

Landmarks Preservation Commission
January 5, 1993; Designation List 248
LP-1842

WASHINGTON APARTMENTS

2034-2040 Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Boulevard, Borough of Manhattan.
Built 1883-84; architect Mortimer C. Merritt.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1927, Lot 33.

On July 15, 1991, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Washington Apartments and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 9). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Eight speakers were in favor of the designation of this and the other items on the calendar at the hearing but urged the Commission to continue its work in Harlem. Numerous letters have been received expressing the same sentiments.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

The Washington Apartments, built in 1883-84 for the speculative developer Edward H.M. Just, was the earliest apartment building constructed in central Harlem. This eight-story brick building, with stone, iron, terra-cotta and pressed brick trim, was designed by the talented and productive architect Mortimer C. Merritt in the popular Queen Anne style, incorporating neo-Grec details. Merritt created a lively and picturesque composition using contrasting materials, and provided textural interest through the use of projecting balconies and cornices, a prominent overscaled frontispiece, and numerous decorative panels. The extension of the elevated transit lines, which by 1881 connected lower Manhattan to 129th Street, served as an impetus to the development of this area, previously the location of small farms and shantytowns. The amount of real estate speculation and new construction which occurred in Harlem from the 1880s through 1904 was unmatched in New York's history. Harlem was transformed from a rocky and marshy backwoods to a premier middle-class neighborhood. The Washington Apartments was built at the start of this tide of development, when much of the nearby construction took the form of single-family rowhouses and occasional small flats. Throughout New York, multi-family living arrangements were just gaining acceptance among the middle and upper classes. A large apartment house such as the Washington, was quite conspicuous amid rows and rows of brownstone-fronted rowhouses. Not only does the building retain its distinctive presence in the Harlem community, it is also one of the few surviving apartment houses of the early 1880s in New York City.

Development of Harlem¹

That part of New York known as Harlem embraces generally the area of Manhattan north of 110th Street. The original village of Harlem was established in 1658 by Peter Stuyvesant and named Nieuw Haarlem after the Dutch city of Haarlem. Rich farms were located on the region's flat, eastern portion, while some of New York's most illustrious early families, such as the Delanceys, Bleekers, Rikers, Beekmans, and Hamiltons, maintained large estates in the western half of the area, enjoying the magnificent views proffered by Harlem Heights. Several small villages and isolated shanties were also scattered throughout the area, helping Harlem retain its rural character beyond the middle of the nineteenth century.

Harlem's stability was shaken in the 1830s. The lush farmland became depleted, worn out from decades of cultivation. Many farms were abandoned and the great estates were sold at public auction. The area became the refuge of those desiring cheap property and housing, including many newly-arrived and destitute immigrants who gathered in scattered shantytowns. However, most of the scenic topography was left untouched and the striking vistas and unspoiled country attracted fashionable downtowners on picnics and day trips, particularly after the 1860s.

It was the advent of new and better forms of transportation, as well as the rapidly increasing population of New York which brought about the change in Harlem from a rural village (population at mid-century of approximately 1500) to a fashionable middle- and upper-class neighborhood. As the population of New York City swelled after the Civil War, mounting pressures for housing pushed the development of neighborhoods further northward until, in 1873, Harlem was annexed to New York City. Although the New York & Harlem Railroad had run trains from lower Manhattan to Harlem beginning in 1837, service was poor and unreliable, and the trip was long. The real impetus for new residential development in this area came with the arrival of three lines of elevated railroads which, by 1881, ran as far north as 129th Street.

Between the 1870s and 1910 Harlem was the site of a massive wave of speculative development which resulted in the construction of record numbers of new single-family rowhouses, tenements, and luxury apartment houses. Almost all the houses which stand in Harlem today were built during that time. Commercial concerns and religious, educational, and cultural institutions were established to serve the expanding population. Electricity came to Harlem in 1887 and the telephone arrived the following year. The west half of Harlem, although developed slightly later, became a prosperous and fashionable

neighborhood and boasted elegant homes such as the King Model Houses, later known as Strivers' Row (in the St. Nicholas Historic District, West 138th and 139th Streets) and Astor Row, 8-62 West 130th Street (1880-83, all designated New York City Landmarks), as well as luxurious apartments with the most modern amenities such as the Graham Court Apartments, 1923-1937 Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Boulevard (1899-1901, a designated New York City Landmark). More modest housing was built as well. The area also contained the popular Polo Grounds and the distinguished Harlem Opera House on West 125th Street. Some speculators made tremendous profits by buying and reselling land and by developing properties, including Oscar Hammerstein I, Henry Morgenthau, and August Belmont.

Development of the Washington Apartments

The land on which the Washington Apartments was constructed was typical of Harlem real estate just ripe for development. Until 1851, the property was held by members of the Benson family, descendants of Captain Johannes Benson who settled there in 1696.² Samson Adolphus Benson sold a large tract (including this property) to John Bruce, a well-to-do Brooklyn resident and hardware dealer in New York. Bruce was clearly interested in the investment possibilities as he subdivided the land and sold off lots to numerous buyers. This property was held briefly by a succession of owners, without development, until Harlem began to blossom.

Edward H. W. Just (d.1893), the developer of the Washington Apartments, was one of the speculators who profited from the tremendous early Harlem building boom.³ Born in Eisleben, Germany, Just arrived in New York in the 1830s. He and his brother John (and later his nephew Carl) were the owners of the Just Brothers Fine Shirt manufacturing company, which had stores in the fashionable Ladies' Mile area during the 1880s and into the 1890s.⁴ Edward Just invested heavily in Harlem property, turning his attention to real estate full time shortly before his death in 1893. He left an estate valued at more than \$2 million.⁵

The site of the Washington Apartments, at Seventh Avenue (Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Boulevard) and 122nd Street, was near the newly expanded elevated railroad line, although previous to 1883, nothing had been constructed on this block or those immediately surrounding it. An 1880 map of the area of central Harlem (Fifth to Eighth Avenues from 124th Street to 131st Street), shows several rows of brownstone-fronted, single-family rowhouses as well as many older, wood-framed houses. The only large buildings were a few churches and a grammar school. The section of central Harlem just

to the south, from 117th to 124th Streets, shows very little construction of any kind, with nothing at all south of 123rd Street.⁶ An 1884 map of the same area (Fifth to Eighth Avenues, from 117th to 124th Streets) shows several rows of individual houses on 123rd and 124th Streets, as well as the elegant houses lining Mount Morris Park. The Washington is the only large apartment house in this section. The section from 124th to 131st Streets was much more heavily built up by 1884, with many rows of masonry-fronted rowhouses, several slightly larger flat houses, several churches, stables and a grammar school. Two small, walk-up apartment houses (the Beverly and the Eisleben, also a Just property) of three and four stories, respectively, are also shown, opposite each other at the intersection of Sixth Avenue and 125th Street.⁷

Edward Just was concerned about providing solid middle-class housing in Harlem and was an advocate of the large apartment house, a building type which in 1883 had only recently begun to gain popularity and enough cache to be acceptable to New York's middle class. In 1885, in an article discussing the extensive development in Harlem, *The Real Estate Record & Guide* recorded primarily single-family homes under construction,⁸ while in 1893 a local magazine listed fifty-five apartment houses in Harlem.⁹

Multi-Family Housing in New York¹⁰

Although multi-family housing existed early in New York's history, this generally took the form of boarding houses, hotels, and subdivided rowhouses and was not considered desirable for respectable middle-class families. Middle-class values stressed the importance of a "home" as a refuge from the world, the significance of privacy for the family unit, and the concept that societal levels should not be mixed in living quarters. These ideas came to be modified, however, as population growth and economic factors made single-family houses too expensive or forced them to be located too far from a person's place of work. Overcrowded tenements were for the poor, but new solutions were needed for people of greater means.

By the mid-nineteenth century buildings were constructed in New York which were labelled "French Flats," so named to evoke the multi-family residences found in Paris, in an attempt to distinguish them from common tenements. The term was recognized as a classification by the Department of Buildings in 1874 to describe multiple dwellings with apartments containing private baths and toilets. By the mid-1880s French flats were becoming accepted for middle-class residences. "Flats" became known for their more spacious accommodations, for the inclusion of more amenities, and for more architecturally distinguished exteriors than were

typical of tenements. They were often built with wider street frontages than the standard twenty-five foot wide city lot, and by about 1875 could rise eight to ten stories in height with the inclusion of a passenger elevator, a relatively recent innovation. Within ten years of the construction of the precedent-setting Stuyvesant Apartments (Richard Morris Hunt, 1869-70, 142 East 18th Street), several hundred expensive "flats" geared to the middle and upper classes had been constructed in New York, with ninety more built in the five years from 1880 to 1885. The eight-story Washington Apartments, an elevator building with a frontage of 101 feet on Seventh Avenue and an estimated construction cost of \$200,000, was among this group.¹¹ Today, only a few of these early flats buildings are still extant, such as the Manhattan (244 East 86th Street, 1879-80) and the Windemere Apartments (400-406 West 57th Street, 1880-81).¹²

Mortimer C. Merritt¹³

Mortimer C. Merritt, the architect chosen to design the Washington Apartments, was a talented and prolific designer, having produced a variety of types of buildings in numerous styles throughout New York City. Merritt (1840?-1931) was born in New York and graduated from the College of the City of New York (now City College) in 1859. He was established as an architect by 1868 and always worked independently. Merritt designed many commercial structures, the most well-known being the large, cast-iron-fronted department store on Sixth Avenue for Hugh O'Neill in 1887. That building and two others by Merritt are located within the Ladies' Mile Historic District. The others are: the Ely Building at 37 East 18th Street (1896-97), a neo-Renaissance store and loft building with a brick, stone and terra-cotta front; and the granite-clad store and loft building at 53-55 West 21th Street (1901-02). A cast-iron-fronted store and loft building designed by Merritt in 1879 at 71-73 Grand Street is located in the SoHo-Cast Iron Historic District. Merritt worked throughout the city, and another of his designs is found on a Medieval Revival style rowhouse at 128 West 73rd Street (1883-84, in the Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic District).

The Washington Apartments

For the Washington Apartments, Merritt designed a substantial brick-fronted building facing the broad avenue.¹⁴ A corner building of eight stories, this was the first structure built on this block as well as the first large apartment house in central Harlem, and thus set the tone for the surrounding area. In the building's design Merritt used the Queen Anne style, which had become a popular residential style in this country in the late 1870s,

particularly following the Centennial celebration of 1876 which sparked interest in America's Colonial past. First developed in England and associated with the work of architect Richard Norman Shaw, the style was modified in this country by including decorative elements typical of Colonial architecture, such as applied pilasters, pediments, and foliate friezes, and was mostly used for residential buildings. In the Washington Apartments the quality of picturesqueness, so desirable in the Queen Anne style, has been successfully achieved by the combination of materials, including red brick with contrasting light stone at the base and trim, as well as elements of terra-cotta and iron. Fluted pilasters and colonnettes which separate and flank some of the windows are also indicative of this style. On the lively main facade, the central portion of the building is emphasized by the projections of the bays, the overscaled iron frontispiece composed of a triangular pediment with side panels embellished by sunbursts, and the series of bracketed balconies (missing their balustrades) which embellish the center windows. Both facades are further enhanced by terra cotta and pressed brick panels of foliate design, stone stringcourses, and diapered brick spandrels and panels. The addition of delicate incised ornament at the impost blocks, typical of the neo-Grec style, was common in Queen Anne buildings in New York.

When constructed, the building housed thirty middle-class families. The occupants included doctors, lawyers, bankers, public accountants, and builders, many of whom had servants who lived with them. A number of residents had offices in lower Manhattan and were able to live in Harlem and conveniently commute to work because of the recently constructed elevated railroad.¹⁵

The character of Harlem changed considerably during the early years of the twentieth century. Proposed subway routes to West Harlem in the late 1890s had sparked another wave of real estate speculation which led to highly inflated market values. Tremendous numbers of new residential buildings were constructed around the turn of the century. This overbuilding resulted in extensive vacancies and artificially high rents, causing a general collapse of the real estate market in 1904-05 as loans were withheld and mortgages foreclosed.

Taking advantage of the deflated market and the housing surplus which followed, a black businessman named Philip Payton and his Afro-American Realty Company, founded in 1904, played a major role in the development of Harlem as a black community. In the aftermath of the real estate collapse, Payton acquired five-year leases on white-owned properties and rented them at higher rates to black families. African-Americans who could afford high rents had begun moving to Harlem at the turn of the century. A dramatic increase in Harlem's black population

came, however, as hundreds of black families were uprooted when their homes in the Tenderloin area near 34th Street were destroyed during the 1906-10 construction of Pennsylvania Station. For the first time good housing in large quantities was available to New York's black population. Just as Harlem had been a middle-class white community, it became a middle-class black community, with approximately 50,000 blacks living there in 1914. By 1920 the area from 130th to 140th Streets and from Fifth Avenue to Eighth Avenue was predominantly black, housing 73,000 people including two-thirds of Manhattan's African-American population.¹⁶ The black migration to Harlem continued to increase during the 1920s as people came from the American South and the West Indies in record numbers. The years that followed, saw the "Harlem Renaissance." By 1930 Harlem became the urban cultural center of black America, with its central location being around 125th Street.

With all the changes occurring nearby, the Washington Apartments maintained its white, middle-class residents through the 1920s.¹⁷ Interior changes made from 1915 through 1920 did, however, create smaller apartments so that the building, which had been constructed to house thirty families in 1883, was home to sixty-three families and a restaurant in 1932.¹⁸

The Washington Apartments was sold in 1894 after the death of Edward Just. The building was purchased for investment by businessman Ross Browning, the owner until his death in 1925; Browning's heirs held it until 1936.¹⁹ After that, it was owned by a series of real estate corporations until it was taken over by the City in 1977. Rehabilitation began in the late 1980s.

Description

Located on the southwest corner of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Boulevard and 122nd Street, the eight-story building known as the Washington Apartments is clad in red brick highlighted by stone, iron, terra-cotta and pressed brick trim above a stone base (now painted). The building is currently unoccupied and is being rehabilitated by the New York City Department of Housing, Preservation and Development. Almost all of the windows have been replaced by double-hung, one-over-one and two-over-two, aluminum sash windows.

The main facade faces Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Boulevard and is symmetrically arranged with a wide projecting pavilion which extends through the height of the building and is crowned by an overscaled galvanized iron frontispiece. This element is formed of a triangular pediment carried on pilasters and buttressed by a split panel enhanced by a sunburst motif. Projecting iron finials (one of which is

partially missing) capped by anthemion finish the composition. Originally this element was incorporated into a broad cornice (now removed) which surrounded the building above the seventh story. Beneath this frontispiece, each story in the central bay is comprised of three sets of paired windows. The central pair is joined by a small stone engaged pilaster and crowned by a shallow-arched pediment ornamented with terra-cotta designs. The flanking pairs of windows are linked by continuous stone sills and lintels. The windows of the third through seventh stories of the central bay are fronted by stone balconies carried on brackets. Their stone balustrades have been removed.

The one-story base, with its central entranceway, is faced with rusticated stone and has a one-bay return on the 122nd Street facade. A small replacement stoop and a ramp for handicapped access have been added to the main entrance. A pair of rectangular window openings flanks the doorway within the central bay, while each of the other bays at this level also have two similar window openings, now closed by boards.

Stone stringcourses divide the building horizontally above the first, third, and fifth stories, with two-story brick piers creating vertical bays between these horizontal divisions. The stringcourses are enhanced at the third and fifth stories by panels of terra-cotta foliate ornament which also form pilaster capitals. The windows below these bands are marked by stone impost blocks incised with neo-Grec floral motifs, while the levels between have spandrels of brick diaper work framed by contrasting stone sills and lintels. The eighth-story windows are segmentally arched and have projecting brick hoods. Above the eighth story a brick corbel table supports a simple sheet-metal cornice, parts of which are missing. This facade has two historic fire escapes.

The 122nd Street facade has five bays, the easternmost bay serving as a return of the main facade and carrying the same decorative motifs. The major elements of the composition continue on this facade as well. At the central bay the paired windows of the second through sixth stories share common ornamental motifs: continuous stone sills and lintels, brick relieving arches with terra-cotta ornament, and flanking decorative brickwork suggestive of pilasters. To each side of the central bay, continuous stone sills and lintels link the windows of each bay. At the seventh story all of the windows except those in the east bay are segmentally-arched. The eighth-story windows have the same treatment as on the main facade. At the ground story, beyond the first bay, the square-headed window openings are set in brick and have stone lintels which are continuous within each bay and a stone sill course extends across the facade.

Parts of the rear and south elevations are visible above the tops of the neighboring buildings. These elevations are not ornamented.

Report prepared by

Virginia Kurshan

Report edited by

Elisa Urbanelli

Research Department Editor

NOTES

1. This section is compiled from: LPC, *Mount Morris Park Historic District Designation Report* (LP-0452), (New York: City of New York, 1971); *17 East 128th Street House Designation Report* (LP-1237), report prepared by Edward Mohylowski (New York, 1982); *16 West 130th Street House Designation Report* (LP-1141), report prepared by Virginia Kurshan (New York, 1981); and *Graham Court Apartments Designation Report* (LP-1254), report prepared by Jay Shockley (New York, 1984).
2. The information on early property holders comes from New York County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances, and from LPC, *Mount Morris Park Historic District Designation Report*.
3. Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971), 76.
4. *Trow's New York City Directories* of 1879 through 1887 list Just Brothers Fine Custom Shirts at various locations on lower Broadway. By 1892, Carl Just is listed as a successor to Just Brothers and Edward Just has a real estate office on West 135th Street.

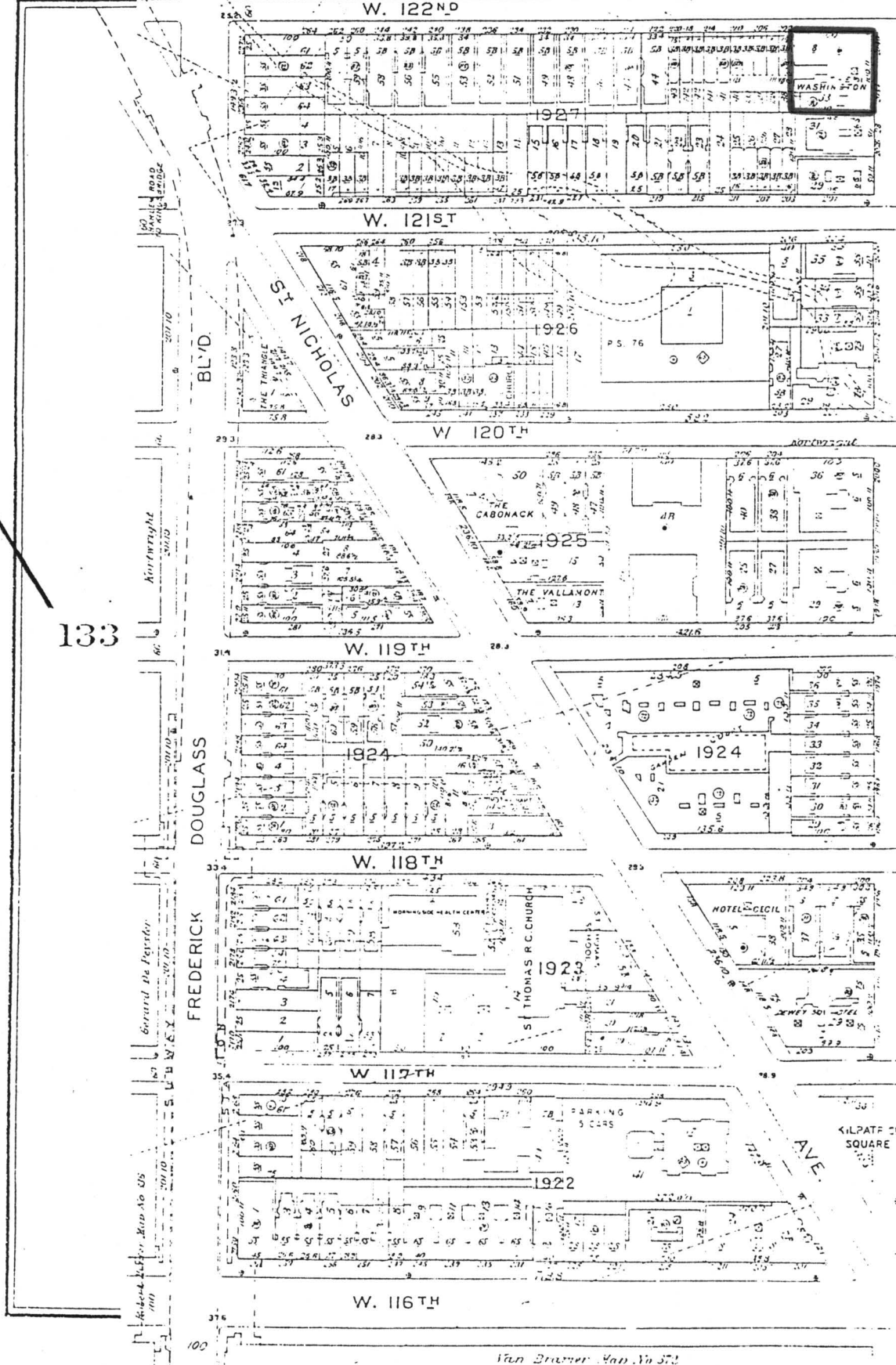
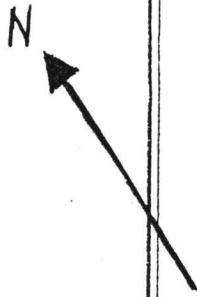
5. Just committed suicide on February 3, 1893. At the time, in addition to the Washington, he owned several other apartment houses in Harlem including: the Cosmopolitan Row on Eighth Avenue between 134th and 135th Streets, the Elberon Apartments on Lenox Avenue and 125th Street, and the Eisleben Apartments on Sixth Avenue at 125th Street, as well as numerous individual houses in Harlem. *New York Times*, (Feb. 4, 1893), p.1.
6. *Atlas of the City of New York*, vol. 2 (New York: E. Robinson, 1880), pl.21 and pl.24.
7. *Atlas of the City of New York*, vol. 2 (New York: E. Robinson, 1884), pl.21 and pl. 24.
8. *Real Estate Record & Guide* (Oct. 10, 1885), p.1103.
9. *Harlem of To-day, Illustrated, A Glimpse at its Past, Present and Future* (New York: Davison Publ. Co., 1893), n.p.
10. This section is compiled from: Elizabeth Collins Cromley, *Alone Together, A History of New York's Early Apartments* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990); and: LPC, *Osborne Apartments Designation Report* (LP-1770), report prepared by Virginia Kurshan (New York, 1991). See also Sarah Bradford Landau, "Richard Morris Hunt: Architectural Innovator and Father of a 'Distinctive' American School," *The Architecture of Richard Morris Hunt*, ed. Susan R. Stein (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 61-66.
11. NB 242-1883.
12. Several other large apartment buildings from this era are still extant, including the Dakota (1880-84), the Gramercy (1882-83), the Chelsea (1883), and the Osborne (1885, all New York City Landmarks). These buildings, however, were intended for a more elite clientele, with more elegant and spacious features than the larger flats.
13. This section is compiled from: LPC, *Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic District Designation Report* (LP-1647), (New York, 1989) and the research files of the Landmarks Preservation Commission.
14. Seventh Avenue is a major Harlem thoroughfare. In 1974 it was renamed Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Boulevard in memory of the flamboyant and well-loved, eleven-term Congressman from Harlem. Henry Moscow, *The Street Book* (New York: Hagstrom Co., 1979).
15. *New York Police Census of 1890*, and *Trow's New York City Directory 1890-91*, (New York: The Trow City Directory Co., 1891).
16. Information on the changes occurring in Harlem is compiled from Osofsky, 92-149, and LPC, *16 West 130th Street House Designation Report*.
17. According to the 1925 New York State Census.
18. New York City, Department of Buildings, Manhattan, Plans, Permits and Dockets [Block 1927, Lot 33]. Alt. 1921-1915, Alt. 2438-1916, Alt. 2127-1920, and Alt. 1286-1932.
19. According to the obituary of his son, Charles Ross Browning, in the *New York Times* (Jan. 27, 1945), p.27, Ross Browning had been president of the American Ringer Company in New York and had resided at Llewelyn Park in New Jersey.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and the other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Washington Apartments has a special character, special historic and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City.

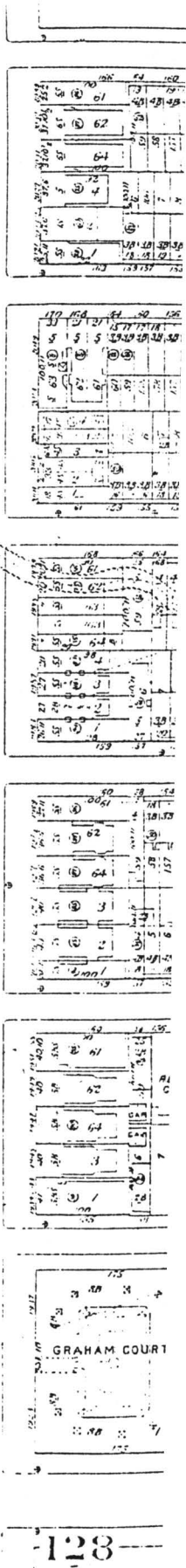
The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Washington Apartments, designed by the talented and productive architect Mortimer C. Merritt, is a fine example of the Queen Anne style, with a picturesque facade achieved through the use of several materials and colors, and a variety of elements such as balconies and colonnettes which give depth and texture to the composition; that the building, constructed in 1883-84 for Edward H.M. Just, was part of the early wave of speculative development which transformed Harlem from a rural outpost to a premier middle-class enclave; that this building was the earliest large apartment building in central Harlem, and dominated the many rowhouses built in this area during the period; and that this building not only retains its distinctive presence in the Harlem community, but also is one of the few surviving apartment houses in New York City from the early 1880s.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 (formerly Section 534 of Chapter 21) 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 Washington Apartments at 2034-2040 Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Boulevard, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1927, Lot 33, Borough of Manhattan, as its related Landmark Site.



133

245
240
235
230
225
220
215
210
205
200
195
190
185
180
175
170
165
160
155
150
145
140



128

Washington Apartments

2034-2040 Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Boulevard, Manhattan, Landmark Site
Graphic Source: Sanborn Manhattan Land Book, 1988-89.



Washington Apartments, 2034-2040 Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Boulevard, Manhattan
Photo Credit: Carl Forster



Washington Apartments, West 122nd Street elevation.
Photo Credit: Carl Forster.



Washington Apartments, frontispiece, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Boulevard.
Photo Credit: Carl Forster.



Washington Apartments, detail of ornament, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Boulevard.
Photo Credit: Carl Forster



Washington Apartments, window detail, West 122nd Street.
Photo Credit: Carl Forster.