Landmarks Preservation Commission
February 22, 1977, Number 1
LP-0052

CLERGY HOUSE, 92 Fourth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan, Built 1902; architects
Heins & LaFarge.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 557, Lot 39 in part, consisting
of the land on which the described building is situated. (Originally heard as
Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 557, Lot 34 in part.)

On March 22, 1974, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public
hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Clergy House, 92 Fourth
Avenue and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 1).
The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law.
Thirty witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were twenty-five speakers
in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

This handsome Gothic style building is one of the finest in the City. It
is an integral part of a picturesque group of buildings, all designed in similar
style, that form part of the Grace Church complex, and it is a part of the
terminal vista obtained by looking west on 11th Street toward Fourth Avenue. In
New York, few structures remain which provide such terminal features: Grand
Central Station at the head of Park Avenue, the Metropolitan Museum of Art on
Fifth Avenue at the end of East 92nd Street, and the New York Public Library at
the end of East 41st Street are among the notable examples which come to mind.

The Grace Church complex is located on a portion of the old Brevvoort Farm.
The Brevvoorts were an old Knickerbocker family, established in the City since
1673. The farm was bounded roughly by the area between 9th and 13th Streets
and Fourth to Sixth Avenues. The existence today of a long block, running from
10th to 12th Streets, between Broadway and Fourth Avenue, is due entirely to
the stubbornness of Henry Brevvoort. When the City attempted to cut through 11th
Street, in accordance with the Commissioners' Plan of 1807, he refused to vacate
or remove his old farmhouse, which stood on the west side of Fourth Avenue in
the line of 11th Street. Successive ordinances were passed—to no avail—and
so the effort to cut through the property was finally abandoned. In the last
analysis, we owe the closed vista where 11th Street meets Fourth Avenue to Henry
Brevvoort.

Grace Church and its Rectory on Broadway were designed in Gothic Revival
style by architect James Renwick, Jr. Once New York's most fashionable church,
it served a large congregation of well-to-do parishioners until completion in
1846. By the 1870s and early eighties, however, the social and cultural needs
of the parish and of the neighborhood had changed, and Dr. Henry C. Potter, who
served as rector from 1868 to 1888, recognized the need for providing new
facilities.

No. 92 Fourth Avenue, Clergy House, is one of three buildings which were
erected in 1902 (Nos. 88, 90 and 92). They form a symmetrical group flanking
the nave of Grace Church. The architects were the firm of Heins & LaFarge,
winner of the original competition for The Cathedral of Saint John the Divine.
Despite the later date of these buildings, they accord perfectly with the
earlier 1883 Gothic Revival Grace Memorial House, No. 94-96, adjoining them to
the north. No. 92, Clergy House, actually duplicated the design of No. 96, making
the middle section at No. 94, surmounted by a high gable, the center of a
symmetrical group of buildings. Clergy House, built as a residence for clergy,
was closed in 1973 in anticipation of the enlargement of the facilities of the
Church School. It is a tribute to Grace Church that Grace Memorial House and
Clergy House, although constructed at different dates and designed by different
architects, give the appearance of one building. No. 90, just north of No. 94-96
was built in character with it in 1907. These buildings bear testimony to the
intelligent control exercised by Grace Church over architectural design for
almost sixty years, thus achieving a remarkably coherent group of buildings
on Fourth Avenue which harmonize perfectly with the older ones on Broadway. As
a notable part of the City's architectural heritage, this fine group of buildings
lends great distinction to the area.
Architecturally, Nos. 92 and 94-96 form a homogenous whole of which No. 92 is an integral part. The ecclesiastical character of Grace Church and its Rectory is carried out in the marble-faced Clergy House in its use of pointed-arch windows and in the dormer and bay windows where tracery is employed. The label moldings over the windows, the trefoil reeling above the bay window and the finials on the south gable of the roof are in themselves a study in Gothic detail. The moldings used as horizontal bandcourses serve to unite the overall composition of this building with Nos. 94-96 and 98 with which it forms such an important part visually.

The story of how the Grace Church Houses were saved forms a vital part of their history.

In the late 1960s a fund raising drive was instituted for the enlargement of Grace Church School utilizing the Gothic style buildings on Fourth Avenue and Grace House behind them. They were to be ingeniously linked together by a connecting corridor with elevator and to have a much needed auditorium-gymnasium in "Tuttle Hall," a new building then proposed to be located north of Neighborhood House. All of this was set forth in a fund-raising brochure, Reach Out High Grace, showing the architectural firm of Oppenheimer & Brady’s sketch drawings of the proposed facilities and the new facade of Tuttle Hall, promised onazing only the small brick houses on Fourth Avenue; however, this special study proposal was never carried out because funds could not be raised at that time.

In November of 1973, Moore and Hutchins, the architects for Grace Church, formally notified the Landmarks Preservation Commission that a contract had been signed to proceed with new plans for expanding the school. The proposed gymnasium, a structure of contemporary design, was to replace the Gothic style buildings (Nos. 92, 94-96, and 98) on Fourth Avenue. This decision was reached because of lack of funds and the pressing needs of the school.

Professor James Marston Fitch of Columbia University, noted in the field of preservation, was called upon by a group of preservationists to make a counter-proposal and to prepare a scheme which would save the Gothic style buildings while at the same time satisfying the functional requirements of the school. On January 24, 1974, Dr. Benjamin Minifie, rector of Grace Church, informed the Landmarks Preservation Commission that, having received no satisfactory solution from Professor Fitch, and having received professional advice that a new building incorporating the existing facades would cost several hundred thousand dollars more than the building already designed by the architects, the Vestry of Grace Church had voted on January 22 to proceed with the new plan of Moore and Hutchins which involved the demolition of the buildings on Fourth Avenue. At this point Community Board No. 2 (Greenwich Village) asked the Buildings Department of the Housing and Development Administration to rescind the demolition permit which had been obtained for the work. In February, students from Columbia University and Cooper Union picketed the site.

On February 28 the Joint Emergency Committee to Save the Grace Church Houses was formally organized by concerned citizens and called on the Landmarks Preservation Commission to designate the Gothic style buildings. Selma Rattner, an architectural historian, coordinated their work and carried out the necessary historical research regarding the affected buildings.

On March 4, 1974, a suit was brought in the Supreme Court, State of New York, to prevent demolition of the buildings (Nos. 92, 94-96, and 98) on Fourth Avenue, Fitch et al v. Minifie et al, and the Judge granted a temporary restraining order. On April 2, a preliminary injunction was entered restraining the defendants from seeking a permit for demolition until the controversy could be brought to trial. Shortly afterwards, before the matter could be heard by the Appellate Court, the legal action was discontinued by stipulation of the parties.

In the meantime, on March 22, 1974, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a Public Hearing on the Fourth Avenue buildings (Nos. 92, 94-96, 98) which was attended by a great number of people. Among those who spoke in favor of designation were Selma Rattner, James Marston Fitch, Henry-Russell Hitchcock, noted architectural historian, Frederick L. Rath, Jr., Deputy Commissioner for Preservation, New York State, Councilman Henry Stern, and Councilwoman Carol Greitzer. Many of those who spoke in favor of designation also urged that the
new school facilities he built in such a way that would permit retention of the
Gothic style buildings on Fourth Avenue. Stewart Metmore, Suffragan Bishop
of New York, Dr. Benjamin Hinsfie, and Robert Hutchins, among others spoke
against designation.

An estimate by E. V. Howell Co., contractors for the Moore and Hutchins
scheme, made it clear that, over and above the estimated cost of the new
facilities, some $400,000 in additional funds would be required to save the
Fourth Avenue houses. By April of 1974 the vestry had decided that if the
money could be raised and a functional plan to reuse the buildings could be
worked out, they would go along with such a scheme. Fund raising was initiated
by the promise of a grant of $25,000 from the Kaplan Fund and substantial
grants by others. Probably the turning point in the fund raising effort came
when Thaddeus Seymour, President of Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana,
obtained a grant of $100,000 from a trustee of Wabash, Mr. Eli Lilly, and the
Lilly Endowment. By June 1975 the New York Times reported that the Fourth
Avenue buildings had been saved. Ultimately some $425,000 was raised, enough to
finance the revised construction plan. Much of the credit for the fund raising
must go to the efforts of Vestryman Whitney North Seymour, Sr., his co-workers,
and the School.

In accordance with the revised designs by the architects for Grace Church,
Hutchins, Evans & Lefferts, successors to Moore and Hutchins, the new gymnasium
has now been built on an interior lot north of Grace House. The preservation
of the facades of this row of Gothic style buildings is a fine example of public
interest in retaining the architectural character of an historic area of New
York City. Grace Church, cooperating with preservationists and with vestrymen,
priesthood, school parents, state authorities, and others—who all worked
diligently together—was able to raise the necessary funds. The church then
proceeded with the plan for saving this handsome frontage while meeting its
functional requirements and those of the school. In a New York Times editorial,
written at a time when the Fourth Avenue buildings were considered effectively
lost, it was pointed out that they were to be saved this would be an "opportunity
to demonstrate the the right way to rebuild a city." Today these buildings
stand as a testimonial to the achievement of this worthy goal.

In recognition of their significance, the Grace Church Houses were placed
on the National Register of Historic Places on June 25, 1974.

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 Clergy House, 92 Fourth Avenue has a special character, special historical
and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cul-
tural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, Clergy
House is one of the finest Gothic style buildings in New York City, that it
was designed by the notable architectural firm of Helms & LaFarge in keeping with
Grace Memorial House, No. 94-96 Fourth Avenue, that it duplicates the design of
No. 96 thus forming part of a handsome symmetrical group of buildings, that it is
distinguished by fine Gothic detail, that it forms a part of the terminal vista
obtained by looking west on 11th Street toward Fourth Avenue, that this building
bears testimony to the Intelligent control exercised by Grace Church over
architectural design for some sixty years, thus making it an integral part of a
remarkably coherent group of buildings (Nos. 92, 94-96, 98) on Fourth Avenue
which harmonize perfectly with the Church and factory on Broadway, that it is a
notable part of the City's architectural heritage, that it was saved from
demolition through the action of preservationists who submitted an alternative
plan and helped raise the necessary funds to implement it—an outstanding example
of the adaptive reuse of landmark quality buildings, and that this building lends
great distinction to the neighborhood.

Accordingly pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 63 of the Charter of the
City of New York and Chapter B-8 of the Administrative Code of the City of New
York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designated as a Landmark, Clergy
House, 92 Fourth Avenue, and designates as its related Landmark Site that part
of Borough of Manhattan Tax Map 557, Lot 39 which contains the land on which the
described building is situated.