

Landmarks Preservation Commission
July 11, 1989; Designation List 218
LP 1698

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS BUILDING INTERIOR, first floor interior consisting of the entrance vestibule, the main sales room, the staircases leading from the first floor to the ground floor, the staircase leading from the first floor to the mezzanine level, and the spiral staircase leading from the first floor to the balcony level; the ground floor interior consisting of the display room; the mezzanine level interior consisting of the display area and the staircases leading from the mezzanine level to the balcony level; and the balcony level interior consisting of the display areas, the upper level of the main salesroom including the clerestory windows, the upper part of the mezzanine display area including the mirrored endwall, and the ceiling; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall, floor and ceiling surfaces, piers, staircase and balcony railings, attached pedimented display case on the mezzanine level, and attached decorative elements, 597 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1912-13, architect Ernest Flagg.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1284, Lot 2.

On February 7, 1989, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as an Interior Landmark of the Charles Scribner's Sons Building, first floor interior consisting of the entrance vestibule, the main sales room, the staircases leading from the first floor to the ground floor, the staircase leading from the first floor to the mezzanine level, and the spiral staircase leading from the first floor to the balcony level; the ground floor interior consisting of the display room; the mezzanine level interior consisting of the display area and the staircases leading from the mezzanine level to the balcony level; and the balcony level interior consisting of the display areas, the upper level of the main salesroom including the clerestory windows, the upper part of the mezzanine display area including the mirrored endwall, and the ceiling; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall, floor and ceiling surfaces, piers, staircase and balcony railings, attached pedimented display case on the mezzanine level, and attached decorative elements; and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No.3). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of eight witnesses, including the owner, spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. The Commission has received many letters supporting this designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

The Interior of the Charles Scribner's Sons Building is an outstanding Beaux-Arts commercial space, which created an appropriate image for the sale of books. Built in 1912-13 and designed by the eminent American architect Ernest Flagg, it represents the culmination of the ideas Flagg developed in earlier buildings on the interrelationship of exterior and interior design and planning. This structure was the second building that Flagg designed for the prominent publishing firm of Charles Scribner's Sons and incorporated many of the same design features of this earlier work, expanding and elaborating them for this new, more fashionable midtown location at Fifth Avenue near 48th Street. The flamboyant ironwork which frames the first floor interior exemplifies some of the best design and craftsmanship of the early 20th century, and this design is continued in the staircase and balcony railings. The two-story vaulted space, organized as a basilica-like form, with its mezzanine, balconies, and clerestory, is outstanding for its complex spatial elements and beauty of form, as articulated in the elegant mirrored end-wall, graceful central staircase, spiral staircase on the south side, and delicate cast-iron railings. The space, among the finest interiors in New York City, is further linked to the publishing firm of Charles Scribner's Sons with its long and distinguished history by the iconography of the ceiling detail.

History¹

The firm of Charles Scribner's Sons has been one of the leading publishing houses in this country. It came into existence with the partnership of Charles Scribner and Isaac Baker in 1846. The original quarters of the firm were at the former building of the Old Brick Church on Park Row and Nassau Street, a book trade headquarters at the time. A book entitled The Puritans and Their Principles by Edwin Hall was the first work published by the company. Reflecting Scribner's devout Presbyterian background, the firm of Scribner & Baker soon distinguished itself as a leading publisher of books on theological and philosophical subjects. Financial success was assured by such early best sellers as J.T. Headley's Napoleon and His Marshals and Washington and His Generals (both 1847) and Nathaniel P. Willis's People I Have Met (1850). Baker died in 1850 and Scribner continued the business alone, as Charles Scribner & Company. In 1857, he purchased Bangs, Mervin & Co. a British book importing business, and took on Charles Welford as a partner, organizing the firm of Scribner & Welford, importers. He also started a subscriptions department, which published the first American edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica. In 1865

he expanded into magazine publishing with the first issue of Hours at Home, later Scribner's Monthly. At the time of his death in 1871 in Switzerland, The New York Times commented:

As a publisher Mr. Scribner was noted for the sagacity, accuracy, quickness and soundness of his judgments. The breadth, liberality and catholicity of his views, as well as the ripeness of his views, were admirably represented by the character and high standing of the publications that he issued...of Mr. Scribner as a man it is almost impossible to speak in terms that shall not seem exaggerated to all but those who had the privilege of his personal acquaintance.²

At Scribner's death, the firms' names were changed to Scribner, Armstrong & Co., publishers, and Scribner, Armstrong & Welford, book importers. Scribner's sons, John Blair Scribner, and, after his graduation from Princeton in 1875, Charles Scribner II, began to regain control of the companies from the various partners their father had admitted over the years. In 1878 the brothers changed the name of the publishing house to Charles Scribner's Sons. When John died, in 1879, Charles II became the head of the firm. Upon the death of Welford in 1885, the importing end of the business was discontinued. In 1881 Scribner's Monthly was sold to the Century Company, and Scribner's agreed to stay out of the magazine business for at least five years. Thus it was not until 1887 that a new periodical, Scribner's Magazine was launched. Charles Scribner II soon distinguished himself as a leader of the movement for copyright laws in the United States and as a founder of the American Publisher's Association. He also helped to organize the Princeton University Press in 1905. Among the many publications issued under his leadership were the American editions of Baedeker's Guides, the Dictionary of American Biography, as well as works of such distinguished authors as Henry James, Edith Wharton, Ernest Hemingway, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, and British authors such as Robert Louis Stevenson, George Meredith and Rudyard Kipling. Another brother, Arthur H. Scribner, became the company's vice-president and treasurer in 1904. He became the company's President in 1928 while Charles was chairman of the board until his death in 1930.

After occupying several offices in lower Manhattan, the company decided in 1893 to move uptown and bought land at 155 Fifth Avenue. Charles Scribner's brother-in-law, Ernest Flagg, was commissioned to prepare the plans for the new building. This six-story, limestone-faced structure had a large bookstore occupying the street level. (This building is now a designated New York City Landmark.) Twenty years later, when Scribner's followed the commercial movement northward to midtown Manhattan, Flagg was again asked to design the new headquarters at 597 Fifth

Avenue, near 48th Street. In later years, just before 1930, another move was considered but the construction of Rockefeller Center across the street, seen as a stabilizing force, led the firm to stay.³

The Architect⁴

Ernest Flagg (1857-1947) was a prominent and talented American practitioner of French Beaux-Arts design principles. His long and varied career produced fine institutional buildings such as St. Luke's Hospital (1892-97) and the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. (1892-97); commercial structures such as the forty-seven story Singer Tower (1906-08 now demolished) at Broadway and Liberty Street and the Produce Exchange Bank (1905, demolished); elegant townhouses such as those he designed for Charles Scribner II at 9 East 66th Street in the Upper East Side Historic District and for Oliver G. Jennings (1898) at 7 East 72nd Street, a designated New York City Landmark; firehouses such as that for Engine Company No. 33 on Great Jones Street (1898), a designated New York City Landmark, and that for Engine Company No. 67 on 170th Street. He is also known for the design of the ten original buildings of the campus of the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis (1899-1907).

Flagg's cousin Cornelius Vanderbilt sponsored the young man's study at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. There Flagg worked in the atelier of Paul Blondel and absorbed the principles of logical planning and formal design which the school stressed. These principles included the idea of a "parti" or general conception of the building that would most logically meet all its requirements and constraints and fit all the various parts of the structure together. According to Flagg, for an architect trained at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, the solution to all these problems would be most clearly expressed in a plan based on logic. The design of the exterior would then grow naturally out of this plan and be closely linked to it. Further, Flagg wrote that architectural principles were learned from the human form: "symmetry from right to left and diversity from head to foot." Flagg applied these principles to the buildings he designed after his return to the United States in 1891 when he began his first large-scale commission, that of St. Luke's Hospital.

In Flagg's 1904 building for the Singer Company at Broadway and Prince Streets, as well as in the 1905 Produce Exchange Bank, a feeling of lightness was dominant on the facades, as large expanses of glass gave a full expression to the steel frame of each building. Certain design themes seen in these and earlier buildings were also used in later works by Flagg, but always in original and appropriate combinations. These include vertical

window groups flanked by continuous piers and banded by spandrel panels and the use of an elliptical arch to frame a group of windows.

Design & Construction of the New Building and Its Bookstore⁵

Flagg recorded in his personal diaries as early as January 10, 1911, that: "Scribner called and talked about a new building on Fifth Avenue." A little over a year later, on February 11, 1912, he noted: "Mr. Scribner here to dinner. Charles said he bough(t) 53'5" on Fifth Avenue." And on March 10: "Scribner to dinner. Arthur came in after we discussed the plans for the new building. I am very anxious for fear they will not let me do as I want to. If given a free hand I am sure I can make this the building of my life."⁶

The building designed in 1912 for Charles Scribner's Sons incorporates Flagg's diverse architectural experiences. Primarily, however, it is based on the first Scribner Building, built twenty years before. The basic themes and rhythms are the same, expanded and elaborated for this larger work. The success of the first design resulted in features which were carried over into the later work. The most striking similarity between the two buildings is on the first story, the location of the main Scribner bookstore. On the facade the bookstore is distinguished from the rest of the building by its materials: the glass of the entrances and display windows are framed in black ironwork and serve as a strong focal point for the facade. A shallow elliptical arch crowns this area in both buildings, with delicate scrollwork in the spandrels. Following Flagg's interpretation of the Beaux-Arts dictum, the second Scribner building is also symmetrical from side to side. Although the interior space designed for the bookstore is not symmetrical, the axial plan and the organization of the space into regular bays provides a symmetrical effect. A pleasing balance of solid and void is created through the juxtaposition of areas of dark ironwork at the base and light stonework on the stories above. This adds a sense of lightness to an otherwise substantial eleven-story building.

A prime concern of the clients was that the elegant bookstore image be retained, from the first building.⁷ The display windows of the storefront imparted perfectly their retailing function. A description of the first bookstore in a Scribner's Magazine article may be equally applied to the second bookstore:

...the ground floor is entirely occupied by the bookstore which differs in many ways from the conception of a bookstore derived from past examples. Instead of a confused and crowded space with counters

and low bookcases, the whole room resembles a particular well-cared-for library in some great private house, or in some of the quieter public institutions....having its great space quite clear, this ground floor room is altogether free from offices...; and the plentiful sunlight which pours in from the high windows...is a spacious, airy, and pleasant place. From the back a broad flight of stairs of white marble, dividing half-way up to the left and right,...⁸

The Independent likened the first bookstore to "a retreat of quiet, refined and learned leisure."⁹

The bookstore was to occupy the ground floor while the financial, editorial and business offices were to occupy the next four floors. Flagg had hoped that the bookstore would have two entrances, but Arthur Scribner insisted on only one, in order to give the interior more display space.¹⁰ Flagg noted in his diary of March 18, 1912: "My best and most original feature is lost."¹¹ Other features were retained however in order to keep the interior space similar to a small library. When the new building opened, the New York Times of May 18, 1913, described the new bookstore as "...a large oblong room, lighted from both the front and the rear. Its arched ceiling of a whitish stone is supported by pillars of the same substance. Its walls, broken by a gallery are hidden by rows of handsomely bound books upon glass shelves. The entire front of the store - that is, the first story of the building - is one great window set in a metal framework of graceful design and faced with brass.(sic)"¹² The space is designed on an axial plan with columns to either side of the large vaulted browsing space, which is organized as a basilica-like form. The grand staircase at the rear splays to either side to the balcony areas. A series of six bays takes one's eye from the glass front entrance to the mirrored end-wall not only reflecting the exterior of Fifth Avenue but the interior shop space as well. Henry Russell Hitchcock, the well-known architectural historian, commented on this grand interior in 1974 when he said it rivaled Grand Central Terminal and was "the grandest interior space that had been created in New York."¹³ Flagg himself felt "I think this building is the best thin[g] I ever did and I am glad I lived long enough to have this appointment."¹⁴ (see two original 1913 photographs attached.)

Description

An intrinsic part of the space designed for the bookstore is the two-story iron and glass storefront, extending the width of the building, which forms the western wall of the bookstore. An entrance vestibule is centered on this wall and retains its original acanthus-leaf cresting.

At the main floor level large plate glass windows flanking the vestibule provide a display area and a view of Fifth Avenue. An additional display window is located in the northern bay. The southern bay, at the main floor level, is not part of the bookstore space but part of the lobby space leading to the offices above. Surmounting these windows is a horizontal window opening with thirteen vertical lights. This in turn is flanked by window openings, each with four vertical lights, at the balcony level. Above the center opening is an elliptically arched opening with 37 lights. To either side of this are two circular windows divided into 12 lights each at the clerestory level.

The main salesroom rises the equivalent of two stories and is axially planned according to Beaux-Arts principles, with seven piers on each side creating bays and supporting balconies lining the side walls. The axis was originally accentuated by a broad center aisle leading to the main staircase. On the north, the bays open into recesses, lined with bookcases beneath the balcony, while on the south only the three eastern bays have recesses. Between the third and fourth bays is a cast-iron spiral staircase with decorative railing leading from the main floor to the south balcony. Originally another similar staircase was located opposite this, on the north.

The main staircase leading to the mezzanine display area retains its original cast-iron railings of scroll, floral, and bow knot design which echo the ornamental design of the storefront. Similar railings shield the front of the mezzanine. A Chippendale style mahogany bookcase, although not the original, but of a similar design, dominates the mezzanine at the back, against the east wall. Short flights of steps at the ends of the mezzanine lead to the balconies on the north and south walls. The railings are continuations of those shielding the mezzanine.

The balcony is continuous on the north wall although recessed behind the piers in the three eastern bays. On the south wall, it is in two parts -- recessed behind the piers in the three eastern bays, and terminating at the spiral staircase in the three western bays. Fascias at the balcony floor level have ornamental moldings. Cast-iron railings like those on the staircase and mezzanine are placed between the piers. The railings continue to the Fifth Avenue front. The ceilings above the balconies have plaster panels. The piers are linked at capital level by a continuous cornice, adorned with a Greek key motif, extending all around the room. Above this rise seven round-arched, 40 light, clerestory windows, corresponding to the bays, on the north and south walls and a mirrored surface set in an elliptical arch on the east wall above the mezzanine. A staircase with cast-iron balusters and railing, at the east end of the north balcony, leads to the area behind the clerestory windows on the north. This was originally another book display

area and still retains shelving. The area behind the clerestory windows on the south contained office space.

The 30-foot high ceiling is a shallow vault which springs from the piers and is intersected by the vaults encompassing the clerestory windows. The main vault is adorned with plaster panels, rectangles alternating with ovals, outlined with egg-and-dart and bead-and-reel moldings accented by owls and anthemia in low relief, from which chandeliers (not original) are suspended. There is a skylight over the mezzanine. At the east and west ends of the ceiling low relief plaques bear the date "MCMXII." Plaster shields with the "CS" monogram intersect the ceiling panels.

The essential components of the space are intact from the original bookstore. None of the existing bookcases, including the Chippendale style bookcase, information desks, or cash registers are original, although the bookcases in the balcony are in the original locations. None of the light fixtures are original, although the chandeliers are hung in the original locations.

Subsequent Building History¹⁵

The bookstore underwent a \$200,000. renovation under Charles Scribner, IV (grandson of Charles Scribner II) in 1974, by Synthesis Inc. and received new lighting fixtures, new pyramidal-shaped display bookcases (which were designed to be moved easily about the main floor), and a moveable cash register in the center of the floor.

It remained in the ownership of the Scribner family until June of 1984 when it was purchased by Macmillan Inc. In December of 1984 Rizzoli International bought the bookstore while Macmillan Inc. retained ownership of the Scribner Book Companies. In June of 1988 Benetton Corporation purchased the entire building.

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Report edited by Marjorie Pearson
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Notes

1. Adapted from the following designation reports: LPC, Scribner Building prepared by Ignacio Navarrette (New York, 1976), and Charles Scribner's Sons Building prepared by Virginia Kurshan (New York, 1982).
2. The New York Times, August 28, 1871, p. 4.
3. Mardges Bacon, Ernest Flagg, Beaux-Arts Architect and Urban Reformer (New York, The Architectural History Foundation, and Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1986), pp. 179, 180.
4. Adapted from the designation report: Charles Scribner's Sons Building prepared by Virginia Kurshan (New York, 1982).
5. Adapted in part from Ibid.
6. Ernest Flagg diaries, Jan. 10, 1911 and Feb. 11 and March 10, 1912, Archives, Avery Library, Columbia University.
7. Bacon, p. 180. See also p. 175-176 for discussion of the storefront of the first Scribner Building.
8. "The History of a Publishing House, 1846-1894," Scribner's Magazine, 16 (Dec. 1894), 803.
9. Bacon, 176.
10. Bacon, 368, note 25.
11. Flagg Diary: March 18, 1912.
12. "Scribner In New Home, Publishing Firm Moves to Fifth Avenue and Forty-eight Street," New York Times, May 18, 1913, p. C7. The storefront was actually of cast iron, trimmed in gold leaf, not in brass.
13. Margaret Sheffield, "Renovation Brightens a Notable Interior," NYT, April 7, 1974, sec. 8, p.1.
14. Flagg Diary: March 27, 1913.
15. Herbert Mitgang, "Macmillan Acquires Scribner," NYT, April 26, 1984, p. 17; "Rizzoli Acquires Scribner," NYT, Dec. 1984, p. 15; Alexis Jetter, "Saving Splendor In The Stacks," Newsday, Feb. 8, 1989. In May of 1989 Barnes & Noble Bookstores Inc. bought the bookstore name from Macmillan. Edwin McDowell, "Scribner Name and Shop Are Sold to B. Dalton," NYT, May 12, 1989.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

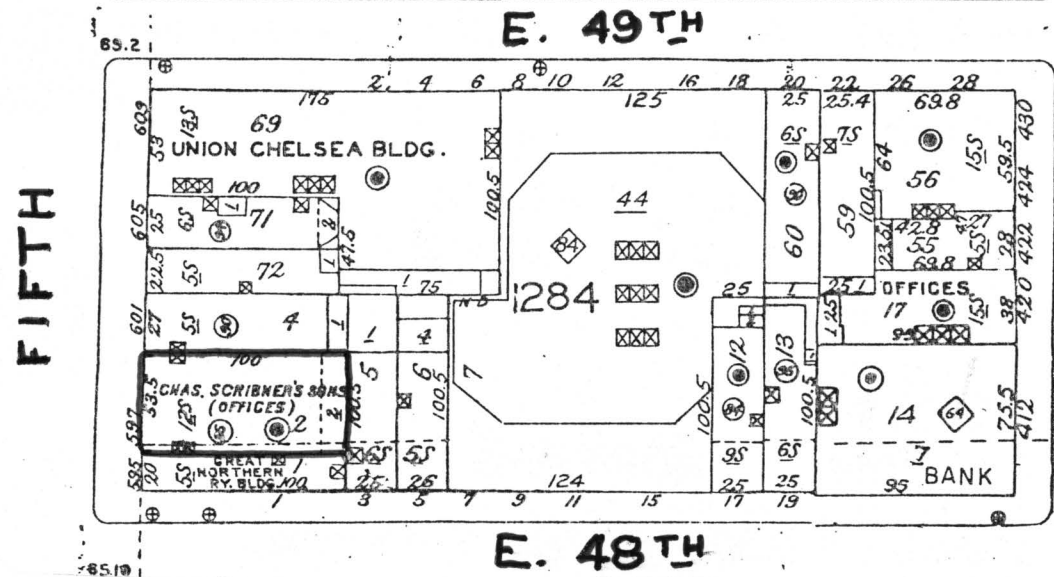
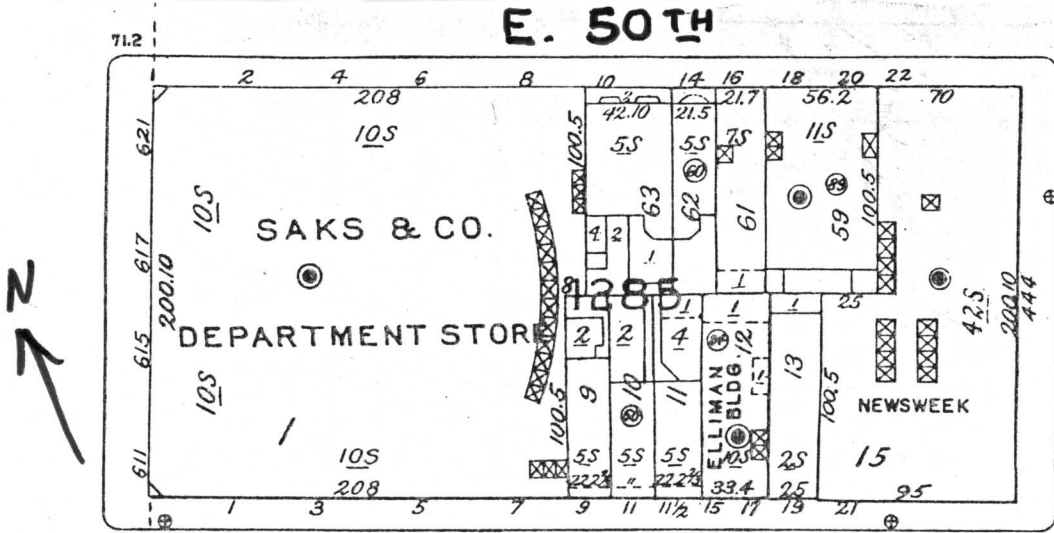
On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Charles Scribner's Sons Building Interior, first floor interior consisting of the entrance vestibule, the main sales room, the staircases leading from the first floor to the ground floor, the staircase leading from the first floor to the mezzanine level, and the spiral staircase leading from the first floor to the balcony level; the ground floor interior consisting of the display room; the mezzanine level interior consisting of the display area and the staircases leading from the mezzanine level to the balcony level; and the balcony level interior consisting of the display areas, the upper level of the main salesroom including the clerestory windows, the upper part of the mezzanine display area including the mirrored endwall, and the ceiling; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall, floor and ceiling surfaces, piers, staircase and balcony railings, attached pedimented display case on the mezzanine level, and attached decorative elements; has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City, and the Interior is one which is customarily open and accessible to the public, and to which the public is customarily invited.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Charles Scribner's Sons Building Interior is an outstanding Beaux-Arts commercial space which created an appropriate image for the sale of books; that, designed in 1912 by the eminent, French-trained architect Ernest Flagg, it represents the culmination of the ideas Flagg developed in earlier buildings on the interrelationship of exterior and interior design and planning; that this structure was the second building that Flagg designed for the prominent publishing firm of Charles Scribner's Sons and incorporated many of the same design features of this earlier work, expanding and elaborating them for this new, more fashionable midtown location at Fifth Avenue near 48th Street; that the flamboyant ironwork which frames the first floor interior exemplifies some of the best design and craftsmanship of the early 20th century; that the two-story vaulted space, organized as a basilica-like form, with its mezzanine, balconies, and clerestory is outstanding for its complex spatial elements and beauty of form, as articulated in the elegant mirrored end-wall, graceful central staircase, spiral staircase on the south side, and delicate cast-iron railings; and that this space, among the finest interiors in New York City, is further linked to the publishing firm of Charles Scribner's Sons with its long and distinguished history by the iconography of the ceiling detail.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534, 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 an Interior Landmark the Charles Scribner's Sons Building, first floor interior consisting of the entrance vestibule, the main sales room, the staircases leading from the first floor to the ground floor, the staircase leading from the first floor to the mezzanine level, and the spiral staircase leading from the first floor to the balcony level; the ground floor interior consisting of the display room; the mezzanine level interior consisting of the display area and the staircases leading from the mezzanine level to the balcony level; and the balcony level interior consisting of the display areas, the upper level of the main salesroom including the clerestory windows, the upper part of the mezzanine display area including the mirrored endwall, and the ceiling; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall, floor and ceiling surfaces, piers, staircase and balcony railings, attached pedimented display case on the mezzanine level, and attached decorative elements; 597 Fifth Avenue, Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1284, Lot 2, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

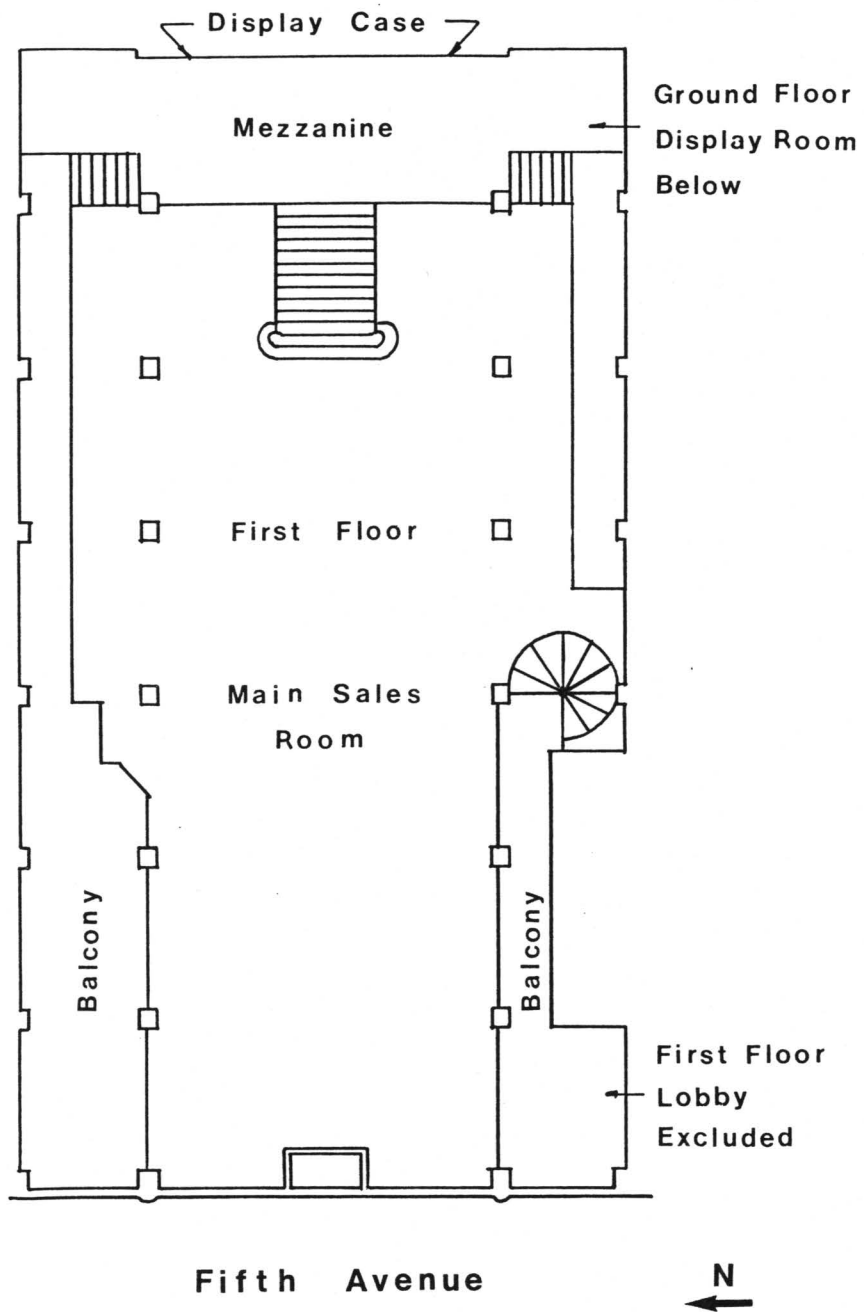
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Charles Scribner's Sons Building Interior Landmark Site

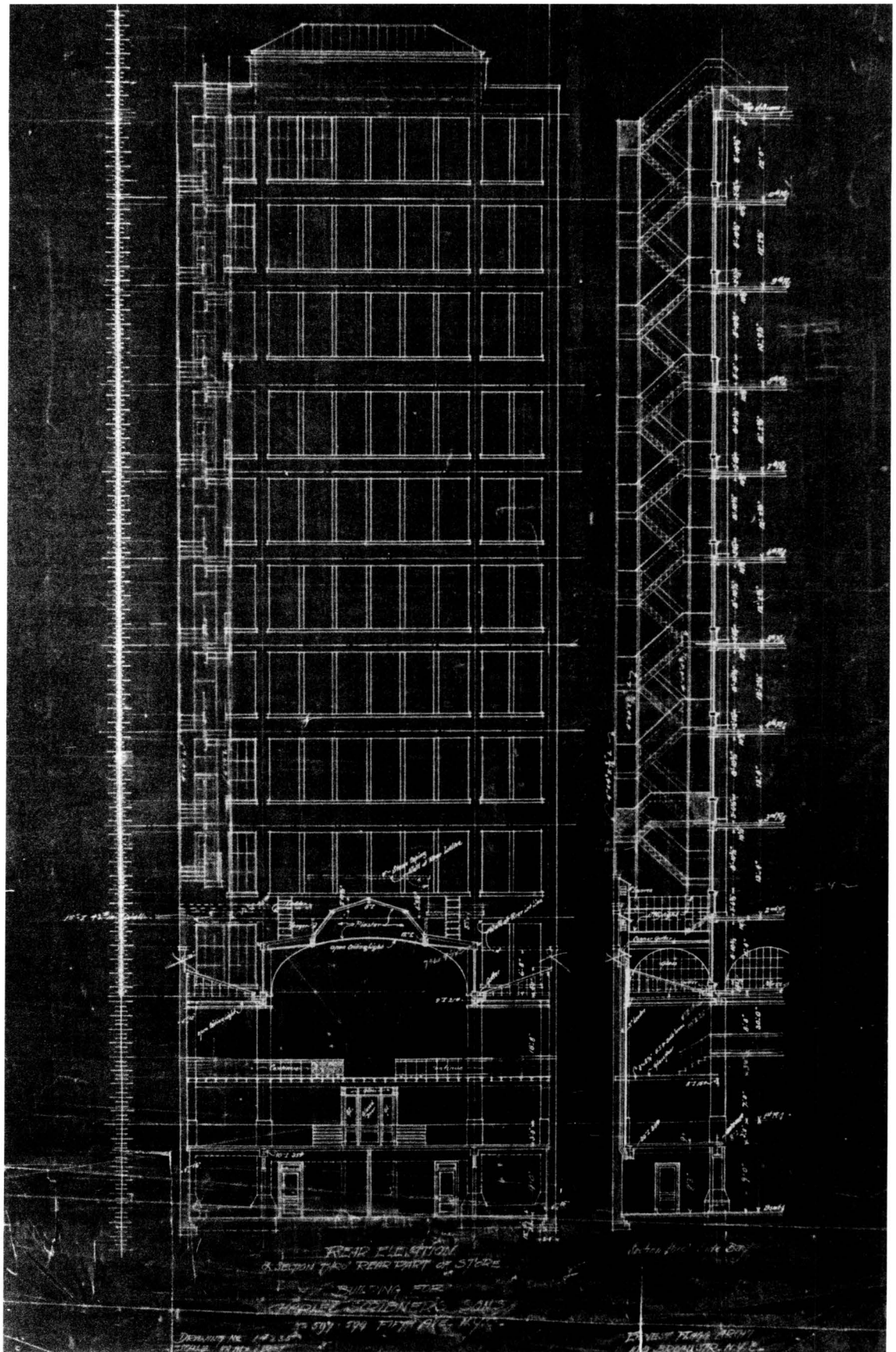
Graphic Source: Sanborn Manhattan Land Book, 1988-89



Charles Scribner's Sons Building Interior

Landmarks Preservation Commission
 Designated July 11, 1989

Graphic credit: D. Breiner



Charles Scribner's Sons Building Interior
Original Rear Elevation, 1912

Photo Credit: Carl Forster



Charles Scribner's Sons Building Interior, 1912-13
597 Fifth Avenue
Historical Photograph 1913, view facing South-East

Architect: Ernest Flagg
Photo Credit: Mardges Bacon,
Beaux-Arts Architect and Urban Reformer
p. 181.



Charles Scribner's Sons Building Interior
Historical Photograph 1913
View facing East

Photo Credit: Courtesy of Mark Tomasko



Charles Scribner's Sons Building Interior
View facing East

Photo Credit: Carl Forster



Charles Scribner's Sons Building Interior
View facing North-East

Photo Credit: Carl Forster