Landmarks Preservation Commission
December 22, 1981, Designation List 151
LP-2016

ROYAL CASTLE APARTMENTS, 20-30 Gates Avenue, Borough of Brooklyn. Built 1911-12; architects Wortmann & Braun.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 1976, Lot 7.

On October 9, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Royal Castle Apartments and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 15). The item was continued to the hearing on December 11, 1979 (Item No. 5). The hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Five witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Royal Castle Apartments is an imposing Beaux Arts style apartment house designed by the architectural firm of Wortmann & Braun and built about 1912-13 for the development firm of Levy & Baird. It replaced the William M. Ingraham residence, a distinguished brick mansion surrounded by spacious lawns and gardens. The Royal Castle, a six-story brick building with stone decorative details, is an imposing composition complementing the dignified and exclusive nature of Clinton Avenue which was once known as Brooklyn's "Gold Coast."

Clinton Avenue was named for DeWitt Clinton, mayor of the City of New York from 1803 to 1815, governor of the State of New York from 1817 to 1821 and 1825 to 1828, and chief supporter of the construction of the Erie Canal. The street was planned in 1832 and laid out as a broad boulevard with a double line of trees. Because of its location on the crest of one of the highest points in Brooklyn, the avenue attracted a number of affluent people who erected suburban villas along the street. The houses, generally frame structures, were built on large plots of land and set well back from the street behind wide, landscaped lawns, creating a country-like ambience for the area. After the Civil War, the avenue began to change into one of the city's finest residential streets. This change was spurred by the decision of Charles Pratt to erect his mansion at No. 252 in 1875 Pratt (1830-91) acquired his fortune during the early years of the oil industry and, in 1874, sold his business interests to John D. Rockefeller who incorporated Pratt's business into the Standard Oil Company. In the years following the building of Pratt's mansion on Clinton Avenue, other industrialists began to move to the avenue and to construct their own opulent residences, so that Clinton Avenue became Brooklyn's equivalent of Lakeshore Drive in Chicago, Euclid Avenue in Cleveland, and Delaware Avenue in Buffalo.

The era of the mansions on Clinton Avenue reached its peak at the turn of the twentieth century when four grand homes were erected for Pratt's sons. Yet it was also about this time that the living patterns of prosperous and wealthy families began to change. As the large houses in which they lived became more difficult to maintain and staff, the apartment house became a popular alternative and a number of them were erected in the area, often replacing earlier mansions.[1] The Royal Castle is an excellent example of the type of multiple dwellings erected during this period and its dignified design in the Beaux Arts style is in keeping with the architectural character of the avenue established earlier by the freestanding mansions.

The Beaux Arts style was very popular at the time the building was built. Some of the city's most prominent buildings of the period were designed in this style, such as the New York Public Library, Grand Central Terminal, the U.S. Customs House and scores of mansions and rowhouses on the Upper East Side of

Manhattan. The style was associated with wealth and luxury and considered appropriate for the Royal Castle, erected on one of Brooklyn's most prestigious residential streets. The name, too, was chosen to convey an image of luxury and social standing.

Little has been discovered about the architects of this building or other works they have designed. It is known that Deitrich Wortmann (1884-1952) was born in Germany and graduated from both the University of Leipzig and Columbia University in New York. Wortmann was very active in amateur athletics and represented the United States at the 1904 Olympics as one of the members of the wrestling team. In 1936, he served on the American Olympic Committee, as chairman of the weightlifting team, and as manager of the bob-sled team.[2] Nothing is known about his partner, H.H. Braun.

Built of brick above a rusticated limestone base, the Royal Castle commands the intersection of Gates and Clinton Avenues. A deep central court on Gates Avenue marks the main entrance and divides the building into two pavilions. The building is entered through a one-story stone portico pierced by a broad round arch enhanced with a drip molding. Its parapet has stylized urns at the corners which flank a large ornamental plaque. Above the first floor, the building is constructed of brick with stone trim and the facade of each pavilion is divided into three window bays. The projecting, three-sided central bays have ornamental stone plaques beneath each window. Flanking these bays are simulated pilasters created by widely placed stone blocks set in the brick face of the building. At the base of each pilaster is a stylized plinth carried on a corbel block carved in the shape of a human mason, a decorative feature that adds to the character of the building. Crowning the pilasters are monumental console brackets. Similar pilasters flank the windows above the entrance. The most dramatic feature of the building is the striking silhouette of the sixth floor and roofline. The central bay at the sixth floor of each pavilion is designed as a large Venetian round-arch window with radiating keystones and a voussoir arrangement echoing the pilasters below. Ornate round pediments, following the curve of the window bays below, crown each pavilion. Stone pseudo-pilasters enhance the corners and carry human masks supporting acroteria.

The continuous Clinton Avenue facade is built out to the property line. The longer of the two facades, it has its own central entrance with flanking pilasters carrying consoles with lion heads and a broken, round-arched pediment. Above the door is a stone plaque with the name "Royal Castle" carved into it. The design treatment of this facade has all the elements of the main facade including the simulated pilasters, exuberant sixth floor and rich roofline.

The Royal Castle is one of Clinton Avenue's most distinguished apartment houses. It is one of the few Beaux Arts style buildings in the area and contributes to the architectural richness and variety of the neighborhood. Its wealth of details, elaborate roofline and striking silhouette convey a sense of opulence and luxury, maintaining the ambience established on Clinton Avenue during the nineteenth century by the mansions of prosperous industrialists and businessmen.

Report prepared by
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FOOTNOTES

1. Landmarks Preservation Commission. Clinton Hill Historic District Designation Report (LP-2017). Report prepared by Andrew S. Dolkart, et al., Nov. 10, 1981, p. 41.

2. New York Times, Sept. 22, 1952, 23:5. (Obituary)

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

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 Royal Castle Apartments has a special character, 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 the Royal Castle is an imposing Beaux Arts style apartment house, that it is an excellent example of the type of apartment house erected during the first decades of the twentieth century to attract prosperous New York families, that it complements the dignified and exclusive character of Clinton Avenue, once known as Brooklyn's "Gold Coast," and that the building's exuberant details, elaborate roof line and striking silhouette contribute to the architectural wealth and variety of the area.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Royal Castle Apartments, 20-30 Gates Avenue, Borough of Brooklyn and designates Tax Map Block 1976, Lot 7, Borough of Brooklyn, as its Landmark Site.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Landmarks Preservation Commission. Clinton Hill Historic District Designation. Report (LP-2017). Andrew S. Dolkart, editor. New York: City of New York, 1981.

The New York Times, September 22, 1952, 23:5.



Photo: LPC

THE ROYAL CASTLE APARTMENTS
20-30 GATES AVENUE, BROOKLYN

ARCHITECTS: WORTMANN & BRAUN
BUILT: 1912-13