

July 31, 2003

Hon. Robert Tierney
Chair
Landmarks Preservation Commission
Municipal Building, 9th floor north
New York, NY 10007

Re: Ladies' Mile Historic District

Dear Commissioner Tierney,

Manhattan Community Board No. 4 wishes to reconfirm that it believes the error in determining the western boundary of the Ladies' Mile Historic District in back of the great department stores along Sixth Avenue located in Board 4 should be corrected. In the course of preparation of the notice for the designation hearing in 1988 the through tax lot between 19th and 20th Streets on the Sanborn maps that actually comprises the back third of the Simpson, Crawford, and Simpson Store on the west side of Sixth Avenue was misread as not being part of the building. The boundary thus cut out the rear portion of the building and forced omission from the District of the annex that stretches westward from the rear of the main building along the north side of 19th Street and that was designed by the same architect as the rest of the store with similar design and materials. This error is reflected in an awkward reference and transition at this point in the designation report.

Since the time shortly after the hearing that Board 4 discovered this error and reported it to the Commission, the Board has supported correcting it. The Commission has taken no action, possibly because it was thought that the error was unlikely to have serious consequences. Now, however, as a result of a chemical explosion that took place last year on a lower floor of the annex near the undesignated portion of the main building, blown-out windows remain boarded up along the 19th Street façade and a section of the molded metal fascia that continues the cornice line of the base of the main building along the façade of the annex has disappeared.

The investigation into the explosion has been completed and a report issued. The fact that the damaged part of the building is not covered by Landmarks designation means that the Commission will have no power to ensure that the repairs or renovation respect the historic character of the building or to press for more appropriate ground-floor infill in this portion of the annex.

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Thus the Board was surprised and disappointed to learn from a recent letter sent by the Commission to the Drive to Protect the Ladies' Mile District that an "upper-level staff decision" had determined on unstated grounds that this extension was "not in the current priorities of the Commission." Presumably the work required to hold a hearing and repair the error would be small. The research reflected in the truncated reference in the Designation Report must have been done and be in the possession of the Commission. Letters from persons, organizations, and elected officials have been sent in support of this extension. The Drive to Protect the Ladies' Mile District has provided detailed material in support of the extension. It has also informally offered to help fund any reasonable research necessary to update the Designation Report and expressed interest in supporting research to extend the district along nearby undesignated but handsome streets if the Commission should think it desirable to take such action as well.

We urge the Commission to reconsider this unfortunate decision now. It seems only to compound the original mistake at a time when this error may finally have significant consequences.

Sincerely,



Walter Mankoff
Chair
Manhattan Community Board No. 4



Lee Compton
Co-Chair
Chelsea Preservation & Planning Committee

Edward S. Kirkland
Co-Chair
Chelsea Preservation & Planning Committee

cc: Elected Officials
Manhattan Community Board No. 5