

CHARLTON-KING-VANDAM HISTORIC DISTRICT, Borough of Manhattan.

The property bounded by Vandam Street from 9 Vandam Street to 29 Vandam Street, the western property line of 29 Vandam Street, a portion of the rear lot line of 34-40 Charlton Street, the rear lot line of 42 Charlton Street, the western property line of 42 Charlton Street, Charlton Street, the western property line of 43 Charlton Street, the western property line of 54 King Street, King Street, the western property line of 49 King Street, the rear lot lines of 49 through 37 King Street, a portion of the western property line of 27-35 King Street, a portion of the rear lot line of 27-35 King Street, a portion of the eastern property line of 27-35 King Street, the remainder of the rear lot line of 27-35 King Street, a portion of the eastern property line of 27-35 King Street, the rear lot lines of 25 through 15 King Street, Avenue of the Americas, West Houston Street, MacDougal Street, King Street, Avenue of the Americas, Charlton Street, the eastern property line of 20 Charlton Street, a portion of the rear lot line of 9 Vandam Street and the eastern property line of 9 Vandam Street.

On March 8th, 1966, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the Charlton-King-Vandam Historic District (Item No. 48). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. The support for designation from this small community was extraordinary. Almost half the property owners in the proposed district supported the proposal by their presence at the hearing or by letters and telegrams. Many tenants in the district spoke for the proposal. Only two owners spoke against the proposal at the public hearing, and one of the two has since withdrawn his opposition. These figures are even more impressive when it is known that the area had been canvassed before the hearing by a group strongly urging opposition to the proposal.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

It is important to note that the present boundaries of the proposed district encompass the remains of a small district which has always been, since its beginning, a distinct and separate neighborhood. Charlton, King and Vandam Streets are not only linked physically, but by a common history.

The old houses on these streets are all that remain of a city plan, conceived and mapped in 1797, but almost completely developed between the years 1820 and 1829. The boundaries of this neighborhood were, originally, from the Hudson River (then at Greenwich Street) to MacDougal Street, and from Vandam to King Streets. This small enclave was a piece of "instant city" developed from one large country estate, by the great real estate operator of the day, John Jacob Astor. The development of these streets in common gave them a continuity and homogeneity which still survives today - not only visually, but in spirit as well. This is not Greenwich Village; this is not "downtown"; this is the Charlton-King-Vandam area.

Early History

The estate was the site, in the Eighteenth Century, of one of the most beautiful mansions ever to grace Manhattan, the famous "Richmond Hill". This great Georgian house was built in 1767 for Major Mortier, in New York "on the King's business". It sat on a hill four hundred feet high, surrounded by gardens, meadows and woods, all with an impressive view of the Hudson. During the Revolution, George Washington used it as his headquarters. Later, it became the Vice-Presidential Mansion for John Adams, when New York was the Capitol. Later, the house was bought by Aaron Burr, who used it for lavish entertainment and as a brilliant background for furthering his ambitions. With the development of the City northwards and the expansion of Greenwich Village from a rural to a city landscape, Burr mapped his property in 1797, planning its future development into lots of 25 by 100 feet on three streets, which became Charlton, King and Vandam. A copy of this map is still in the Hall of Records.

After his duel with Hamilton, Burr was forced to leave the City, and his estate was taken over by Astor. There was a contract between two men, and Burr retained the right to buy back the house and part of the land anytime within a period of twenty years. In 1817 Burr was paid off handsomely by Astor, and the development of the property proceeded. The mansion house was rolled down the hill to the southeast corner of Charlton and Varick Street (then newly opened) - where it was used for many years as a theatre. The hill was then levelled, the lots laid out, and building started. Local builders bought the majority of the new lots and erected the first houses as investments. The largest percentage of the remaining houses on Charlton Street, all the remaining houses on Vandam, and many of the houses on King Street were put up within a few years of each other in the early and mid-1820's. They represent the greatest display New York now has of the rare and attractive Federal style town houses. (The few replacements of the Federal houses on the north side of Charlton Street are fine Greek Revival houses, built after a fire destroyed four houses in 1840.)

Architectural Importance

Because of this unusual situation, where the land was controlled by one owner and properties released at one time, this area represents an extraordinary architectural and historical document. Here there is the exceptional harmony of old houses built within a few years of each other. On the north side of Vandam Street there is an unbroken row of Federal houses: almost all retaining their original steps and entrances, their pitched roofs and dormers, and their ironwork. Charlton Street, on its north side, retains what is probably the longest row of Federal and early Greek Revival houses in the City. Such continuity of period and such excellent state of preservation is not known to exist anywhere else, even including Greenwich Village and Brooklyn Heights. To walk these streets is as delightful and unexpected a step into the past as to walk up Cheyne Row in London.

King Street has a different sort of charm; it has an infinite variety, the unexpected juxtaposition of Federal houses, Greek Revival houses, Anglo-Italianate, Roman Revival, and eclectic buildings of the late Nineteenth Century. The early apartments and the public school still have a certain grandeur while the little Federal houses look cozy by comparison and the Greek Revival houses maintain their own distinct dignity.

Buildings in the District

In the area of Charlton, King and Vandam Streets there is so much natural preservation of early New York architecture that it is difficult to choose a few specific houses for description. Perhaps, the two most important houses in age, richness of style, scale and perfection of preservation are the twin Federal buildings, 37 and 39 Charlton Street. The entrances are particularly handsome and large in scale. The detail is exquisite; fluted columns flank the original doors, and between them and the quarter-colonnettes which join the white stone door frame are the original leaded glass side lights. Above a handsome horizontal member (entablature), each doorway retains its original leaded glass. The ironwork in both houses is the original. Both houses are intact on the inside, and the glimpses one gets of the opulent wood carving and plaster work through the windows adds to the beauty of the facade.

The Sayre House, 29 Charlton Street, is a perfect example of the simple "genteel" house of the Federal period. It has architectural companions in numbers 27, 31, 33 and 35 Charlton Street. These have low entrances and simple narrow doors, typical of the less opulent houses of the Federal period.

25 Charlton Street is a rare survivor of its period and neighborhood. It retains a stable in its back yard and has a separate entrance

and passageway to it. The stable still shows evidence of eight stalls; they were built for horses used by a well-to-do carter, in the business of hauling merchandise from the waterfront, which was then nearer to the houses. (Many of the houses on these streets had stables, or rear houses for servants, which faced on alleys which ran between the back gardens and were necessary for servicing the houses.)

On Vandam Street, numbers 23, 25, 27 and 29 remain in close-to-original state. Their pitched roofs, and dormers, their delicately-contrived doorways, and their iron work are appealingly representative of the Federal style. Number 17 has a particularly handsome door frame and two columns, backed by wood carving simulating stonework (rusticated). Number 9 lacks only its main entrance door to bring it back to its former authenticity. This house still retains a street level door, with an elliptical window above it. This was the former passageway to a rear house or stable.

On King Street, Numbers 15 and 17 most clearly retain their original Federal flavor. Although their doors and lintels have been altered, they retain their original pitched roofs, dormers and cornices. The doorways are in their original state, as are their shallow stoops.

King Street is rich in handsome Greek Revival houses of the early period, the 1840's. Numbers 20, 40, 42 and 44 are perfect, and in their original state - a great example of survival. Their brownstone doorways, strict and linear, their window lintels, their roof cornices with frames, their ironwork with Grecian motifs - their stair railings terminating on handsome columns of brownstone - are all there. Number 34 is another fine Greek Revival house with its doorway crested with ornament (the anthemion motif) designed in the manner associated with Minard Lafever, the great architect of the period. Number 32, which was its twin, has had a Mansard roof added, which hurts the relationship but is in itself an interesting "modernization" not old enough to have considerable charm. Numbers 22, 24, 26, and 28 are identical apartment houses of 1901, and are outstanding examples for this period. Of red brick, they are covered in a lavish way with white stone ornamentation, which is very eclectic. Their stonework is of a type fast disappearing.

The houses across King Street, and around its corner on MacDougal Street, consists of three handsome Anglo-Italianate apartment houses, and a Greek Revival row, built and designed together in 1846. The corner building retains its original shop front - a rare survival in the city. It was built as a wine shop, and the wine cellars still exist beneath the shop.

Recent History

This neighborhood was originally tenanted by prosperous builders, lawyers and merchants - these latter, mostly involved in the shipping and wholesaling of food-stuffs. The markets were on the wharves, which was then on or near Greenwich Street. For some reason, the neighborhood, particularly Charlton Street, remained settled, serene and genteel, while comparable near-by streets of similar age became less fashionable or entirely commercial sinking into slums. Many houses were kept in the same family for generations, and many people who led lives of distinction in the City continued to live here. The temptation to "modernize" in the late Nineteenth Century was largely resisted, and the tendency to make "town houses", a big fad in the 1920's, was also avoided. The most precarious period was during the 'twenties, but for a different reason; the domestic character of Charlton-King-Vandam was threatened by large factory and commercial buildings which obliterated the corners at Varick Street and resulted in heavy trucking. In spite of these forces for change the charm of these streets was such that people continued to live there.

Since the last war, like Brooklyn Heights and Greenwich Village, this small neighborhood has steadily increased in real estate value. Run-down houses have been refurbished and have become in many instances what they were originally, owner-occupied houses, cherished by their owners and carefully maintained.

Charlton, King and Vandam Streets compose a homogenous neighborhood of rare architectural merit, and historic value. The aesthetic quality of this happily-surviving chapter of the early Nineteenth Century architecture is heightened by its unexpected juxtaposition to commerce and traffic. Its sudden revelation to the eye of the passerby from teeming Varick Street and rushing Avenue of the Americas is one of the most surprising visual treats in store for New Yorkers.

Comments on the District

Dr. Esther P. Rothman, principal of the public school on King Street (a "600" school), said in a letter to the Commission, "This area has great meaning for the girls who come to school here. They come from areas which are the worst in New York City. To come to an area that is replete with historical significance and that is resplendent, kindles in them a feeling of history and of beauty. For girls who do not have beauty in their lives and have not identified with their country, coming into this area is truly an educational and therapeutic experience."

Montgomery Schuyler, the great critic of New York architecture, wrote, in "The Architectural Record" in 1899, of his dismay about the rapid disappearance of the genteel houses of 1825. He said: "Meanwhile it seems to be a pious as well as an interesting task to commemorate what is left of them, and the best examples for our purpose are two rows, one in Vandam Street and one in Charlton, between MacDougal and Varick, in blocks which not so long ago were lined with like houses from end to end and gave an impression of decorum and refinement for which one would search any more modern quarter entirely in vain."

Ada Louise Huxtable, the best-known critic of architecture in contemporary New York, writing in her recently-published book "Classic New York" says of the remaining Federal houses in the City: "The best, of course are in the Village, and the richest area is Charlton, King and Vandam Streets."

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this area, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Charlton-King-Vandam Historic District contains buildings and other improvements which have a special character and special historical and aesthetic interest and value and which represent one or more periods or styles of architecture typical of one or more eras in the history of New York City and which cause this area, by reason of these factors, to constitute a distinct section of the City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Charlton-King-Vandam Historic District is an exceptionally well preserved cross-section of old New York, that it has on its streets some of the finest Federal and Greek Revival town houses in the City displaying exceptionally fine architectural detail, that it is on the site of Aaron Burr's famous country seat "Richmond Hill", and that it has succeeded in maintaining its historic integrity as a charming community of outstanding architectural importance.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 8-A 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 an Historic District the Charlton-King-Vandam Historic District, Borough of Manhattan, consisting of the property bounded by Vandam Street from 9 Vandam Street to 29 Vandam Street, the western property line of 29 Vandam Street, a portion of the rear lot line of 34-40 Charlton Street, the rear lot line of 42 Charlton Street, the western property line of 42 Charlton Street, Charlton Street, the western property line of 43 Charlton Street, the western property line of 54 King Street, King Street, the western property line of 49 King Street, the rear lot lines of 49 through 37 King Street, a

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