

NEW YORK YACHT CLUB BUILDING, 37 West 44th Street, Borough of Manhattan.
Built 1899-1900; architects Warren & Wetmore.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1260, Lot 16.

On November 14, 1978, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the New York Yacht Club Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 8). The hearing was continued to January 9, 1979 (Item No. 1) and again to March 13, 1979 (Item No. 1). All three hearings were duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Four witnesses spoke in favor of designation. Two witnesses spoke in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

A brilliant synthesis of the Beaux-Arts tenets of character and composition, the New York Yacht Club Building marked the debut of the noted New York architectural firm of Warren & Wetmore. Built in 1899-1900 in the fashionable clubhouse district along 43rd and 44th Streets, the building became the fifth home of the country's most prestigious yachting organization.

Founded in 1844 by a group of nine New York yachtsmen aboard a schooner anchored off the Battery, the New York Yacht Club is the foremost and oldest yachting institution in the country. Established during the era of the great China Clippers, the club was incorporated "for the purpose of encouraging yacht building and naval architecture and the cultivation of naval science."¹ The New York Yacht Club was established during a era of unprecedented commercial and industrial expansion. In 1851 buoyed by its industrial success, England invited the world to a great industrial exhibition where it challenged the other nations to present examples of their modern technology. The summer of 1851 was filled with related events to amuse the visitors to the exhibition. In this spirit of rivalry a full schedule of yachting events had been planned, no doubt to remind the world of England's historical supremacy of the sea.

As early as the autumn of 1850 an enthusiastic English merchant suggested that a group of New York businessmen enter one of the city's speedy pilot boats into competition for the Royal Yacht Squadron Cup which was a celebrated prize given by England's leading yacht club. John C. Stevens and George L. Schuyler, two of the founding members of the newly established New York Yacht Club took up the English challenge. The two yachtsmen turned to the skills of George Steers who was known to design the fastest pilot boats in the New York area. The son of an English shipwright, Steers had made an early reputation for himself in the New York area by designing successful racing boats. Although his business activity dealt primarily with pilot boats, Steers had continued to produce designs for serious yachtsmen, including several members of the New York Yacht Club. In 1850 at the age of 30, Steers was employed by the city's leading shipbuilder, William H. Brown, whose boatyard was located at the foot of 12th Street on the East River. With the facilities of Brown's boatyard at his disposal, Steers designed and supervised the construction of the famous yacht America which on August 22, 1851, swept past fifteen international competitors to win the famous English yachting cup which came to bear her name. In 1867 the America's owners presented the cup to the New York Yacht Club which has continued to dominate this celebrated

yachting competition. The ardent sponsorship of and interest in innovative boat design has continued to shape the membership of the New York Yacht Club.²

Following its organization aboard John C. Steven's schooner, the New York Yacht Club held its first official meeting at Windhorst's coffeehouse on Park Row. On July 15, 1845, the yacht club began its occupancy of a colorful Gothic Revival clubhouse located in Elysian Fields, above Castle Point in Hoboken. This venerable board and batten structure with its broad sweeping eaves has been preserved at Mystic Seaport in Connecticut. In 1869, three years after its incorporation, the club moved to a house at Clifton on Staten Island. By 1871 the club's membership began demanding an increase in social activities and in addition to the Staten Island house, the yacht club rented rooms in a house at Madison Avenue and 27th Street. Financial difficulties in 1877 forced the club to abandon its Staten Island headquarters, and in 1884 the club formally took up residence at 27th Street and Madison Avenue.

By the 1890s men's social clubs had become an established tradition in New York City. Their rapidly growing memberships forced many clubs out of the brownstones they once comfortably occupied and into specially designed club houses which followed the fashionable move uptown of well-to-do residential development. In 1893 the decision was made to remove the Croton Reservoir from its location between 40th and 42nd Street in preparation for the construction of the New York Public Library. Plans for this important cultural institution brought additional prestige to this area where numerous social and professional clubs began to take root. Along West 43rd Street the Century Association, the Racquet and Tennis Club (now demolished) and the Academy of Medicine established handsome headquarters. The Harvard Club and the Association of the Bar of the City of New York joined the ranks on West 44th Street.

In January of 1898 a committee was formed to study the possibility of erecting a larger and more commodious clubhouse for the New York Yacht Club. Some members of the club, who also held memberships at other of the city's social clubs, were opposed to the expansion of the yachting club within the city. They felt that if anything a clubhouse on Long Island Sound would better serve their needs. A growing number of members, however, desired larger headquarters which would serve not only the purpose of a yacht club but also that of a social club with the attendant dining and recreational facilities. In October of 1898 Commodore J. Pierpont Morgan, who supported the construction of a more imposing clubhouse, prompted a final decision. As the building site committee debated, Morgan caught everyone by surprise by offering to purchase three lots on West 44th Street for the club if it in turn would assure him of building a more important clubhouse with a 75-foot front. In addition, Morgan insisted that the annual dues be raised from \$25 to \$50 per year.

Morgan was not a novice in the field of club building and club administration. In 1892 Morgan had been the prime organizer of the Metropolitan Club, and he had contributed ideas to the design of the clubhouse. In addition to serving as Commodore of the New York Yacht Club Morgan was a past president of both the Union Club and the Metropolitan Club. The members of the yacht club could hardly ignore his generous offer which amounted to \$148,000.

To secure a design for the yacht club an architectural competition was held and seven architects entered their work. On December 15, 1898, the New York Times announced that the designs of Whitney Warren of the recently established firm of Warren and Wetmore had been selected by the Yacht Club's building committee.³ Following a year of deliberation the committee had selected Warren's evocatively baroque design over a more conventional club design by George A. Freeman. Warren, who counted among his personal library many books on marine and military architecture, had literally incorporated images of marine life and naval architecture into the clubhouse design. Upon presentation of his plans Warren explained:

This being a club for a special purpose namely the furtherance of naval architecture from an amateur standpoint, we consider that externally and internally the arrangements should be such as to place the subject in evidence, and not to retire it and make the clubhouse appear as that of merely a social club.⁴

This fanciful Beaux-Arts design which has been hailed by numerous architectural critics⁵ was not only the first New York commission of the important architectural firm of Warren & Wetmore but was the hallmark which established the firm's reputation. In fact the facade of the New York Yacht Club Building with its carefully executed asymmetrical composition, its clear expression of the interior plan, and its daring use of nautical symbols is one of New York's clearest and finest statements of Beaux-Arts design.

Born in New York City Whitney Warren (1864-1943) began his career with the full intention of becoming a painter. From his study of drawing, Warren developed an interest in architectural rendering and after a year at Columbia, he began his architectural career in 1885 at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. While at the Ecole, Warren studied in the ateliers of two highly esteemed architects: Charles Girault and Honoré Daumet. Girault is best known for his celebrated design of the Petit Palais for the Paris Exposition of 1900. Girault, as well as Warren, studied with the older master Honoré Daumet whose career included the famous restoration of the Chateau de Chantilly and who himself was a student of one of the Ecoles leaders in the development of the highly expressive style, the Neo-Grec. The early proponents of the Neo-Grec had around 1850 returned to the literal use of symbolic images within their architectural compositions. This incorporation of literal expression into architecture had been the foundation of the work of the late 18th century French masters Boulée and Ledoux and indeed around 1850 the Ecole des Beaux-Arts experienced a revival of interest in the work of Ledoux. From this directly symbolic work of the Neo-Grec came the comment "that one can make poetry in architecture."⁶ It was during this period that character joined composition as the two fundamental tenets of the design theory of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. While many have described Warren's use of nautical symbols in terms of fantasy, his work is clearly grounded in the basic teachings and theories of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, the most influential architectural design force of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

In keeping with the teachings of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, the composition of the club's facade can be read as an expression of the general plan of the interior. The front plane of the facade is divided like the Classical column into regions marking the base, shaft and capital. These areas denote interior divisions

The horizontal courses are counter-balanced by the advancing vertical emphasis of the entrance pavilion. This pavilion itself is separated into three sections representing the varying levels of the interior of the entrance hall. Behind the grill-covered fenestration in the base are housed the club's service rooms: kitchen, pantries, and cellars. The grand arched windows of the piano nobile clearly mark the principle club rooms above which rests the library. The regular pattern of the library windows extending across the building's facade crowns the frontal plane. Set back behind the public areas are the private apartments which are set into the roof.

Constructed of brick with a finely-grained stone facing, the seven-story facade of the New York Yacht Club Building is a baroque testimony to the inventive character of Beaux-Arts design. Raised up on a banded podium, the four-bay front is composed of a monumental three-bay Ionic order which is asymmetrically balanced by the solitary bay of the imposing entrance pavilion. The three bays of columns are filled by large round-arch windows, the lower portion of which are pierced by elaborate bay windows set into a sculpted framework depicting the sterns of fancifully carved baroque sailing vessels. Garlands of seaweed and shells hang from wave-like consoles and dolphins spew into the overhanging wakes of the departing ships. There are few examples of architectural sculpture in the United States which match these bay windows. The club's entrance is emphasized by a slightly advancing pavilion flanked by monumental pilasters hung with the club shield. The entrance door, surmounted by an elaborate cartouche, is lighted from above by a broad segmental-arch window overhung by a transom. The pavilion is further emphasized and flanked at the attic levels by two stanchions holding flag poles. Above the Ionic entablature, piers continue the vertical emphasis through the attic which is punctuated by trabeated openings and become free-standing above the roofline. These piers were originally met by a lacy pergola which joined the front plane of the facade with the plane of the Mansard roof which was set back behind the fifth story roof garden. Two stories of attic windows light the roof.

One of the most expressive examples of Beaux-Arts architecture in the country, the New York Yacht Club Building established the architectural reputation of the prestigious firm of Warren & Wetmore and has become a well-known symbol of the nation's oldest yachting organization. Standing today alongside many of the city's most prestigious clubhouses, the New York Yacht Club Building continues to serve as a prominent reminder of the elegant clubhouse district which developed along 43rd and 44th Streets and continues to call to mind the romantic tone of the city's architecture during the late 19th century.

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FOOTNOTES

1. New York Yacht Club Yearbook, 1944, p. 48.
2. John Parkinson, The History of the New York Yacht Club from its Founding Through 1973 (New York: The New York Yacht Club, 1975), p. 430.
3. New York Times, December 15, 1898, p. 5 C.4.
4. New York Times, December 9, 1900, p. 23 C.4.
5. See: Alan Burnham, ed., New York Landmarks (Middletown, Ct.: Wesleyan University Press, 1963), p. 186; Paul Goldberger, The City Observed: New York (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), pp. 143-144; Norval White and Elliot Willensky, A.I.A. Guide to New York City (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1978), p. 137.
6. Arthur Drexler, ed., The Architecture of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1977), p. 408.

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 New York Yacht Club Building 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, among its important qualities the New York Yacht Club Building is a brilliant synthesis of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts' tenets of character and composition; that it was the first commission of the architectural firm of Warren & Wetmore and helped to establish their reputation; that the building's facade was influenced by the Ecole's highly expressive Neo-Grec movement which established the role of character as one of the school's two primary design tenets; that among the facade's notable characteristics are its carefully executed asymmetrical composition, its clear expression of the interior plan and its daring use of nautical symbols; that the facade's elaborate bay windows depicting sterns of fancifully carved baroque sailing vessels are themselves among the finest examples of architectural sculpture in the United States; that the building was built in 1899-1900 as the fifth home of the country's most prestigious yachting organization and that the New York Yacht Club Building continues to serve as a prominent reminder of the elegant clubhouse district which developed along 42nd and 44th Streets during the late 19th century.

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 New York Yacht Club Building Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1260, Lot 16, Borough of Manhattan as its Landmark Site.

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Photo Credit:
Charlotte LaRue

New York Yacht Club
Built 1899-1900

Architects:
Warren & Wetmore