ST. LOUIS HOTEL (now HOTEL GRAND UNION), 34 East 32nd Street (aka 34-36 East 32nd Street), Manhattan. Built: 1903-05, architect: Frederick C. Browne

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 861, Lot 52

On May 14, 2013, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the St. Louis Hotel (now Hotel Grand Union) and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (item No. 2). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. There were three speakers in favor of designation, including two representatives of the owner and a representative of the Historic Districts Council. No one spoke in opposition to designation.

Summary

The St. Louis Hotel, constructed in 1903-05, as part of the midtown hotel district was built at a time of great expansion and development in midtown Manhattan. Close to shopping and entertainment districts, this area was also well-served by a variety of transit lines. In the early 20th century, the neighborhood was being redeveloped from single-family homes to stores, institutions and lofts. Many hotels were built at this time, for transient guests as well as apartment hotels for residents of longer duration, all taking advantage of the convenience of this location. The designer of the St. Louis Hotel was Frederick C. Browne, a New York architect with a prolific practice between the early 1890s and 1925. He designed numerous hotels and small apartment buildings in Manhattan, many in the Beaux-Arts style, as seen on this building. The facade of this distinctive building is faced in red brick and limestone, with projecting bay windows in a lively arrangement that creates a striking facade on this narrow street. Its exuberant carved ornament and high mansard roof, highlighted by bronze dormer window surrounds, are defining elements of the Beaux-Arts style, a style valued for its classical and European associations. This distinguished building has continued to be used as a hotel for more than 100 years and its ongoing existence speaks to the practicality and durability of its style and use.
DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Midtown Manhattan Neighborhood

Manhattan’s earliest real estate development has edged continuously northward, transforming buildings and their uses in each neighborhood as it advanced. The area north of Madison Square developed originally with row houses for wealthy New Yorkers, but by the end of the 1800s, it had become an entertainment center focused on Madison Square Garden (opened 1880 at Madison Avenue and 26th Street, rebuilt 1889-91, McKim, Mead & White, demolished 1925). Numerous legitimate theaters (all demolished) also opened on Fifth Avenue and Broadway around this time. Related businesses such as hotels and restaurants were attracted by the popularity of the area, the most celebrated being Delmonico’s Restaurant, that moved to 212-214 Fifth Avenue at 26th Street in 1876 to satisfy the gastronomical needs of the area’s patrons. Two of the first hotels in the area were the Gilsey House (1869-71, Stephen Decatur Hatch, a designated New York City Landmark) at Broadway and 29th Street and the Grand (1868, Henry Engelbert, a designated New York City Landmark). Beginning in the 1870s, this section also became the city’s primary club district, with the opening of numerous private social clubs where members could eat, drink and socialize. Some clubs met regularly in hotels and restaurants but others built or purchased their own structures, including the Knickerbocker Club (located at Fifth Avenue and 28th Street in the former residence of William Butler Duncan, demolished), the Reform Club (Fifth Avenue and 27th Street in the former residence of Amos R. Eno) and the St. Nicholas Club and Canadian Club (12 East 29th Street).

By the turn of the 20th century, the entertainment district had move farther northward, along Broadway to Longacre (Times) Square. Retail businesses began to shift into this midtown section from Ladies Mile and other more southerly locations. Rogers, Peet & Company located at 1260 Broadway in 1889, while R.H. Macy’s opened their large store on Herald Square in 1902. Fifth Avenue attracted businesses that replaced the town houses of wealthy families. B. Altman’s opened at 34th Street and Fifth Avenue in 1904, followed slightly later by Tiffany’s and Gorham Silver. The density of the neighborhood increased as large apartment houses were added to the mix of structures. One of these was the Knickerbocker Apartments, a luxury building at Fifth Avenue and 28th Street, built in 1882-84 (demolished).

This midtown area was also a transportation hub, which helped further its continued development. Streetcars ran across Manhattan at 34th Street, the Sixth Avenue Elevated railroad, and the Hudson Tubes to New Jersey had stops at Sixth Avenue and 34th Street. Grand Central Terminal at 42nd Second Street, and Pennsylvania Station on Seventh Avenue were being planned to provide more passenger railway facilities. Train tunnels were constructed, beginning in 1904, under 32nd and 33rd Streets to give Long Island Railroad trains access to Pennsylvania Station, with some discussion of another (suburban) terminal on Fourth Avenue.

Many new hotels opened in this area because of its accessibility. In addition to the hotels already mentioned, scores of luxury and apartment hotels opened in the late 19th and early 20th century, including the Holland House, called “one of the most opulent and luxurious hotels in city” (1891, Harding & Gooch, Fifth Avenue and 30th Street, demolished), the Waldorf Hotel (1891-93, Henry J. Hardenburgh, 1895-97, expanded as Waldorf Astoria, Fifth Ave and 34th Street, demolished), the Wolcott Hotel (1902-04, 4 West 31st Street, John H. Duncan, a designated New York City Landmark), the Hotel Martinique (1897-98, expanded 1901-03, 1909-11, Henry J. Hardenbergh, Broadway and 32nd Street, a designated New York City Landmark), the Aberdeen Hotel, (1902-04, Harry B. Mulliken, 17 West 32nd Street, a designated New York City Landmark), the Martha Washington Hotel (1901-03, 30 East 30th Street, Robert W. Gibson,
a designated New York City Landmark), and the Hotel Breslin (1903-04, Broadway and 29th Street, Clinton & Russell, located within the Madison Square North Historic District).

To the east, along Fourth Avenue, large office buildings and lofts began to be developed after 1900. A large lot on Fourth Avenue between 32nd and 33rd Streets that was the site of car barns for the transfer and storage of equipment for the New York and Harlem Railroad became available for development. This area was already the site of the Park Avenue and the Vanderbilt Hotels.

**New York Hotels and Apartment Hotels**

Hotels have been an important part of city life since the earliest taverns and inns of New Amsterdam dispensed food, drink, lodging and entertainment to colonial travelers, but during the second half of the 19th century New York hotels reached an extreme degree of size and luxury. This was epitomized by Henry J. Hardenbergh’s Waldorf and Astoria Hotels (which functioned as one hotel) on Fifth Avenue at 34th Street, with 1,300 bedrooms and 40 public rooms, all lavishly and individually decorated. While this was the largest and most luxurious of the type, various different hotels were built at this time, responding to the greater ease of travel that allowed many more people to visit New York for business and pleasure.

During this period it also became more acceptable for middle and upper class people to live in some type of multiple housing. The change from single-family homes to multiple dwellings was a dramatic one and newspapers and magazines were brimming with articles discussing “the proper type” of housing for various groups. Middle and upper-class people gradually acknowledged the advantages of apartment life, a move often aided by the development of buildings marketed to specific economic classes, with the understanding that all the residents of a given building would be “just like them,” sharing a common status or lifestyle. Buildings geared toward families (by far the most common and acceptable) would not welcome single women or single men whose lives were often viewed as suspect. At the same time it was understood that men sometimes had to move for employment and therefore the need for housing specifically for men or bachelor apartments was acknowledged.

Among the new types of buildings developed during this period were numerous apartment hotels and residential hotels, which were “new hotels of the largest and most modern type.” These facilities were commonly used by couples or families who did not want or could not afford to keep up a full middle-class home with all the servants and work that entailed. Apartment hotels provided parlors and bedrooms, expecting residents to take meals in the common dining room or restaurant. Large parlors were also provided for entertaining or other more public activities. Well-appointed lobbies and public spaces often provided a higher degree of luxury than could otherwise be afforded.

The first wave of apartment hotel construction occurred between 1889 and 1895. Apartment hotels became so numerous that they sparked a backlash among New York’s social establishment, who still considered the idea of unrelated people living under one roof to be vulgar. A second wave of apartment hotel construction followed the passage of the new building code in 1899 and the Tenement House Law in 1901. Under the Tenement House Law, apartment hotels were classified as hotels rather than tenements (i.e. regular apartment buildings). In this way apartment hotel construction was exempt from the stringent tenement house law and regulated only by the more flexible building code as applied to commercial buildings. (Hotels were considered commercial rather than residential buildings.) As a consequence, apartment hotels could be less fireproof, taller, cover a larger portion of the lot, and contain more units than apartment houses, providing a better financial return for the developers. By 1905, it was
estimated that there were almost 100 such establishments in "in the central part of Manhattan." The St. Louis Hotel, built originally with two-room suites, is a significant example of an apartment hotel from this period.

**Hotel Architecture**

Hotels played an important role in the life of the city throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. For many years the Astor House, built in 1836 by Isaiah Rogers, located on Broadway between Barclay and Vesey Streets, was the city’s most renowned hotel. By 1859, the Fifth Avenue Hotel, called the “first modern New York Hotel,” opened on Madison Square, offering its patrons amenities such as New York's first passenger elevator and luxuriously decorated interiors. During the course of the 19th century, hotels became increasingly larger and more luxurious, culminating in architect Henry J. Hardenbergh’s Waldorf Hotel and Astoria Hotel. The Waldorf and Astoria complex, however, was not the only grand hotel built in the late 19th century. Fostered by economic prosperity, the large luxury hotels of this period became the venue for public life, supplying halls for promenading, dining rooms to be seen in, and private rooms in which to entertain and be entertained.

By the early 20th century, the tendency was observed to “include within the walls of the building all the possible comforts of modern life, facilities which formerly could be found only beyond the hotel walls. Telephones, Turkish baths, private nurses, physicians...” in addition to laundry, maids, valets, barbers, hairdressers, and shoe-shine boys. A large staff was required to supply such services, which in turn necessitated a building that was large enough to make the whole enterprise financially sound.

The exterior design of the Waldorf and Astoria Hotels included warm-colored brick, elaborate ornament, and a strong roofline and it provided an influential stylistic exemplar for the many hotels that followed. In 1905, the architectural critic A. C. David proclaimed that the large, new American hotels were “in a different class architecturally from any similar buildings which have preceded them.” These tall buildings were constructed with steel-frames, like skyscrapers, but were created "in such a manner that it would be distinguished from the office-building and suggest some relation to domestic life." David praised the use of warm materials, especially brick, and admired the strong roof lines. These elements were often used in the Beaux-Arts style of architecture, a style that derived from Parisian architecture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Hotel St. Louis is a fine example of a small mid-town building in the Beaux-Arts style.

**Hotel St. Louis**

The Hotel St. Louis was constructed by George L. Felt, a developer responsible for numerous other buildings during this period. He often worked with architect Frederick C. Browne, including the development of a 12-story apartment hotel on West 47th Street in 1901. In May, 1903, Felt purchased two lots on the south side of 32nd Street from Charles and Mary Wolf, who had owned the property more than ten years. The two existing houses were demolished and a New Building permit was issued in 1903 for a building 9 ½ stories high to fill the entire lot, to be designed by architect Frederick C. Browne. The building was completed in June, 1905 and was named the Hotel St. Louis, probably in commemoration of the celebrated world’s fair just concluded in St. Louis. The Hotel St. Louis was constructed as one of the numerous apartment hotels in this convenient midtown district.

After construction, Felt immediately sold the building and it was operated for the first ten years as “a family apartment hotel containing fifty apartments of two rooms and bath.” Census
records for 1915 and 1925 show that the residents of this building were mostly adults, many single, but some couples. They were primarily middle-class people, including several engineers, doctors, salesmen, editors and brokers among them. By 1920, the property, which was then called the Hotel Regent, was purchased by Artemus Ward of Ward & Gow and had been converted to 126 rooms. In 1934, it was sold again to the Hotel Grand Union, Inc., whose president was Hyman Portnof, owner and operator of several nearby midtown hotels such as the Hotel Wolcott and the Hotel Stratford. This owner signaled his intention to convert any remaining two-room suites into single room suites at this time. The name of the hotel was also changed at this time to what it has remained, the Hotel Grand Union. After ten years under this ownership, the hotel changed hands again, and several more times in subsequent years, while still remaining a comfortable and convenient residence in a distinctive midtown structure.

Architect

Little has been discovered about the personal life or education of Frederick C. Browne. His career as an architect in New York City began in the 1890s. He was quite prolific during those years, with many residential works to his credit, exemplified by the Romanesque Revival style rowhouses on West 147th Street in the Hamilton Heights/Sugar Hill Historic District. He designed numerous tenements, store and loft buildings, and hotels throughout Manhattan. He also designed office buildings, such as the Mercantile Building at 34 East 10th Street and a Beaux-Arts style office building at 366 Broadway, now part of the Tribeca East Historic District. His Beaux-Arts style hotels, the Hargrave and Colonial, are included in the Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic District. In partnership with Randolph H. Almiroty, Browne designed an apartment building at 31 West 11th Street (1910) that is part of the Greenwich Village Historic District, and a store and loft building at 30-32 West 24th Street (1910-11) in the Ladies Mile Historic District. One of their most distinctive buildings was the 19-story store and office structure at 218-20 Fifth Avenue (at 26th Street, located within the Madison Square North Historic District) which features ornamentation based on French Renaissance sources and is crowned by a mansard roof. Their partnership lasted from 1910 to 1916, after which Browne worked independently through 1925.

Style of the Hotel St. Louis

Constructed with a steel frame, the facade of this building was designed in the Beaux-Arts style, a style commonly used for hotels in New York. Named for the famous architectural school, the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, this style of architecture was brought to this country by the many Americans who studied there. It became popular in the United States during the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries as American tastes demanded more classical designs, encouraged by the architecture and planning first displayed at the World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893. By the 20th century, the organization and specific order suggested by classical ideas were important but architects and their clients were often content to get their ornamental inspiration from multiple sources, and were sometimes interested in applying a lavish amount of decoration to a building, in order to suggest the erudition of the owner and designer. Often moving toward a degree of baroque classicism, buildings in this style usually featured a rusticated stone base, heavy, paired brackets, columns, balconies, and an elaborate mansard roof with embellished dormer windows.

The Hotel St. Louis is faced with warm red brick and trimmed with limestone and terra cotta, with a two-story rusticated stone base. Symmetrically arranged with two vertical rows of projecting bay windows framed with copper panels and a flat center bay, the facade suggests
movement and depth. These elements, along with the steep, slate-covered mansard roof ornamented with numerous copper-faced, ornate dormer windows, were emblematic of the Beaux-Arts style of architecture. The facade is divided along its height by strong, bracketed cornices and stone string courses into a base, a mid-section and a top, as was common for this style. The round-arched central entrance is emphasized by a large cartouche and huge brackets topped by a marquee. Other over-scaled sculptural elements such as embellished brackets, shields and lions’ heads enliven the upper sections of the facade and help the building stand out on this narrow midtown street. This facade treatment continues to lend a distinctive air to this fairly small building, which has helped it survive in its original function more than 100 years later.

Description
The St. Louis Hotel is a 9 ½ story building, three bays wide, covering the entire midblock lot on the south side of 32nd street.

Historic: Two-story, rusticated stone base with three large, round-arched openings including central entrance; deep reveals of entrance arch with coffers; each entrance has double wood-and-glass doors and wood-and-glass transom; over-scaled brackets and cartouche, painted, around main entrance; fixed marquee held by chains; large-scale sculpted pineapples on plinths flank entrance; projecting stone cornice with volutes and modillions between base and intermediate section: six-story, brick-faced intermediate section with three vertically-continuous window bays; two outside bays have projecting, three-section windows at each story, with stone framing from 3rd through 7th stories; stone quoins at 4th through 6th stories; volutes at 3rd story support narrow, balustrades at lower section of 4th story windows; copper spandrel panels on bays of 3rd through 6th stories; central bays have paired windows topped by flat arches with keystones in stone, and ornamented stone panels between stories, including stone pediment on 3rd story; 7th story separated by stone string course with ornamented stone brackets on lions’ heads; elaborate stone cartouches above bays at top of 7th story; 8th story faced with banded brick; paired windows with flat stone arches with keystones; simple copper cornice above 8th story; two-story slate-covered mansard roof with two stories of dormer windows; windows on 9th story have elaborate, pedimented and bracketed copper surrounds and those on top story have simple copper frames with plain triangular pediments.

Alterations: Westernmost entrance has access ramp and railing; roll-down security gate; easternmost entrance has fixed awning; air conditioner in transom; light; mullions removed from glass doors; security gate; extra lights below 2nd-story windows; sections of 2nd-story sills broken off; windows replaced; down lights in marquee; lighted name sign above marquee.

Western facade: Neighboring building sets back to expose plain brick walls with plain windows on top two stories of western facade.

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NOTES


2 These included the Fifth Avenue Theater (at 24th Street), the San Francisco Music Hall (at 28th Street), and Daly’s Fifth-Avenue Theater (at 28th Street), the Metropolitan Opera House (1883, Broadway and 39th Street), the Casino Theatre (1882, 39th Street) and Harrigan’s Theater (later Herald Square Theater). Madison Square North Historic District Designation Report, 12.

3 Other early hotels in the area were the Albemarle, the St. James, and the Victoria (all demolished).

4 All of these club buildings have been demolished or converted to other use.

5 This building included one floor of bachelor apartments.

6 The Wilbraham Designation Report, 2.


9 Cromley, Ch. 6, “The Modern Apartment House.”


11 Cromley, 187.

12 The Wilbraham Designation Report

13 Randall Blackshaw, “The New New York,” Century Illustrated Magazine (Aug., 1902), 493-4. Apartment hotels were defined as a “suite of rooms ...for families that use the dining room of building or go out for meals.

14 Cromley, 189; and Groth, 70.


16 David, 167-168.


18 Not only was the building very large, but it was equipped with the latest facilities, including a bath and toilet on every floor.


20 This phenomenon continued well into the twentieth century. In 1923, Rider’s New York noted that the modern American hotel was "not merely a hotel, but in a certain sense a public resort, frequented daily by a vast floating population comprised not only of casual strangers, but of resident New Yorkers, who take an unlicensed, yet
undisputed advantage of a large proportion of the accommodations and privileges intended for the guests of the house. Any well-dressed stranger can enter unchallenged, use the parlors and sitting rooms as meeting places for social or business purposes, finish a day's correspondence on the hotel stationery...” In addition, hotels enhanced their sense of luxury by adding all the latest technological advancements, including electricity, elevators, telephones, and central heat.


22 Hutchins, 621.


24 Ibid.

25 This information was found in The New York Times (NYT) (Aug. 7, 1901) however it is contradicted by an article by Christopher Gray, on May 13, 2007 which states that the Somerset House Hotel (still on the site) was started by Felt and Browne but completed by another developer and architect.


27 New York County Building Department NB 0443-1903.

28 A series of real estate transfers over the first ten years are documented at New York County Office of the Registrar Liber Deeds and Conveyances, culminating in a foreclosure action in October, 1914 at which time the property was sold to Leonard Lewisohn.


31 “Buildings Taken for Remodeling,” NYT Mar. 10, 1934, 27. The Hotel Wolcott is a designated New York City Landmark.
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 Hotel St. Louis (now Hotel Grand Union) has a special character and a 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 the Hotel St. Louis (now Hotel Grand Union) was designed by the architect Frederick C. Browne in the Beaux Arts style and constructed in 1903-05 in the new mid-town Manhattan hotel district that was developing because of a period of prosperity and growth in New York, reflected in its buildings, entertainment and businesses; that new forms of transportation led to more travel for business and pleasure, encouraging the construction of new hotels and apartment hotels with the latest conveniences; that New York hotels of this period emerged as a new and different type of building (later copied in other cities) used for public and private functions; that the Hotel St. Louis was centrally located near shopping and theater opportunities as well as transportation stations and lines; that the hotel catered to transients and long-term residents; that the Beaux Arts style of the building, with its classically-inspired elements, its warm brick facade and high mansard roof followed the type of hotel design begun by Henry Hardenbergh on the Waldorf-Astoria and recommended to designers of the period; that Frederick Browne chose to make this building distinctive on its side-street location by the use of over-scaled decorative elements such as cartouches, lions’ heads and brackets; that the building is an unusually well-maintained example of this popular type and is a remarkably intact example, fulfilling the same function for which it was designed, more than 100 years ago.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 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 Hotel St. Louis (now Hotel Grand Union), 34 East 32nd Street (aka 34-36 East 32nd Street), Manhattan, and designates as its Landmark Site Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 861, Lot 52.

Robert B. Tierney, Chair
Frederick Bland, Michael Devonshire, Michael Goldblum, Christopher Moore, Margery Perlmutter, Elizabeth Ryan, Roberta Washington, Commissioners
ST. LOUIS HOTEL (now HOTEL GRAND UNION)
34 East 32nd Street (aka 34-36 East 32nd Street), Manhattan
Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 861, Lot 52
Photo: Theresa C. Noonan, 2006
Hotel St. Louis (now Hotel Grand Union)
Ground story details
Photos: Theresa C. Noonan, 2006 and
Christopher D. Brazee, 2013
Hotel St. Louis (now Hotel Grand Union)
Details of roof and upper stories

*Photo: Theresa C. Noonan, 2006*
HOTEL ST. LOUIS (NOW HOTEL GRAND UNION) (LP-2531), 34 East 32nd Street (aka 34-36 East 32nd Street)  
Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 861, Lot 52  
Designated: June 25, 2013

Graphic Source: New York City Department of City Planning, MapPLUTO, Release 11v1, 2011. Author: New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, JM. Date: June 25, 2013

Map Legend
- Designated Landmark Site
- New York City Tax Map Lots

* Note: Map elements may not be to scale.