

Statement of Otis Pratt Pearsall Before The
Landmarks Preservation Commission On
November 29 2016 In Support of the Designation
of 181 and 185 Montague Street as Individual Landmarks

Good morning Madame Chair and members of the Commission, my name is Otis Pratt Pearsall. As leader of the Brooklyn Heights community's seven year campaign to achieve the Landmarks Law and designation as the City's first Historic District, I am here to voice my enthusiastic support for designation of the People's Trust Company and National Title Guaranty Company buildings as individual landmarks, as well as to offer a few words on the relevant insights of our late intellectual guru, the learned architectural historian Clay Lancaster.

Commencing in April 1959 and throughout our campaign, Clay educated and inspired us, and his exhaustive report published in book form as Old Brooklyn Heights, New York's First Suburb by Charles Tuttle in October 1961, and republished last year by the Brooklyn Historical Society and the Warwick Foundation, became the sustaining evidentiary lynchpin of our entire effort. Under his tutelage, the dates, styles and myriad decorative details indigenous to the Heights became second nature to us and his many slide lectures, Heights Press articles, and walking tours aroused an almost religious fervor in an entire neighborhood of recently converted preservationists.

Clay loved the Montague Street buildings now before us and if he'd had his druthers they, together with York and Sawyer's Brooklyn Trust Company at the Clinton Street corner, would have formed the eastern end of the Brooklyn Heights Historic District. In his July 1959 Heights Press article entitled "Architecture: White City on the Heights," attached here, he declared that "we have the finest trio of neo-classic buildings in any such restricted area in America" and went on to celebrate Mowbray and Uffinger's 1904 People's Trust Company, Frank Freeman's Brooklyn Savings Bank, demolished just before enactment of the Landmarks Law, and the Brooklyn Trust Company, designated an individual landmark in 1996. And, in Old Brooklyn Heights, he went on to specifically call out Corbett, Harrison and MacMurray's 1929 National Title Guaranty Company building with its Arts Decoratif ornamentation.

However, as our thinking developed, we made the command decision, rightly or wrongly, that proffer of the important commercial structures along our Eastern edge, including Montague Street's "Bank Row," should be deferred. Largely ignorant of the actual facts, we imagined that in control of these buildings would be powerfully connected interests perhaps in a position to scuttle our entire, unprecedented initiative. And later, when we detailed our eastern boundary rationale to Jim Van Derpool and Chairman Platt, they agreed.

So now, given the intense development pressure endemic today in the vicinity of Brooklyn Heights, we have brought to your attention the vulnerability of these two remarkable survivors that many in our community erroneously assume are already protected. Whether we think of them as the logical eastern terminus of the Brooklyn Heights Historic District, or the northern boundary of the Borough Hall Skyscraper Historic District which stretches southward, or simply as worthy individual landmarks, I submit to you that the moment for their designation and protection should be right now. Thank you.

Architecture:

White City on the Heights

The grandeur of the "White City", which was the popular name for the group of exhibition halls at the World's Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1892-93, gave rise throughout America to a renewed vogue for classic architecture, that had survived only in modified form, combined with other elements (see 4th article in this series, BHP 14 May 1969, p. 6).

What characterized the resurgence was its insistence upon purity, and a bigness of form made possible through the erection of great arches, vaults and domes describing spacious interiors.

The architecture of the Chicago Fair was unified by a standardized colossal order 60-feet tall. The adoption of the classic style

By Clay Lancaster

for the buildings of the exposition, was largely due to the persuasion of east-coast architects, such as Daniel Burnham, R. M. Hunt, and McKim, Mead and White.

At one of the conferences held in preparation for the World's Columbian Exposition the sculptor Saint Gaudens turned to Burnham and said: "Look here, old fellow, do you realize that this is the greatest meetings of artists since the fifteenth century?" And, similarly, the Heights resident can turn to his neighbor and say with pride: "Look here, old fellow, do you realize that here we have the finest trio of neo-classic buildings in any such restricted area in America?"

The first and foremost example of the neo-classic in Brooklyn Heights is the Brooklyn Savings Bank, built in 1893-94 by Frank Freeman, who had designed the Hotel Margaret and Mr. Behr's house a few years earlier, both in the Romanesque idiom (BHP 4 June 1959, p. 4).

One notes how closely the Brooklyn Savings bank follows the precedent of the Chicago Fair, having been begun, actually, while the exhibition was still in progress. The bank building on the northeast corner of Pierpont and Clinton Streets has a mausoleum-like magnificence. Its entrance is a triumphal arch. The great banking room is covered by an oblong dome surmounted by a columned gallery clerestory, the space below flowing out into attached vaults on four sides.

The second Brooklyn Heights building showing the influence of the "White City" is the First National City Bank at 181-183 Montague Street. It was planned by Mowbray and Uffinger, and constructed in 1904-05.

Use is made here of a temple facade, with an applied tetrastyle portico having Roman Ionic columns set on pedestals, supporting an entablature and triangular pediment filled with a considerable amount of sculpture.

An attic story rises above the pediment. The interior of this building, which originally housed the People's Trust Company, lacks the dramatic architectural treatment of either of the other two.

Next door to the First National City Bank stands the tall mass of the former home of the Brooklyn Trust Company, now the headquarters of the Manufacturer's Trust, its long west flank on Clinton Street, and its north front facing the Brooklyn Savings Bank.

Externally it is an Italian Renaissance Palazzo with rusticated walls, great arched windows, and a columned attic, which exquisitely tooled gray marble and beautifully detailed ironwork at the majestic entrances at either end.

The building contains a vast barrel-vaulted hall between vesti-

THE HEIGHTS

By Deberah Sm

St. Croix is a delightful island, where limes, avocados, papayas, coconuts and mangos grow in every yard and golden native rum is sold for 65 cents a bottle in every grocery store.

Cruzan Rum, produced from molasses by the St. Croix Sugar Cane Industries, Inc., is one of the best in the West Indies. Its fine quality and tiny price make it the favored drink here. Most people have developed favorite recipes through trial and error. The following are from three different sources.

While still aboard the freighter, Captain Wood invited us in for Cuba Libres made in this way:

1 to 2 oz. rum
juice of ¼ lemon
2 dashes bitters
Plenty of ice and cola to fill the glass.

Bules adjacent to the entrances, a Roman tepidarium richly ornamented, including a coffered ceiling and an unusually fine cosmatesque floor. Designed by Edward Palmer York and Phillip Sawyer, the Trust Company building was constructed in 1915.

Its spiritual antecedent at the Chicago Fair may have been the New York State Building, by McKim, Mead and White, which was modeled after the mid-sixteenth Century Villa Medici in Rome, where Napoleon had established the French Academy in 1803.

Is Rent Control

H. Arthur Steir

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