Landmarks Preservation Commission
September 11, 1979, Designation List 127
LP-1039

GILSEY HOUSE, 1200 Broadway, Borough of Manhattan.
Built 1869-71; architect Stephen Decatur Hatch.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 831, Lot 20.

On March 13, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Gilsey House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 15). The hearing was continued to May 8, 1979 (Item No. 3). All hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of 4 witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There was no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Dominating the intersection of Broadway and West 29th Street, the Gilsey House Hotel is one of the city's most imposing Second Empire cast-iron buildings. Designed by Stephen Decatur Hatch for Peter Gilsey, the hotel was built between 1869 and 1871 at the beginning of a period in New York's history that transformed Broadway between Madison and Herald Squares into the heart of a glittering entertainment district.[1]

Just prior to the outbreak of the Civil War when Madison Square was an exclusive residential quarter, most hotels, restaurants, theaters and stores of any distinction were still below Houston Street. However, with the end of the War and the recovery of the economy from the general depression that followed it, the relentless northward growth of the city resumed and a number of fashionable hotels opened near Madison Square along Fifth Avenue and Broadway. The Albemarle, the St. James, the Victoria, the Grand, and the Gilsey House all located in the area and each attempted to exceed the other in opulence and luxury.

The great department stores moved "uptown" to Broadway and Sixth Avenue between 14th and 23rd Streets, creating an unparalleled shopping center known as "Ladies' Mile." Theaters also left downtown and began to congregate north of 23rd Street. At one time, the three blocks along Broadway between West 28th and 31st Streets boasted six theaters including: Daly's, Weber & Field's and Wallack's Thirtieth Street Theater, all featuring the finest musical-variety shows of the day.[2] So many music publishers had opened their offices on West 28th Street near Broadway that the cacophony of their pianos--likened to the clashing of tin pans--gave the sobriquet "Tin Pan Alley" to the street.

West of Sixth Avenue, the side streets, bordered with respectable brownstones, became notorious for the diversions they offered the "nabobs" frequenting the theaters and hotels. They housed the city's posh brothels and swank gambling clubs. Between Sixth and Seventh Avenues, West 27th Street once contained 27 of the district's "seraglios".[3] So infamous had the area become as a source of municipal corruption, particularly in the West 30s, that Inspector Alexander "Clubber" Williams, on being appointed to the West 30th Street precinct was able to say with impunity, "I've had nothing but chuck steak for a long time and now I'm going to get a little of the tenderloin."[4] From then on the section was known as the Tenderloin--a section that offered the best and the worst that the city possessed, a section with Stephen Crane on West 23rd Street and "Clubber" Williams on West 30th, a section with newly wed Edith Wharton at 28 West 25th Street and the madam, Kate Woods, at 105 West 25th Street entertaining amid lush surroundings

that only the Mauve Decades could provide, a section glaring with rich and dramatic contrasts that only New York could produce.

The Gilsey House, with its gleaming white facade, was a prominent feature of the area for over 30 years until the theater district shifted north to Time Square at the turn of the century. The section then became part of the garment district, and the hotel was altered to provide loft space. Now only the Gilsey House and the Grand Hotel remain on Broadway to recall that colorful era of the city's past.

The owner and builder of the Gilsey House was Peter Gilsey, a prominent 19th-century New Yorker and an alderman of the city. Gilsey, born in Hobro in the Danish province of Jutland in 1811, emigrated to this country in 1837. After successfully establishing himself in the tobacco trade, he began to invest in Broadway real estate.[5] One of the first buildings that Gilsey erected was a Venetian-inspired palazzo designed by J.W. Rich and built on the southwest corner of Broadway and Courtlandt Street, in 1854. The cast-iron facade was produced by Architectural Iron Works, Daniel Badger's firm. Fifteen years later, Gilsey again hired Badger to cast the facade of his new hotel, the Gilsey House.

Daniel Badger, an important advocate for the use of cast-iron fronts, was responsible, to a great degree, for the wealth of cast-iron architecture that New York possesses. It has been written of him that, "No man connected with the business ever did as much as Mr. Badger to popularize the use of cast-iron fronts..."[6] His foundary on East 14th Street between Avenue B and C produced a large number of cast-iron buildings, not only for clients in New York, but for most major cities in this country and for clients as far away as Egypt and Brazil.

The architect of the Gilsey House, Stephen Decatur Hatch, was born in Swanton, Vermont, in 1839 and settled in New York where, in 1860, he entered the architectural office of John B. Snook, a leading architect with one of the largest practices in the city during the 19th century. When he left Snook's office, having served four years as a draftsman, Hatch spent three lean years between 1864 and 1867 until the economy began to recover from the ravages of the Civil War. As building activity resumed, he began to acquire a reputable practice designing first class brownstone rowhouses in Murray Hill and in the 40s near Fifth Avenue. For Hatch, the prestigeous new assignment to design the Gilsey House began his reputation as an architect of important commercial structures.

Prior to the Civil War, the current style was the Italianate, a style based on the architecture of the Italian Renaissance. Sir Charles Barry had introduced the style in London with his Travellers' Club (1830-32) and the Reform Club (1838-40). In 1845, Snook designed the A.T. Stewart department store, still standing on the east side of Broadway between Chambers and Reade Streets. This building was the first in the United States to be stylistically based on the Italian Renaissance and was among the most influential buildings erected in New York in the last century. With the Stewart building, Snook introduced the palace mode or palazzo style for commercial structures to this country and "created architectural repercussions up and down the Atlantic seaboard."[7]

The form of the new Italianate mode was cubic, flat-roofed, and nearly flat-surfaced and had the practical advantage of providing a means to expand a building without destroying its aesthetic effect. Once the basic design was completed, it could be repeated as often as the owner wished or could afford. The use of cast iron as a facade material was gaining acceptance at the same time as the new style, and the two were particularly well-suited for each other. The standardized construction technique of cast iron, joined with the palace mode's characteristic repetition of a basic design unit, greatly enhanced the popularity of both the material and the style.

During the War years and immediately following, when there was little active construction in New York, Britain was experiencing an upsurge in building. Some of the new residential structures, commercial buildings and hotels reflected the architectural style of the Paris of Louis Napoleon--the Second Empire style. Napoleon III had embarked upon a major campaign to redesign Paris. One of his major projects and one of the most widely known outside of France was the New Louvre (1852-57) by Visconti and Lefuel. The building, with its ornate pavilions and striking mansard roofs, became, "the symbol, par excellence, of cosmopolitan modernity."[8] When the building market in New York began to burgeon between 1867 and 1873, the architects here adopted the new French-inspired style popular in Britain and adapted it to the American environment, much as they had done with the Renaissance palazzo first introduced in London by Barry a generation earlier.

The prominent characteristics of the Second Empire are pavilions which add plasticity and verticality to the facade, and mansards which elaborate on the pavilions and create bold silhouettes. These characteristics contrast sharply with the nearly flat surface and flat roof of the palace mode. In New York, because extensive lot coverage and building to street-property line were traditional in commercial architecture, fully developed pavilions were usually found only on institutional buildings surrounded by open land or on a few free-standing mansions. Often, the style as expressed in a business structure was the standard palazzo topped with a mansard, with little or no vertical articulation on the facade to indicate pavilions. It was left to the silhouette of the mansard with its towered sections to create that image. The Gilsey House, as originally designed, is not a melange of palazzo below and palais above. It is an example of mature American Second Empire.

The land on which the hotel was built was not owned by Peter Gilsey. He leased the property initially for 21 years at $10,000 per annum. The entire lot was an assemblage consisting of one large lot at the corner and three smaller adjoining lots on West 29th Street. The smaller lots on the side street were governed by an 1848 restrictive covenant that mandated an eight-foot setback which Gilsey honored.[9] However, the restriction presented the architect with a sudden corner almost at the center of a very long facade. He dealt with the problem by slicing the corner in the center of the West 29th Street front and at Broadway at an angle, creating two single-bay chamfers which he designed to recall pavilions. At the ground floor of each was an entrance to hotel facilities. He further enhanced both chamfers by the use of Palladian-inspired windows in the bays above the ground floor and flanked the ground floor entrance and upper story windows by paired, free-standing columns with stylized Ionic capitals. Behind the columns were paired pilasters which visually tied the columns to the facade. Hatch's design seems to be consciously imitating that of Visconti and Lefuel who had used

paired columns with echoing pilasters on the pavilions of the New Louvre.

The impression of pavilions created by the free-standing columns was heightened by the graceful, three-story high curve of the convex mansard towers. Each roof tower was pierced at its base by round-arched windows enframed with paired pilaster supporting a heavy broken segmental-arch pediment. To the side of the pilasters were handsomely turned volutes. From the break of the pediment rose another small window with triangular pediment. On the prominent Broadway chamfer, the small window carried a clock held on the shoulders of two fanciful figures while at the central chamfer on West 29th Street was a bull's-eye with radiating keystones.

The middle bays of the facade facing Broadway and the setback section on West 29th Street which marked the two major entrances, were handled in a manner similar to the chamfered bays. The exception was that the paired columns ended at the roof cornice line and carried low broken segmental-arch pediments not mansard towers. The verticality created by the free-standing paired columns and continued above the roofline at the chamfered bays by the towers, was carried up at the entrance bays by decorated chimney flues, elements usually hidden within the roof. In order to break the long horizontal space on the West 29th Street front between the chamfered bays, Hatch treated the central windows at each floor separately and enframed them with paired engaged columns, imitating in an understated, shallow way, the pavilion effect at the chamfered bays and the entrance bays.

The floor levels were clearly defined by cornices and separate window treatment for each story. Above the show windows of the ground floor, all the windows were square-headed and framed by pilasters carrying pediments. The variation was in the window pediments: at the second floor, they were in the form of broken segmental arches with ornamental urns; at the third, the pediments were triangular; and the fourth had segmental-arch pediments. The fifth floor had round-arch windows with shallow enframements that provided a transition to the round-arched and oval dormers of the mansard. The technique of differing window treatment at each floor is typically Second Empire and added a subtle horizontal element, further emphasized by the cornices above each floor.

The exterior of the hotel was probably altered to its present appearance with the removal of some ornamental detail and changes in openings shortly after 1911 when the Gilsey House ceased operation as a hotel. The modernization of the Broadway storefronts dates from 1946. However, the setback section on West 29th Street retains most of its original detail. At the present time, the building is being converted to residential use--a development that has helped to preserve much of our cast-iron heritage. The Gilsey House Hotel is an important part of that heritage both from an architectural and a historical point of view.

Report prepared by James T. Dillon
Research Department

FOOTNOTES

1. New York City, Manhattan Buildings Department; Docket Books N.B. 574-69.

2. Mary C. Henderson, The City and the Theatre (Clifton, New Jersey: James T. White & Company, 1973), pp. 122-172.

3. Charles Lockwood, Manhattan Moves Uptown (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976), p. 296.

4. New York Times, May 20, 1979, IV, p. 20.

5. New York Times, April 9, 1873, p. 4. New York Tribune, April 9, 1873, p. 5.

6. A History of Real Estate, Building and Architecture in New York City (New York: The Real Estate Record Association, 1898. Reprinted by Arno Press, 1967), p. 458.

7. Winston Weisman, "Commercial Palaces of New York: 1845-1875", Art Bulletin, 36 (December 1954), 288.

8. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 194.

9. Conveyances of Deeds and Real Property, Surrogates Court, Block 831, Lot 20; Liber 1089, page 436.

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 Gilsey House 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 Gilsey House Hotel is a fine example of cast-iron architecture, that the facade was cast by Daniel Badger's firm, Architectural Iron Works, that it was designed by Stephen Decatur Hatch, an important New York City architect, that when it was erected it was an excellent example of the mature American Second Empire style, that the hotel was built for Peter Gilsey, a prominent 19th-century New Yorker, developer of Broadway real estate and an alderman of the city, and that the Gilsey House Hotel is an important part of the city's historic and architectural heritage.

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 Gilsey House, 1200 Broadway, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 831, Lot 20, Borough of Manhattan as its Landmark Site.

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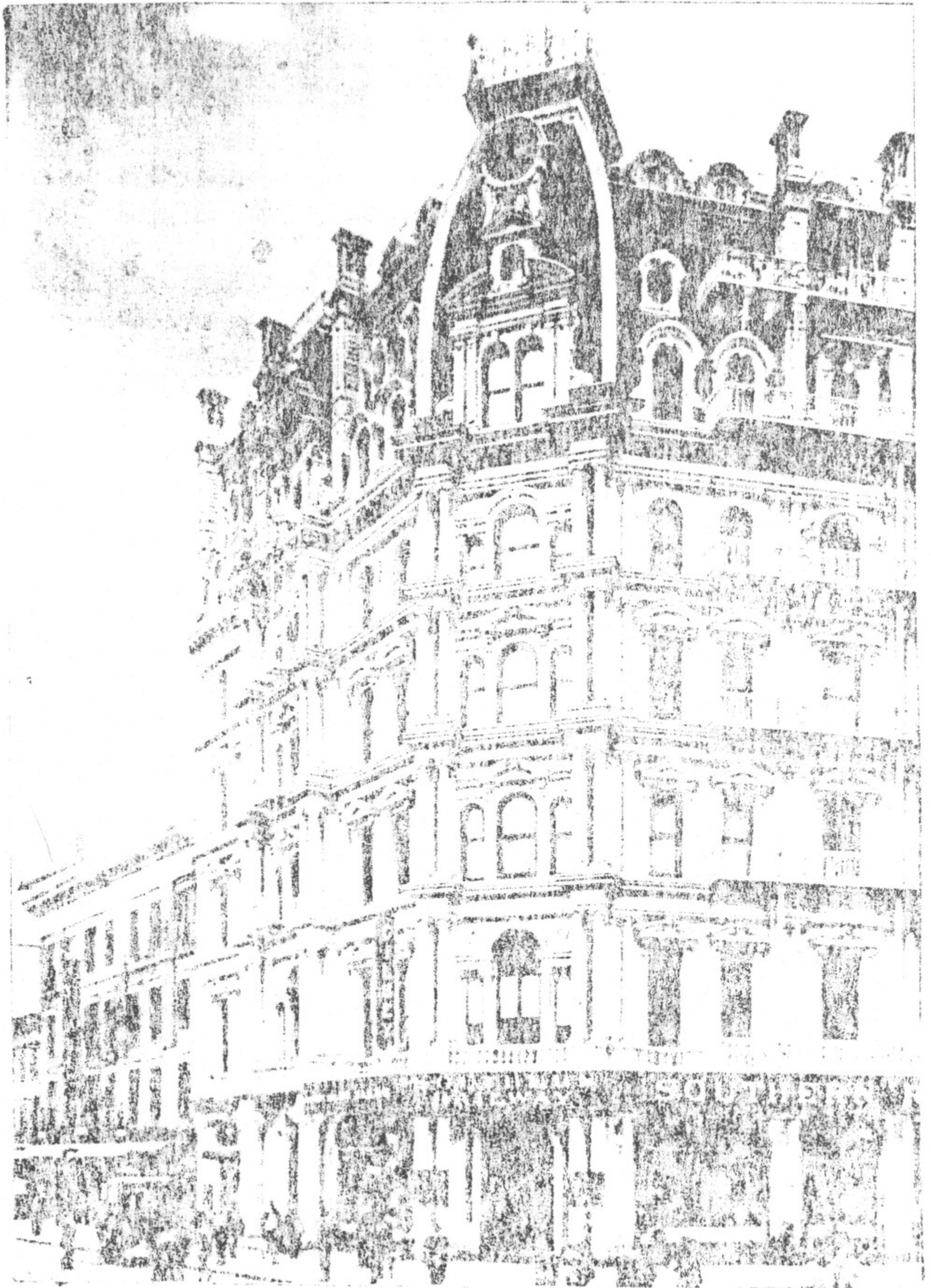

Gilsey House Hotel
Built 1869-71

Photo Credit:
Landmarks Preservation Commission

Architect:
Stephen Decatur Hatch