

506 CANAL STREET HOUSE (John G. Rohr House), 506 Canal Street, Manhattan. Built 1826.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 595, Lot 38.

On April 21, 1998, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the 506 Canal Street House as a Landmark and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 4). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Eight people, including a representative of Manhattan Community Board 1, spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. The owner's representative took no position at the public hearing.¹

Summary

The red brick building at 506 Canal Street is part of a rare surviving cluster of early nineteenth-century structures in lower Manhattan on a block partially created on landfill located close to the Hudson River waterfront. It was built in 1826 with the adjacent house at 508 Canal Street on a midblock site between Greenwich and Washington Streets by John G. Rohr. Rohr, a merchant tailor, developed several properties on both sides of Canal Street and had his business in a building at the northwest corner of Canal and Greenwich. He lived with his family in this building between 1830 and 1853. The building retains distinctive characteristics of the Federal style, including Flemish bond brickwork, brownstone window sills and entrance archway, and peaked roof. The most unusual feature is the three-bay cast-iron storefront with semi-elliptical arches, which appears to date from the original construction of the building and is the only known storefront of its kind to survive in New York City. The presence of 506 Canal Street is a striking reminder of the initial phase of the development of New York City in the years of the early republic.



DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Neighborhood²

The section of Canal Street on which these surviving early nineteenth-century houses are located forms part of the northern boundary of the neighborhood known since the 1970s as Tribeca (Triangle Below Canal Street).³ Much of the area was part of a land grant made in 1705 from Queen Anne to Trinity Church. A significant portion of this was leased to Leonard Lispenard as farmland and was commonly known as the Lispenard Meadows.

Trinity Church fostered residential development in the area with the establishment of St. John's Chapel in 1803 and the laying out of Hudson Square (later known as St. John's Park) between Varick, Beach, Hudson, and Laight Streets. The area around the chapel remained relatively isolated until the 1820s when Trinity further encouraged residential development by selling, rather than leasing, lots around the park and chapel. This became one of New York's most fashionable residential districts throughout the 1820s and 1830s.

Greenwich Street, laid out as "First Street" in 1761, became the main thoroughfare along the west side of the island. The City granted water lots which were gradually filled in, thus extending the shoreline into the Hudson River in the early years of the nineteenth century, which led to the establishment of Washington and West Streets, west of Greenwich Street. Canal Street was laid out in 1809, and by 1811 an eight-foot wide trench was completed down the center of the street to carry water from the Collect Pond (approximately today's Lafayette Street and Centre Street) to the Hudson River. By 1819 the trench had been covered to create a sewer, leaving Canal a broad 100-foot wide street. Greenwich Street and the area immediately to the west developed as a mixed-use district with businesses and trades-people who lived close to their work and provided services to the growing residential population to the east. By the 1820s Canal Street for much of its length had become a thriving retail district.⁴

The appeal of the neighborhood surrounding St. John's Chapel as a fashionable residential district was short lived, and the area became increasingly commercial. In 1867, Trinity Church sold the park, and St. John's Freight Terminal was built on the site, contributing to the evolution of the area, as numerous warehouse buildings replaced the low-scale residential and commercial structures. The city's first elevated train line opened along

Greenwich Street in 1878 somewhat isolating the blocks to the west. St. John's Chapel itself was torn down in 1918 for the widening of Varick Street. The construction of the Holland Tunnel in the 1920s and the construction of the exit plaza on the site of St. John's Freight Terminal increased trucking traffic to the neighborhood. Nonetheless, early nineteenth-century structures like those at Canal and Greenwich survived, in part because they remained viable for commercial and residential use, and in part because this block was located northwest of the access points to the Holland Tunnel.

Federal Style Buildings⁵

The building at 506 Canal Street and the three neighboring buildings to the east and west are rare surviving structures from the early nineteenth century. The rapid growth of the city in these years led to the subdivision and sale of large plots of land and the construction of groups and rows of brick houses and shops to meet the needs of the population. The architectural style of such buildings has been called Federal, after the new republic, but in form and detail the style bears similarities to the contemporaneous Regency style of Great Britain. Buildings in the style were constructed throughout the city, from the tip of lower Manhattan as far north as 14th Street, beginning in the 1790s through the 1820s.

In elevation and plan, Federal style buildings were simple, especially earlier in the nineteenth century. Two or three stories high with an additional half story under a sloping roof and three bays wide, houses were of load-bearing masonry construction or modified timber-frame construction with masonry cladding. Brick facades were laid in the Flemish bond pattern, which alternated a stretcher and a header in every row. This system allowed the linking of the more expensive face brick with the cheaper, rougher brick behind. Walls were usually two "wythes," or eight inches, thick. Because brick was fabricated by hand in molds rather than by machine before it was fired, it was relatively porous. Thus to protect the brick surface and slow water penetration, facades were painted red or gray, and mortar lines were delineated in white.

Federal style buildings were generally of modest proportions with an almost planar smoothness. Facades were ornamented with flat or incised lintels of brownstone or marble above the windows; plain wooden box cornices concealed gutters. Roofs were steeply pitched, and residential structures usually

had wooden dormers. The most ornamental feature of a building was the doorway, often framed with columns and topped with a rectangular transom or fanlight. In residential structures the formal entrance was approached by a stoop -- a flight of brownstone steps placed to one side of the facade, which created a basement level below the parlor floor. Commercial structures retained the simple detailing but with minor variations. The raised entry was usually eliminated in favor of a ground story entrance which provided access to residential accommodations at the upper stories and a ground story shop for customer convenience.

Owners or lessees of property typically would subdivide a large lot, then hire local carpenters or masons to construct several buildings in a group or row. Then these would be sold or leased. With the increasing availability of pattern books such as Asher Benjamin's *American Builders Companion* (published in six editions between 1806 and 1827), local builders had access to drawings and instructions for exterior and interior plans and details.

The Building at 506 Canal Street and its History

Portions of the Lispenard Meadow, including the area at Canal Street and Greenwich Street, were inherited by Lispenard's daughter Sarah and her husband Alexander L. Stewart. On January 1, 1826, Stewart deeded a parcel of land midblock on the south side of Canal Street between Greenwich Street and Washington Street to John G. Rohr, who began construction of the two three-story houses at 506 and 508 Canal Street.⁶ (He was also developing a parcel immediately to the west with three additional houses, which do not survive.) The design of No. 506 Canal incorporated a ground story shop set behind an unusual cast-iron storefront with paneled pilasters supporting semi-elliptical arches which repeated the form of the arch above the entranceway. This is the only known storefront of its kind to survive in New York City. The window lintels are also of paneled cast iron. The source of the ironwork is not known.⁷ Living accommodations were provided at the upper stories which were reached from a staircase set inside the entranceway at the east side of the facade. It is not known if the peaked attic roof originally had two dormers or the hatchways which are there now.

Rohr was merchant tailor who appeared in city directories beginning in 1825-26, listed at Greenwich at the corner of Canal. (By 1832, his business address was specified as 482 Greenwich at the corner of Canal, which would place the business

on the north side of Canal, instead of the building on the south side which today has the address of 480 Greenwich/502 Canal.) The building was first given an address number in the 1826 tax assessment and was identified as 239 Canal Street. (It became known by the address of 506 Canal Street in 1860.) According to directory listings No. 239 was first occupied in 1829 by John Y. Smith, the starch and hair powder manufacturer, who had sold the building he owned and occupied at the corner (480 Greenwich/502 Canal).⁸ The following year Rohr himself and his wife Rebecca moved into 239 [506] Canal. (In 1827-29, they had lived at 243 [510] Canal, another of the properties Rohr had developed.) Rohr and his family remained in the house at 506 Canal until 1853, retaining the tailoring business in a building on the north side of Canal. According to the 1850 census, Rohr was 52 years old and had been born in Germany. In addition to his wife, the household consisted of a married daughter, Rebecca and her husband, Baltus Sege, a saddler; an adult son George who also was working in the tailoring business; two other adult children, John and Hannah; five younger children ranging in age from 6 to 15; Rebecca and Baltus Sege's two children; and a 35-year old Irishwoman named Catherine Brickham. Another household in the same building consisted of Elizabeth Montfort and her two adult sons Daniel and Peter. The sons operated a business in the storefront known as Montfort & Brother, a book and stationery store.⁹

In 1853 the house was sold to Carsten Sierck,¹⁰ whose estate retained the property until 1907. That year it was sold to Samuel Weil who had previously acquired the adjacent building at 504 Canal, and in 1909 purchased the building at 480 Greenwich/502 Canal Street.¹¹ Since Weil's ownership, these three properties always have been held by the same owner.

The building has always had commercial space at the ground story with residential accommodations above. Existing records do not specify all the commercial tenants, but based on the evidence of photographs and insurance atlases, they have included a carpentry shop and a doctor's office. The sash in the storefront has been changed over time, and at some time in the nineteenth century a wooden hood was installed above the elliptical arches of the storefront which contained the housing for a retractable awning. This was removed sometime in the 1930s.¹² Otherwise the exterior remains remarkably intact. (A wood framed extension occupies a portion of the rear yard, as well as the entire rear yard of the building at 504

Canal Street.¹³ It is not visible from the street.) At some point in the twentieth century, interior fire doors were installed in the wall between this building at 506 Canal Street and the building at 504 Canal Street.¹⁴

Description

This three-story building occupies a nineteen-foot wide midblock lot on the south side of Canal Street between Greenwich Street and Washington Street. It is three bays wide with a facade laid up in Flemish bond brickwork, which has been painted, and rests on a brownstone base. The sloping attic roof is covered with rolled asphalt and punctuated by two hatchways. A small chimney is placed near the ridge line of the roof at the east and a larger chimney (which has been cut down from its original height) is placed at the west along the line of the party wall that No. 506 Canal shares with No. 508 Canal.

The ground story is notable for its arcade. At the east, a semi-elliptical arch of brownstone carried on paneled pilasters of brownstone (all painted) contains the entranceway to the upper stories of the building, and is approached by a single brownstone step. The wood paneled door with two lights at the top, which is set in a wood frame, may be a modified version of the original Federal doorway.¹⁵ The arch above the door probably originally contained a fanlight. The cast-iron storefront to the west of the entranceway has three semi-elliptical

arches carried on paneled pilasters. The center archway contains the entrance to the ground story commercial space, approached by a brownstone step. The paneled doorway is of wood set in a wood frame. Each flanking window bay has a shop window with sixteen panes of glass framed in wood above a wooden bulkhead. (This infill is not original.) The arches above the shop windows and door probably originally contained fanlights. The brick wall surface above the arcade has been covered with a rough stucco facing (painted), which may have been added when the wooden housing for the retractable awning was removed.

The second and third stories each have three symmetrically placed window openings with brownstone sills and paneled cast-iron lintels. The third story windows are slightly shorter than the second story windows. The window sash in both stories is double-hung aluminum, which replaced wood-framed multi-light sash. A metal gutter, which would have originally been enclosed within a box cornice, spans the facade below the roof and leads to a drainpipe at the west edge of the facade.

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Director of Research

Notes

1. The Commission had previously held public hearings on this item in 1966 (LP-0567), in 1975 (LP-0906), in 1985 (LP-1444) and in 1989 (LP-1723), but took no action on the proposed designation.
2. The history of the Tribeca neighborhood was compiled from the following sources: Andrew S. Dolkart, *The Texture of Tribeca* (New York: Enterprise Press, 1989); Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Tribeca North Historic District Designation Report*, LP-1714 (New York: City of New York, 1992).
3. Tribeca is bounded by Canal Street on the north, Lafayette Street and Broadway on the east, Vesey Street on the south, and the Hudson River on the west.
4. I.N. Phelps Stokes, ed. *Iconography of Manhattan Island* (New York: Robert H. Dodd, 1928), VI, 396-397. See VI, "Index," 591, for more detailed citations on early history of Canal Street.
5. The history of the Federal style building was compiled from the following sources: Elizabeth Blackmar, *Manhattan for Rent, 1785-1850* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1989); Ada Louis Huxtable, *The Architecture of New York: Classic New York Georgian Gentility to Greek Elegance* (Garden City, New Jersey: Anchor Books, 1964); Charles Lockwood, *Bricks and Brownstone: The New York Rowhouse, 1783-1929, an Architectural and Social History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972); Montgomery Schuyler, "The Small City House in New York," *Architectural Record* (April-June, 1899), 357-388.

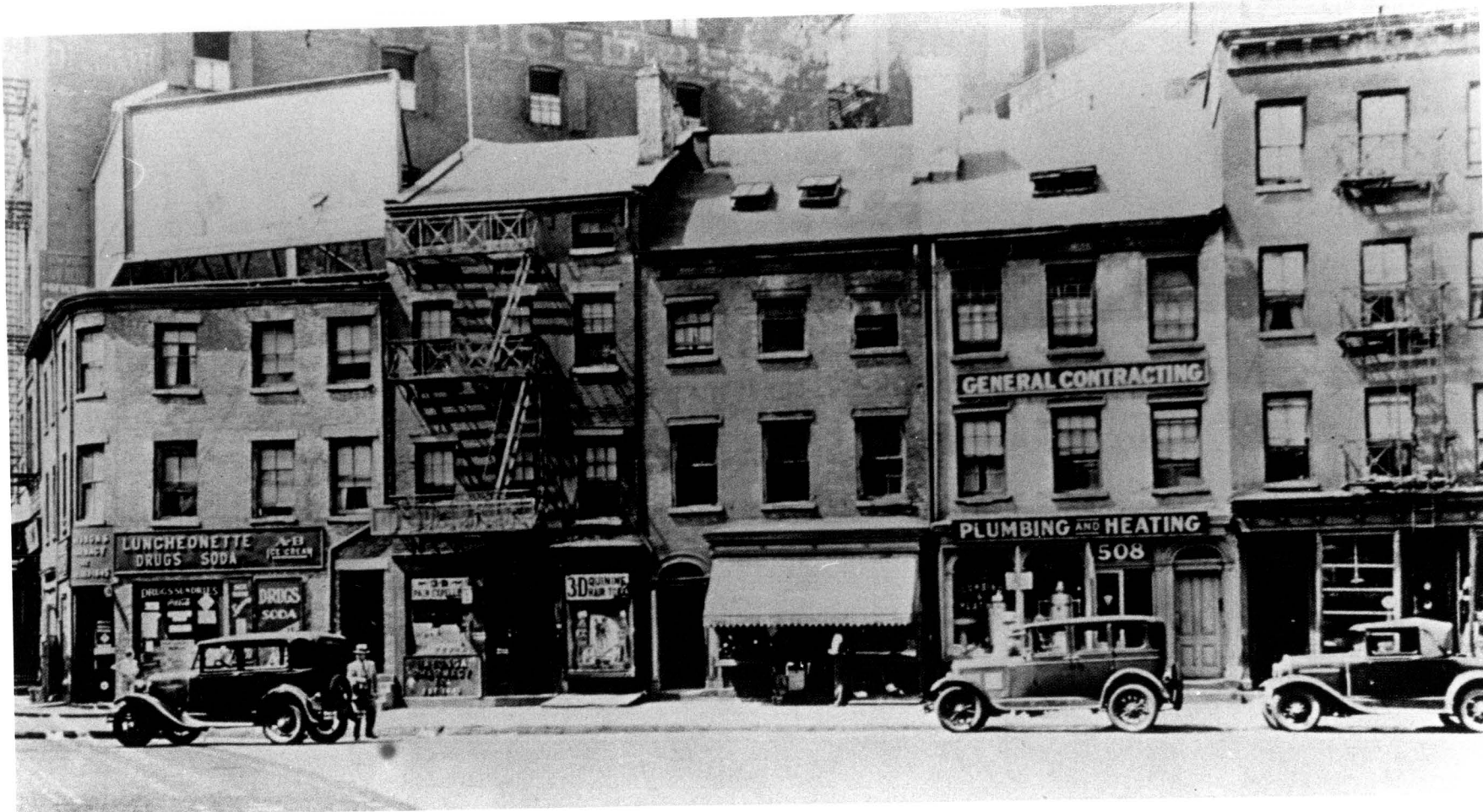
6. New York County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances, Liber 204, page 32, recorded March 30, 1926. New York City [Manhattan], Tax Assessments, 5th Ward. In 1825 Alexander Stewart was assessed for a lot valued at \$700. In 1826, John G. Rohr was assessed for a house and lot valued at \$3000 located at 239 Canal Street.
7. It is possible that the storefront and window lintels were imported from England. However, New York City was beginning to establish foundries for the fabrication of cast iron in the 1820s. See advertisement in *Longworth's Real Estate Directory for 1826-27* (New York, 1827): "Iron Foundry, No. 22 and 24 Elm Street, Henry Warrall makes castings of the best kinds of iron for door frames and arches, back and jambs for fireplaces, sash weights, 50 lbs., 25 lbs., and all other weights."
8. Liber 254, page 554, recorded Oct. 3, 1829.
9. The census records Daniel as a stationer. The 1851 City Directory identifies Montfort & Borthers as "books and paper carriers."
10. Liber 623, page 620, recorded March 15, 1853.
11. Section 1, Liber 52, pages 368 and 368, recorded June 3, 1897, for lot 39 (504 Canal); Section 1, Liber 173, page 312, recorded July 25, 1907, for lot 38 (506 Canal); Section 1, Liber 186, page 331, recorded Jan. 11, 1909.
12. The storefront with the awning is seen in photographs taken in 1927, 1929, and 1931 by P.L. Sperr in the collection of the New York Public Library. See *Photographic Views of New York City* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1981), Fiche 0765, A4, A5, A6, C7. The awning has been removed in Department of Finance Tax Photos, Manhattan for Block 595, Lots 37 and 38 (1939/40).
13. See Robert G. Josephs, "A Discussion of the Canal Street House and the Period of Federal Style Architecture in New York City," Landmarks Scholars Program, Landmarks Preservation Commission, 1976, unpublished typescript, 24.
14. *Insurance Maps of the City of New York, Borough of Manhattan* (New York: Sanborn Map Co., 1922, updated 1992), vol. 1N, plate 63.
15. See notes by Ellen W. Kramer, 1975, in research file for the 506 Canal Street House.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the 506 Canal Street House (John G. Rohr House) has a special character, and special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the red brick building at 506 Canal Street is one house of a rare surviving cluster of early nineteenth-century structures in lower Manhattan on a block partially created on landfill located close to the Hudson River waterfront; that it was built in 1826 with the adjacent house at 508 Canal Street by John G. Rohr, a merchant tailor, who developed several properties on both sides of Canal Street and had his business in a building at the northwest corner of Canal and Greenwich; that Rohr lived with his family in this building between 1830 and 1853; that the building retains distinctive characteristics of the Federal style, including Flemish bond brickwork, brownstone window sills and entrance archway, and peaked roof; that the most unusual feature is the three-bay cast-iron storefront with semi-elliptical arches, which appears to date from the original construction of the building and is the only known storefront of its kind to survive in New York City; and that the presence of 506 Canal Street is a striking reminder of the initial phase of the development of New York City in the years of the early republic.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the 506 Canal Street House (John G. Rohr House), 506 Canal Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 595, Lot 38, as its Landmark Site.



502, 504, 506, and 508 Canal Street, Manhattan
Photo: Photographic Views of New York City, New York Public Library
P. L. Sperr, 1931



502, 504, 506, and 508 Canal Street, Manhattan
Photo by: John Barrington Bayley, 1965



502, 504, 506, and 508 Canal Street, Manhattan



480 Greenwich Street (aka 502 Canal Street), 504, 506, and 508 Canal Street, Manhattan
Photos by: Carl Forster, 1998



506 Canal Street House, Manhattan

Photo by: John Barrington Bayley, 1964

Photo by: David Bishop, 1975



506 Canal Street House, Manhattan
Photo by: Carl Forster, 1998



Photo by: Alan Burnham, 1953



Photo by: John Barrington Bayley, 1964

506 Canal Street House, Manhattan
Storefront Details



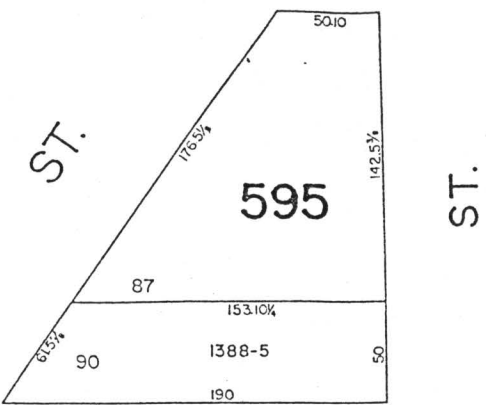
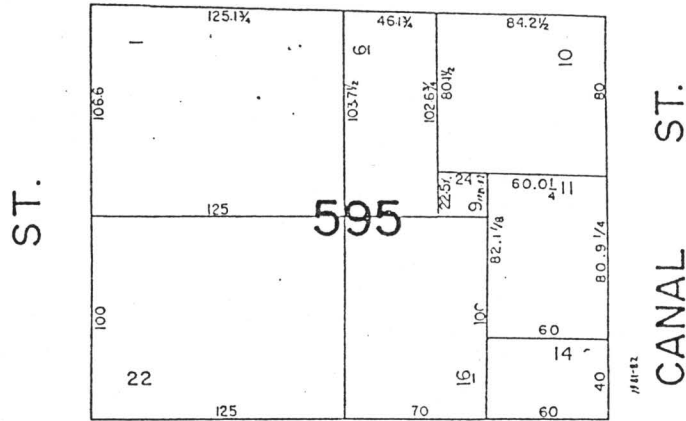
506 Canal Street House, Manhattan
Storefront details

Photo by: Carl Forster, 1998



MILLER HIGHWAY

WEST ST.

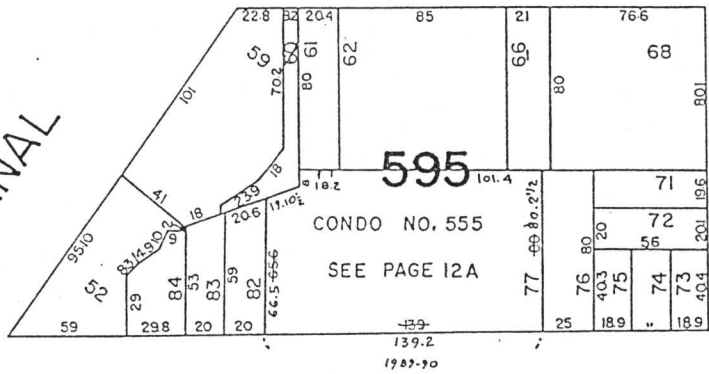


SEE SEC. 1

WASHINGTON



CANAL



WATTS

ST.

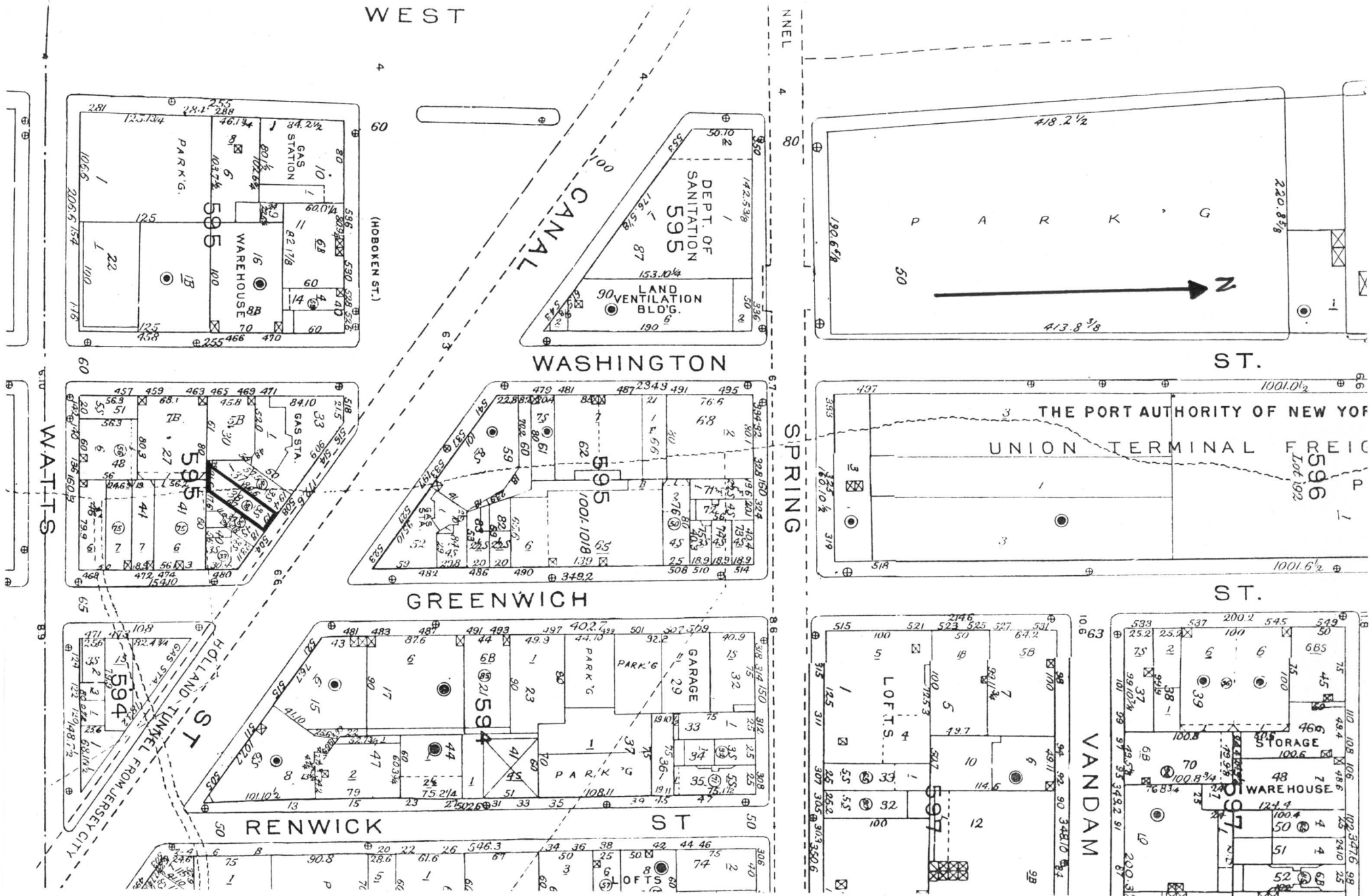
GREENWICH

ST.

SPRING



506 Canal Street House, Manhattan
Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 595, Lot 38
Source: Dept. of Finance, City Surveyor, Tax Map



506 Canal Street House, Manhattan

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 595, Lot 38

Source: Sanborn Manhattan Landbook, 1997-98, Plate 21