

JOHN PEIRCE RESIDENCE, 11 East 51st Street, Manhattan.

Built 1904-06; Architect John H. Duncan.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 1287, Lot 10.

On January 13, 2009, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the John Peirce Residence and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Public Hearing Item No. 1). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of the law. Five people spoke in favor of designation, including a representative of Assembly Member Richard N. Gottfried, a representative of the property owner, and representatives of the Municipal Arts Society of New York, the Metropolitan Chapter of the Victorian Society in America, and the Historic Districts Council. No one spoke in opposition to designation. The Commission has also received several letters and other statements in support of designation.

Summary

The residence at 11 East 51 Street was erected in 1904-06 for stone and building contractor John Peirce and was designed by noted architect John H. Duncan. At the time of its construction, Fifth Avenue just south of Central Park was the most prestigious residential area in the city and was known as Vanderbilt Row because of that family's intimate involvement in maintaining the elite character of the neighborhood.

Peirce was born in Frankfort, Maine where his father operated a granite quarry. Peirce succeeded to the family business in 1873 and soon came to control much of the granite industry in Maine. In the early 1880s he decided to move to New York City to oversee the operations of his New York and Maine Granite Paving Block Company and to expand the market for his firm's products. Peirce soon became one of the largest stone contractors in the country, earning the title of "Granite King." By the 1890s Peirce had expanded the scope of his business to include general building contracting, and he later became involved in a number of large-scale civic infrastructure projects including the construction of New York City's first subway system. Many of the city's most iconic structures were erected with the assistance of Peirce's firm.



At the apex of his professional and personal life at the turn of the twentieth century, Peirce decided to build a new home for his family in the city's most prestigious residential neighborhood. He commissioned architect John H. Duncan to design a residence along the newly-popular American basement plan, an innovation in row house layout that allowed a more scientific division of space on the interior and which lent itself to a number of exterior architectural styles including the Italian Renaissance used for the Peirce Residence. The most striking feature of the house is the full rustication of the lower three floors. The upper floors are faced with smooth ashlar stone, with projecting cornices above the third and fifth stories. While generally austere in demeanor, a number of sculptural elements—including the projecting balcony at the second floor and the ornamental stone keystones and wreaths—display a plasticity more typically associated with the lavish Beaux-Arts style.

When completed, the Peirce Residence stood in the middle of a distinguished row of houses overlooking St. Patrick's Cathedral. Within a few years, however, the fortunes of both John Peirce and the neighborhood changed dramatically. Peirce's company went into receivership in 1909 and failed altogether in 1915. He lost his residence to foreclosure in 1914, at a time when many wealthy families were abandoning the neighborhood to commercial and apartment house development. The building at 11 East 51st Street was subsequently occupied by the Gardner School for Girls and later by a series of businesses. In spite of the changes of use and in the character of the surrounding neighborhood, the Peirce Residence remains nearly perfectly intact and is a significant reminder of the area's history as a prestigious residential district.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Early History and the Development of “Vanderbilt Row”¹

Far removed from the center of population at the tip of the Manhattan, the area surrounding Fifth Avenue between 42nd Street and the southern end of Central Park remained rural in character well into the first half of the nineteenth century. Most of the territory was originally owned by the City of New York, which had been granted “all the waste, vacant, unpatented, and unappropriated lands” under the Dongan Charter of 1686.² The city maintained possession of these common lands—which once totaled over one-seventh of the acreage on Manhattan—for over a century, only occasionally selling off small parcels to raise funds for the municipality. The city’s policy changed after the American War of Independence. In 1785 the Common Council commissioned surveyor Casimir Theodore Goerck to map out five-acre lots to be sold at auction.³ A new street called Middle Road, now known as Fifth Avenue, was laid out to provide access to the parcels. A second survey of additional lots was undertaken by Goerck in 1796 and two new roads, now Park and Sixth Avenues, were created.⁴ Under the city’s plan, half of the lots were to be sold outright while the other half were made available under long-term leases of 21 years. Many of the parcels were acquired by wealthy New Yorkers as speculative investments in anticipation of future growth in the area.⁵ James Mason, one-time president of the Chemical National Bank, for example, acquired most of the lots on the east side of Middle Road in the East 50s in 1825. A number public or public-minded institutions also purchased or were granted large plots along the avenue; the Colored Orphan Asylum was located between 43rd and 44th Streets, the Deaf and Dumb Asylum on 50th Street just east of Fifth Avenue, the Roman Catholic Orphan Asylum between 51st and 52nd Streets, and St. Luke’s Hospital between 54th and 55th Streets. The rough character of the neighborhood—other tenants at this time included Waltemeir’s cattle yard at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 54th Street—persisted into the 1860s, when development pressures finally began to transform the area into a fashionable residential district.⁶

The inexorable northward movement of population and commerce along Manhattan Island picked up momentum during the building boom that followed the Civil War. Four-story brick- and brownstone-faced row houses were constructed on many of the side streets in the area, while larger mansions were erected along Fifth Avenue itself. Pioneers in this development were the sisters Mary Mason Jones and Rebecca Colford Jones, heirs of early Fifth Avenue speculator John Mason and both widows of established Knickerbocker families.⁷ In 1867, Mary Mason Jones commissioned a block-long row of houses, later known as the “Marble Row,” on the east side of the avenue between 57th and 58th Streets. Two years later in 1869, her sister hired architect Detlef Lienau to design her own set of lavish residences one block to the south. Having established the area as an acceptable neighborhood for the city’s elite, other wealthy New Yorkers soon followed the Jones sisters northward up Fifth Avenue.⁸ The gentrification of the area was further motivated by a number of important civic and institutional building projects initiated in the mid nineteenth century. Most notable was the planning and construction of Central Park in the late 1850s and 1860s; the preeminence of Fifth Avenue as the fashionable approach to the park was later solidified in 1870 when the city created a monumental new entrance at Grand Army Plaza. A number of ecclesiastical organizations also opened impressive new buildings on the avenue at this time; St. Thomas Episcopal Church at 53rd Street in 1870, the Collegiate Reformed Protestant Dutch Church at 48th Street in 1872, the Fifth Avenue

Presbyterian Church at 55th Street in 1875, and the Roman Catholic St. Patrick's Cathedral between 50th and 51st Streets in 1879.

The status of the area as the city's most prestigious residential neighborhood was firmly cemented in 1879 when the Vanderbilt family began a monumental house-building campaign on Fifth Avenue. William Henry Vanderbilt—the family patriarch since the death of his father Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt in 1877—located his own palatial residence on the western block front between 51st and 52nd Streets, while his two eldest sons each erected mansions just to the north.⁹ The scope of the work was so impressive and the influence of the family on the neighborhood so great that the ten blocks of Fifth Avenue south of Central Park came to be known as “Vanderbilt Row.” By the turn of the twentieth century, however, the march of business up Fifth Avenue had progressed such that the Vanderbilts were engaged in a constant struggle to protect its enclave from unsympathetic commercial redevelopment.

The situation became particularly pointed when the Roman Catholic Asylum announced plans to vacate its Midtown property—which occupied the entire block front facing directly across Fifth Avenue from William H. Vanderbilt's twin brownstone houses—to move to larger facilities in the Fordham Heights section of the Bronx.¹⁰ At the close of 1899, a real estate syndicate lead by Charles T. Barney and George R. Sheldon finalized negotiations with the Asylum for the purchase of a large portion of the institution's property stretching between 51st and 52nd Streets from Fifth Avenue to just shy of Madison Avenue. In the ensuing months most of the lots along the side streets had been sold off to individual owners. The deeds for these lots contained a number of restrictive covenants that would have pleased the Vanderbilt family greatly; most important was the stipulation that only single-family houses could be erected on the land for a period of 25 years.¹¹ The lots along Fifth Avenue, however, did not find ready purchasers. The parcel at the northeast corner of Fifth Avenue and 51st Street was eventually taken by the Union Club—not a residential tenant but still in keeping with the exclusive character of the neighborhood. The plots immediately to the north, however, were acquired by Stewart H. Chisolm, who soon announced plans to erect an 18-story hotel on the site.¹² The Vanderbilt family acted quickly to block the project by directing their New York Realty Corporation to acquire the property. The family subsequently sold the northern lot at 651-653 Fifth Avenue to Morton F. Plant, a Vanderbilt associate, with the understanding that he would erect a first-class private residence. The mid-block parcel at 645-647 Fifth Avenue was retained by the Vanderbilts, who commissioned architects Hunt & Hunt to design a pair of elegant marble row houses later known as the “Marble Twins” (both the Plant House and the sole survivor of the Marble Twins, 647 Fifth Avenue, are designated New York City Landmarks). With the Fifth Avenue frontage secured and elegant row houses now in construction along the side streets, it appeared that the Vanderbilts had succeeded in their efforts to maintain the residential character of Vanderbilt Row.

John Peirce and 11 East 51st Street¹³

In 1902 William K. Vanderbilt, Jr. and his wife Virginia Vanderbilt acquired three of the former Asylum lots on East 51st Street.¹⁴ They eventually decided not to build a house on the property, moving instead into a mansion at 666 Fifth Avenue, immediately north of William K. Vanderbilt, Sr.'s residence.¹⁵ The three parcels on East 51st Street were subsequently sold off to individual owners. The middle lot, now known as 11 East 51st Street, was acquired by stone contractor John Peirce and his wife Abby B. Peirce, who soon erected a row house for their own occupancy on the site.¹⁶ Peirce was a rising member of New York society at this time, being—

amongst other things—one of the original incorporators of the Interborough Rapid Transit Company and serving on its first board of directors with Cornelius Vanderbilt and the family's associate Morton F. Plant.

John Peirce was born on September 28, 1852 in Frankfort, Maine to George A. and Louise T. Peirce. A year before his birth his father had entered into a partnership with John P. Rowe in opening the Mount Waldo granite quarry. The firm of Peirce and Rowe soon won a number of important contracts and the business grew steadily during subsequent decades.¹⁷ After the death of his father in 1873, John Peirce and his brother George took over the family operation and formed their own partnership with Rowe under the firm of Peirce, Rowe & Co.¹⁸ John Peirce proved to be an astute businessman and the firm's operations expanded substantially in the following years. In 1877 the company won a major contract to provide stone for the footings of the proposed East River Bridge in New York City, and two years later were commissioned for work on the new State, War and Navy building in Washington D.C. During this period Peirce began accumulating a series of inter-related companies controlling much of the granite production and sales in the state of Maine. In 1880 he formally incorporated the Mount Waldo Granite Works to manage the Frankfort quarry. Two years later in 1882 he established the New York and Maine Granite Paving Block Company, which helped negotiate a multi-million dollar contract for the quarry to supply paving stones in New York City.¹⁹ He eventually gained interests in the Hallowell Granite Works and the Bodwell Granite Company in Maine and the Stony Creek Red Granite Company in Connecticut. The acquisition of the Bodwell concern was a particularly important, as it was perhaps the largest and most established operation in state of Maine and controlled a number of quarries on Vinalhaven Island and along the coast.

It was at about this time that John Peirce decided to move to New York City to directly oversee the New York and Maine Granite Paving Block Company and to expand the market for his various companies' products. He soon secured an office in the newly constructed Temple Court building on Beekman Street in Lower Manhattan and began aggressively peddling granite to builders across the city and throughout the country. An article on the New England granite business from the 1890s noted that Peirce pushed "the stone into new fields, widening old markets, and demonstrating its superiority in point of beauty and durability to most of the material currently used in building...it is largely through his efforts, also, that granite has come to be recognized as second to none as an all-round building stone."²⁰ Peirce's firm soon grew to be one of the largest granite contractors in the country, earning him the title of "Granite King." Stone from his Maine quarries was used on such notable buildings as the United States Post Office and Court House in Brooklyn (Mifflin E. Bell, 1885-91) and the American Surety Company Building (Bruce Price, 1894-96), the Empire Building (Kimball & Thompson, 1895-98), and the Germania Bank (Robert Maynicke, 1898-99) in Manhattan, all designated New York City Landmarks.

By the 1890s Peirce had also begun to take on general building contracting projects. One of his firm's most notable commissions was the city's new Hall of Records (now Surrogate's Court-Hall of Records, a designated New York City Landmark), erected in 1899-1907 at 31 Chambers Street. The Board of Estimate awarded Peirce the building contract in 1897 following a competitive bidding process; an article in the *New York Times* suggests that a sample of Hallowell granite, "which is noted for its whiteness and the durability of its color," helped sway the board in Peirce's favor.²¹ Peirce also secured contracts on a number of other prominent civic building projects at the turn of the twentieth century, including the United States Customs House on Bowling Green (Cass Gilbert, 1899-1907) and the New York Public Library Main Branch on

Fifth Avenue (Carrere & Hastings, 1898-1911), both designated New York City Landmarks.²² Peirce also worked on a several important early skyscrapers and other commercial structures, often in collaboration with architect Cass Gilbert. The stone for Gilbert's first commission in New York City, the Broadway-Chambers Building at 277 Broadway (1899-1900), was supplied by Peirce's quarries in Maine.²³ Peirce had a more direct hand in the erection of Gilbert's West Street Building (1905-07), serving as a primary investor in the West Street Improvement Company that conceived and financed the project, and as general contractor in its construction.²⁴ The John Peirce Company also performed general contracting work on Grand Central Terminal (Reed & Stem and Warren & Wetmore, 1903-13, a designated New York City Landmark) and the Interborough Rapid Transit Company Powerhouse (McKim, Mead & White, 1904).

John Peirce was at the apex of his professional success during the first years of the twentieth century. In addition to his stone and general contracting business, he began investing in giant civic infrastructure projects such as the construction of the New York City subway system and the Panama Canal.²⁵ He formally incorporated the John Peirce Company in 1905, consolidating his contracting firm with the New York and Main Paving Block Company. Large projects continued to come in.²⁶ Peirce's personal life was equally as successful; he was a member of the Metropolitan, Manhattan, and Lawyers Clubs and was very active in the New York Yacht Club. Newspaper coverage of society events frequently linked Peirce to a circle of prominent New Yorkers that included financier August Belmont, Mayor George B. McClellan, and contractor John B. McDonald.²⁷ It was at this time that Peirce decided to build a new house for his family in the city's most prestigious residential neighborhood. After acquiring a building plot from the Vanderbilts in 1904, he commissioned architect John H. Duncan to design a five-story dwelling according to the newly-popular American basement plan. Work was commenced in November and Peirce's own firm served as contractor on the project. The building was complete in August of 1906 and Peirce moved in with his wife Abby and their grown children John Royden, Louise, Mary, Reginald, and Alice.²⁸

The Architect: John H. Duncan²⁹

John Hemingway Duncan (1855-1929), a founding member of the Architectural League of New York in 1881, had established his own architectural practice by 1886. Shortly thereafter he won the competition to design the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Arch in Grand Army Plaza, Brooklyn, dedicated to the men who fought in the Union forces during the Civil War. Built in 1889-92, it is a monumental arch in the Roman Imperial tradition. In 1890 Duncan won another prestigious competition to design the General Ulysses S. Grant National Memorial, more familiarly known as Grant's Tomb. Built in 1891-97, it too was inspired by the Classical sources of Greek and Roman architecture.

Following his work on the two monuments, Duncan began to acquire a clientele of affluent New Yorkers who commissioned him to design residences in Midtown Manhattan, on the Upper East Side, and on the Upper West Side. For his residential designs, Duncan preferred the French sources promulgated by the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, and rusticated façade, large-scale ornamental details, and imposing mansard roofs were among his favored motifs. Examples of the type may be seen in the Philip and Carrie Lehman House at 7 West 54th Street (1899-1900), the Henri Wertheim Residence at 4 East 67th Street (1901), the Thomas J. McLaughlin House at 8 East 62nd Street (1902), and the residence at 11 East 70th Street (1909-10), all designated New York City Landmarks.

Design of the John Peirce Residence³⁰

In the late nineteenth century, the New York City row house began to be transformed by architects and housing developers interested in moving beyond the traditional form to achieve a more “scientific division of space,” while at the same time effecting an “artistic disposition” on the interior as well as the exterior.³¹ One of the most notable solutions was what came to be called the American basement plan. According to architectural historian Russell Sturgis, the American basement plan was first introduced around 1880. It gained widespread popularity during the 1890s and first few years of the 1900s, when it was promoted in the architecture and real estate press as a practical, stylistic, and even social improvement over the speculatively built brownstone row houses that had predominated into the latter half of the nineteenth century. In the traditional row house plan, the main entrance was reached by a tall flight of stairs—the stoop, from the Dutch for “step”—which was set to one side of the façade. The main reception hall shared the first floor with the parlor, beyond which was usually another parlor, a library, or sometimes a dining room. More often the dining room was located in the front of the raised basement, which was entered via a short flight of stairs sunk beneath the stoop; visitors to the house would therefore enter on the level of the family’s main living space.

The entrance to an American basement plan row house was instead lowered virtually to street level, and was often centered on the façade. The resulting changes in the interior arrangement of space were quite dramatic; the main entrance hall and stair now occupied the front of the ground story with the kitchen behind, and on the first floor the parlor now occupied the entire building frontage, separated from the rear dining room by a stair hall that functioned as a secondary reception hall.³² Moving the entrance to the center of the ground floor created the possibility of a generous foyer leading to a grand main stairway, and a larger, better lit parlor occupying the entire building frontage on the first floor.³³ Architecture critic Montgomery Schuyler summed up the innovations embodied by the “New New York House,” writing in 1906 for *Architectural Record* that “...there is a practical consensus to the effect that the “American basement,” with the full frontage available on the second floor, is the most convenient arrangement, and the most economical in reality in spite of the ‘waste’ of the entrance hall. And the narrower the front, the more desirable it is, practically and especially architecturally, that the entrance be at the centre.”³⁴

The introduction of this new row house type coincided with increased stylistic experimentation by architects and developers seeking to create distinguished façades that would be readily marketable as private, upper-class residences.³⁵ Fostered in part by the romantic classical styles used at the Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893, many of the row houses employing the American basement plan were given façades in a variety of architectural styles including Renaissance Revival, Modern French, Beaux-Arts, and Georgian Revival.³⁶ In his design for the Peirce Residence, architect John H. Duncan combined many elements of the Italian Renaissance with a few details taken from the French Beaux-Arts. The most striking feature of the house is the full rustication of the lower three floors, which terminates in a severe projecting cornice just below the fourth-story windows. The upper floors are faced with smooth ashlar stone with a deeply projecting, bracketed cornice above. All of the windows have minimal enframements, giving the house the austere demeanor typical of the Italian Renaissance. The most dramatic elements—the molded entrance enframement with cartouche, the prominent balcony with iron railing at the second story, and the ornamental wreaths at the second and fifth floors—display a plasticity more typically associated with the Beaux-Arts style.

Subsequent History³⁷

When completed, John Peirce's residence stood at the middle of a distinguished row of houses overlooking St. Patrick's Cathedral. The collection of buildings displayed a wide range of architectural styles, from the extravagant Beaux-Arts style of 3 East 51st Street to the reserved Federal style at 5 East 51st Street. Most employed the American basement plan; all were first class. The location must have been ideal for a successful businessman settling into the later phases of his life. The idyllic existence did not last long, however, and within a few years the fortunes of both John Peirce and the neighborhood in which he built his lavish new house changed dramatically. The first signs of trouble came in 1909, when the John Peirce Company and a number of related firms were placed in receivership.³⁸ It was widely reported that the difficulties stemmed from the inability of the Mount Waldo Granite Works to collect on a number of large contracts, but some speculated that it was actually the result of souring relations between Peirce and the rest of the board of the Interborough Rapid Transit Company.³⁹ Peirce was able to recover temporarily—helped in part by a number of large government projects including the stone contract for Manhattan's new Municipal Building (William M. Kendall of McKim, Mead & White, 1907-14, a designated New York City Landmark)—and by 1910 his firms were back on relatively sound financial footing. The entire granite industry, however, was already in a steep decline. Newer materials such as concrete were increasingly replacing the stone on building projects of all sizes, and the market for Peirce's company was clearly shrinking. At the end of 1915 the company again went into receivership, this time never to recover.

Peirce's final professional downfall was foreshadowed by his personal one. The Metropolitan Life Insurance Company initiated foreclosure proceedings against the contractor—who owed over \$200,000—in December of 1914. By February of the following year the house at 11 East 51st Street had been taken over by the insurance company. At this time the neighborhood surrounding the residence was in the midst of a major transformation, as the mansions of Fifth Avenue and the lavish houses of the adjacent side streets began to give way to commercial and apartment house development. Seeking a more exclusive location, wealthy families moved farther north to the Upper East Side. Many of the townhouses that survived were altered for commercial use on the ground floors and divided into apartments above. In this climate it is likely that the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company was unable to find a suitable buyer for the former Peirce Residence. The restrictive covenants imposed on the property by the Roman Catholic Orphan Asylum were also still in effect, limiting potential redevelopment of the site. The company eventually rented the building to Louise Eltinge and Mary E. Masland, who operated the Gardner School for Girls out of the house for a number of years. The pair purchased the property outright in 1920, only to lose it in a foreclosure proceeding of their own in 1933. The building has subsequently been used for commercial purposes and is currently owned by the Mercantil C.A. Banco Universal. In spite of the changes of use and in the character of the surrounding neighborhood, the Peirce Residence remains nearly perfectly intact and is a significant reminder of the area's history as the city's most prestigious residential neighborhood.

Description

The Italian Renaissance-style John Peirce Residence has a symmetrical two-bay-wide front façade clad in granite, the first three stories of which are rusticated while the upper floors are of smooth ashlar. It is five and a half stories plus basement in height and just over 27 feet in width. Based on the American basement plan, the building's ground floor is raised slightly above

grade and the main entrance is located at the center of the façade and is approached by a low stoop. The stoop is flanked by granite knee walls projecting from the main façade; bronze railings have been installed on the stoop just inside the knee walls. To the left of the stoop an areaway is enclosed with a short granite knee wall; the level of the areaway has been raised to the top of the knee wall, a metal fence has been installed above the wall, lights have been installed on top of areaway, and a bronze standpipe has been installed in the left face of the wall. To the right of the stoop a short flight of stairs leads down to the basement entrance, flanked by short granite knee walls; a metal fence has been installed above the walls with a metal gate providing access to the stairs, lights have been installed on top of knee walls, a metal railing has been installed along right side of stair, a recess at the left of the stair has a metal security grille, basement entrance has been tiled and a non-historic entrance door and enframing installed. The rectangular entrance enframing is embellished with wide stone molding ornamented by an abstracted egg-and-dart motif and is capped by a carved stone wreath wrapped around a plain cartouche. The historic bronze door frame holds a pair of bronze doors—each containing a large single pane of glass covered by a delicately filigreed bronze grille—separated from a single-pane transom light by a egg-and-dart bronze transom bar with a decorative frontispiece. A single electric light fixture hangs from the soffit of the entrance enframing. Flanking the entrance is a pair of windows crisply recessed into the façade and ornamented with delicately filigreed bronze grilles. Projecting granite sills under the window openings rest flush on the building's tall granite watertable. A wide band of base molding separates the granite watertable from the rusticated limestone of the main façade. The second story features a pair of round-arched window openings above a projecting balcony. The window openings are ornamented with a cove molding enframing, keystones embellished with decorative scrolled brackets and wreaths, slightly projecting voussoirs and quoins, and are fitted with casement French windows with five-pane panels and a semi-circular transom light above; single lights have been installed in the soffits of both window openings. Three metal flag poles are installed on the building façade flanking the window openings. The balcony is supported by scrolled brackets with acanthus leaf ornament and is enclosed by a wrought-iron railing with ornamental cast-iron baluster. The third story features a pair of rectangular window openings fitted with triple-hung windows; the lower sash has six panes, upper sashes have two panes each. A block modillion cornice separates the third and fourth stories; several lights have been installed on top of cornice. The fourth story features a pair of round-arched window openings ornamented with cove-molding enframings and capped with keystones embellished with scrolled brackets. Window openings are fitted with casement French windows with a semi-circular transom light above. Non-historic, replacement metal railings span the lower section of the window openings. A stone beltcourse extends the width of the building midway up the windows, with molded frieze panels below. The fifth story features a set of three rectangular window openings fitted with double hung, one-over-one wood windows. The face of the fifth story is slightly recessed from the rest of the façade, while the window enframings remain flush with the lower floors. A pair of carved stone wreaths flanks the window openings. The cornice above the fifth floor features a molded frieze panel with raised paterae, a dentil course, a course of egg-and-dart molding, and is supported by scrolled modillions. A portion of both the west and east side façades are visible from street level above the rooflines of the neighboring buildings. Both show the limestone of the main façade tied back into a brick side wall, with a sloping limestone parapet and a limestone chimney above.

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NOTES

¹ Information in this section is based on the following sources: William Bridges, *Map of the City of New York and Island of Manhattan with Explanatory Remarks and References* (New York: William Bridges, 1811); Christopher Gray, "Streetscapes: 647 Fifth Avenue; A Versace Restoration for a Vanderbilt Town House," *New York Times* (April 9, 1995); Gray, "Streetscapes: 57th Street and Fifth Avenue; an 1870 Marble Row, Built in an Age of Brownstones," *New York Times* (April 7, 2002); Arthur Bartlett Maurice, *Fifth Avenue* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1918); New York County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances; David M. Scobey, *Empire City: The Making and Meaning of the New York City Landscape* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002); Robert A.M. Stern, Thomas Mellins and David Fishman, *New York 1880* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1999); Robert A.M. Stern, Gregory Gilmartin and John Montague Massengale, *New York 1900* (New York: Rizzoli, 1983); I.N. Phelps Stokes, *The Icononography of Manhattan Island, 1498-1909* 6 (New York: Robert H. Dodd, 1928).

² Stokes, 67. The grant was later confirmed in the 1730 Montgomerie Charter.

³ Bridges.

⁴ The Commissioner's Plan of 1811, which established the principal street grid of Manhattan, borrowed heavily from Goerck's earlier surveys and essentially expanded his scheme beyond the common lands to encompass the entire island. The three existing north-south avenues were incorporated directly into the plan, and the size of the 5 acre parcels fixed the spacing of the 155 east-west streets at approximately 200 feet.

⁵ "The wealthy merchants of New York at that period frequently invested their surplus in outlying property." Maurice, 288-289.

⁶ An article in the *New York Times* used the term "Hog-Town" to describe much of Midtown Manhattan south of Central Park. "The Offal and Piggery Nuisances," *New York Times* (July 27, 1859), 1.

⁷ Mary Mason Jones was the great-aunt of author Edith Wharton and was the inspiration for the character of Mrs. Manson Mingott in the latter's *The Age of Innocence*. Gray, "Streetscapes: 57th Street and Fifth Avenue."

⁸ It has been hypothesized that the phrase "keeping up with the Joneses" refers to the Jones sisters. Stern, Mellins and Fishman, 578.

⁹ William Kissam Vanderbilt erected his house at the northwest corner of Fifth Avenue and 52nd Street, just north of his father's residence. Cornelius Vanderbilt II selected a plot several blocks further uptown at the northwest corner of Fifth Avenue and 57th Street.

¹⁰ The full site encompassed two whole city blocks, stretching from 51st to 52nd Street from Fifth to Park Avenues. The Catholic Orphan Asylum was the last of the remaining institutions to move away from Fifth Avenue in Midtown. The Colored Orphan Asylum was destroyed during the Draft Riots in 1863, while St. Luke's Hospital and the Deaf and Dumb Asylum (which was subsequently occupied by Columbia College) were both sold in the early 1890s.

¹¹ The deeds also restricted all noxious uses for 50 years and capped building height at 135 feet—approximately the height of the ridge of St. Patrick's Cathedral—for 25 years. New York County, Office of the Register, Deed Liber 70, pg. 60 (Section 5).

¹² Gray, "Streetscapes: 657 Fifth Avenue."

¹³ Information in this section is based on the following sources: Ancestry.com, *1870 United States Federal Census* [database online] (Provo, UT: Generations Network, 2003); Ancestry.com, *1880 United States Federal Census* [database online] (Provo, UT: Generations Network, 2005); Ancestry.com, *1900 United States Federal Census* [database online] (Provo, UT: Generations Network, 2004); Ancestry.com, *1910 United States Federal Census* [database online] (Provo, UT: Generations Network, 2006); Roger L. Grindle, *Tombstones and Paving Blocks: The History of the Maine Granite Industry* (Rockland, ME: Courier-Gazette, c. 1977); Ernestine Lewis, *The History of Mt. Waldo, Frankfort, Maine* (Belfast, ME: J.A. Black Co., 1996); LPC, *West Street Building Designation Report*, prepared by Anthony Robins (LP-1984) (New York: City of New York, 1998); LPC, Surrogate's Court Building Research File; New York County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances; Frederick Clifton Pierce, *Pierce Genealogy* 4 (Albany, NY: Joel Munsell's Cons, 1889); George A. Rich, "The Granite Industry in New England," *New England Magazine* 5 (February 1892), 742-763.

¹⁴ The *New York Times* speculated that the young couple was planning on building their own mansion near Vanderbilt Row and proclaimed that "it is hardly likely that the section he has chosen for his [house] will ever be invaded by business." "Vanderbilts as Home Builders," *New York Times* (October 12, 1902).

¹⁵ "W.K. Vanderbilt Buys Realty," *New York Times* (April 6, 1904), 1.

¹⁶ "W.K. Vanderbilt Sells Lot" *New York Times* (Oct. 7, 1904), 5.

¹⁷ Amongst the firm's earliest commissions was the stonework for Fort Knox in Prospect, Maine, which was the first to be erected of granite in Maine and served as a model for later fortifications throughout the state.

¹⁸ Peirce had studied at Harvard Law School but chose to return to Maine to take over the granite business instead of pursuing a legal career.

¹⁹ Grindle, 85. Part of this contract appears to have included the repaving of Fifth Avenue from 8th to 90th Streets, just around the corner from the lot on which Peirce would eventually erect his house. Rich, 762.

²⁰ Rich, 763.

²¹ Peirce submitted three of the thirteen bids, submitting samples from the Bodwell Granite Company's Fox Island quarry, the Mount Waldo Granite Works, and the Hollowell Granite Works. "The Board of Estimate," *New York Times* (December 15, 1897), 12; "The New Hall of Records," *New York Times* (December 17, 1897), 12. Over the course of the next decade Peirce's company would complete three separate contracts on the building, the first for the exterior shell, the second a completion contract for final finishes and decorative statuary, and the third for extra marble work on the interior. The total cost paid to Peirce and his firm amounted to over four million dollars. LPC, Surrogate's Court Building Research File.

²² Peirce was responsible for the superstructure of the Customs House and the interior finishes of the New York Public Library.

²³ Peirce later moved his offices into the Broadway-Chambers Building after its completion.

²⁴ LPC, *West Street Building Designation Report*, 2. After its construction, Peirce again moved offices from the Broadway-Chambers Building to the West Street Building.

²⁵ Peirce was among the original incorporators of both the Interborough Rapid Transit Company and the Panama Construction Company.

²⁶ Amongst other projects in 1905, the John Peirce Company was actively working on stone contracts for the Manhattan Bridge, the Cleveland Post Office, and cadet barracks at West Point. Grindle, 157.

²⁷ Belmont, McLellan, and McDonald were all involved in the construction of the IRT subway system with Peirce. “Prominent New Yorkers on Visit to Baltimore,” *New York Times* (November 23, 1901), 2; “Parker and M’Clellan Confer at Esopus,” *New York Times* (July 30, 1904), 1; “Ex-Judge O’Brien Held Up,” *New York Times* (August 22, 1907), 1.

²⁸ John and Abby Peirce’s marriage was both their second. John Royden, Lousie, and Mary appear to have been the children of John’s first wife, Mary Helen Ward, while Reginald was the son of Abby’s first husband, a Mr. MacKnight. Alice was the only child born to the couple. *1900 United States Census*, New Jersey, Essex County, Montclair Ward 3, 13B; *1910 United States Census*, New York, New York County, Manhattan Ward 19, 7B.

²⁹ Portions of this section were adapted from: LPC, *Knox Building Designation Report* (LP-1091) (New York: City of New York, 1980), prepared by Marjorie Pearson.

³⁰ Information in this section is based on the following sources: “The ‘American Basement House,’” *Real Estate Record and Builders’ Guide* 52 (September 16, 1893), 312-316; Sarah Bradford Landau, “The Row Houses of New York’s West Side,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 34 (March 1975), 19-36; Montgomery Schuyler, “The New New York House,” *The Architectural Record* 19 (February 1906), 83-103; Robert A.M. Stern, Gregory Gilmartin and John Montague Massengale, *New York 1900* (New York: Rizzoli, 1983); Russell Sturgis, *A Dictionary of Architecture and Building* 2 (New York and London, 1901)

³¹ “The ‘American Basement House,’” 315.

³² Sturgis, 432-434.

³³ In the American basement row house a visitor would enter the dwelling at street level and then proceed upstairs, the foyer and main stairway serving as a buffer between the public and service areas, and the family’s main living space above.

³⁴ Schuyler, 89.

³⁵ Landau, 19.

³⁶ Stern, Gilmartin and Massengale, 348.

³⁷ Information in this section is based on the following sources: Roger L. Grindle, *Tombstones and Paving Blocks: The History of the Maine Granite Industry* (Rockland, ME: Courier-Gazette, c. 1977); Ernestine Lewis, *The History of Mt. Waldo, Frankfort, Maine* (Belfast, ME: J.A. Black Co., 1996); New York County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances.

³⁸ “Big Contractors in Receiver’s Hands,” *New York Times* (June 11, 1909).

³⁹ “In a *New York Herald* article reprinted in the local papers in Maine, his ‘ruin’ was attributed to speculation in the New York subway scheme. As one of the original promoters of the subway, Peirce had supposedly made a million dollars, but Morgan and Belmont, ‘who controlled without his consent or knowledge,’ merged the Interborough and Metropolitan lines. They ‘practically forced’ Peirce to exchange his stock, and this ‘probably swept away his gains and more too.’” Grindle, 159. It is also notable that the application to place the concern in receivership was filed by John B. McDonald, Peirce’s former colleague and social acquaintance who was the primary builder of the original IRT system.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and other features of the building and site, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the John Peirce Residence has a special character, 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, among its important qualities, the John Peirce Residence at 11 East 51st Street in Manhattan was erected in 1904-06 for stone and building contractor John Peirce and was designed by the noted architect John H. Duncan; that at the time of its construction, Fifth Avenue just south of Central Park was the most prestigious residential area in the city; that Peirce succeeded to the family granite business in 1873 and in subsequent years came to control much of the granite industry in the state of Maine; that in the early 1880s he moved to New York City to expand the market for his firm's products and that he soon became one of the country's largest stone contractors; that by the 1890s Peirce had extended the scope of his business to include general building contracting; that he later was involved with large-scale civic infrastructure projects such as the construction of New York City's first subway system; that many of the city's most iconic buildings were erected with the assistance of Peirce's firm; that he decided to build a new home for his family in the city's most prestigious residential neighborhood; that Peirce commissioned architect John H. Duncan to design a residence according to the newly-popular American basement plan that allowed more scientific division of interior spaces and lent itself to a number of exterior architectural styles; that the Peirce Residence was designed in the austere Italian Renaissance style with a number of dramatic sculptural elements more typically associated with the Beaux-Arts style; that when complete the Peirce Residence stood in the middle of a distinguished row of houses; that within a few years of its completion the fortunes of both John Peirce and the surrounding neighborhood changed dramatically; that even though Peirce lost the house to foreclosure in 1914 and the building was subsequently occupied by a school and a series of businesses, his former residence remains nearly perfectly intact and is a significant reminder of the area's history as the city's most prestigious residential neighborhood.

Accordingly, pursuant to 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 John Peirce Residence at 11 East 51st Street in Manhattan, and designates Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1287, Lot 10 as its Landmark Site.

Robert B. Tierney, Chair

Pablo E. Vengoechea, Vice Chair

Frederick Bland, Stephen F. Byrns, Diana Chapin, Joan Gerner,

Roberta Brandes Gratz, Elizabeth Ryan, Roberta Washington, Commissioners



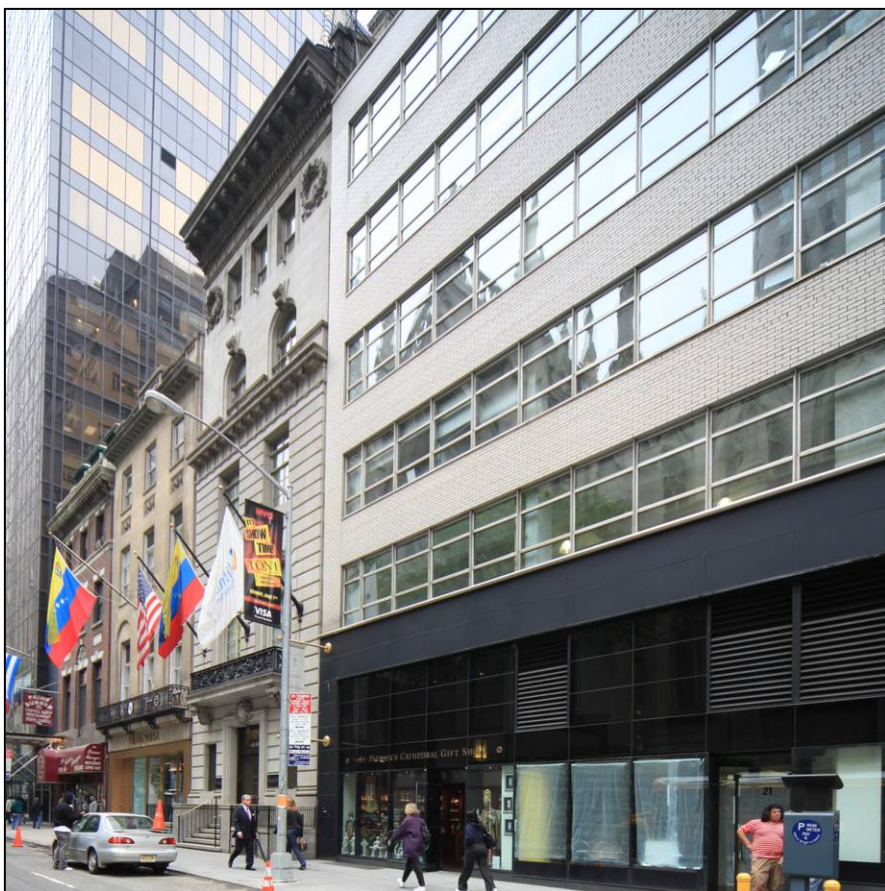
John Peirce Residence
11 East 51st Street
Borough of Manhattan
Photo: Christopher D. Brazee (2009)



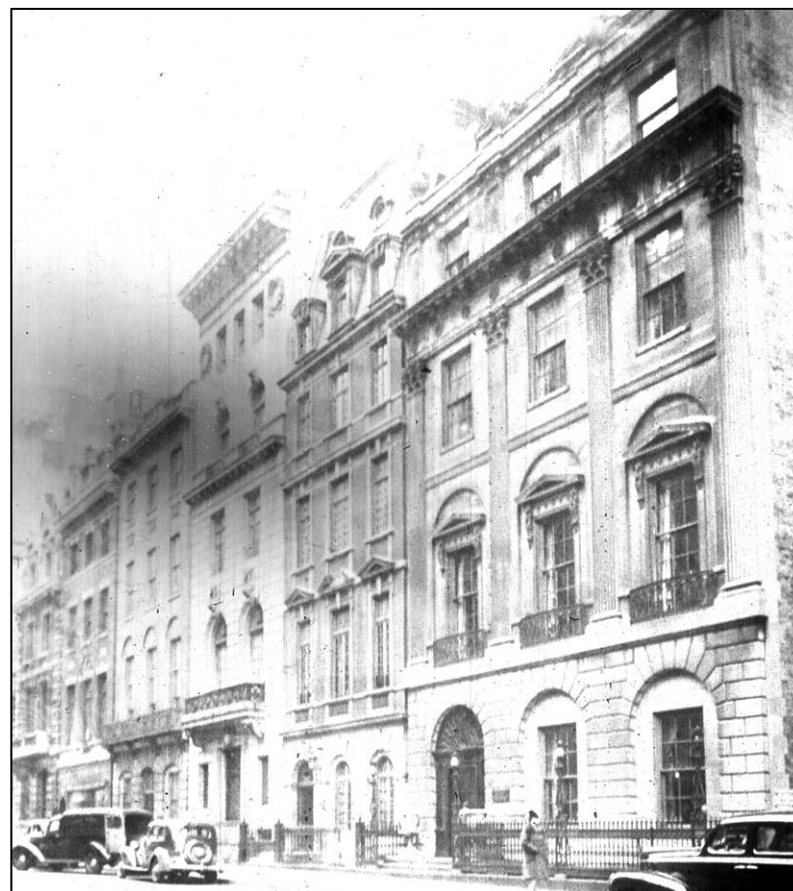
John Peirce Residence
 11 East 51st Street
Photo: Christopher D. Brazee (2009)



John Peirce Residence
 11 East 51st Street
Photo: New York City Department of Taxes (c. 1940)



John Peirce Residence
 11 East 51st Street
Photo: Christopher D. Brazee (2009)



John Peirce Residence
 11 East 51st Street
Photo: New York City Department of Taxes (c. 1940)



John Peirce Residence
 Detail of entrance
Photo: Christopher D. Brazee (2009)



John Peirce Residence
 Detail of ground floor
Photo: Christopher D. Brazee (2009)



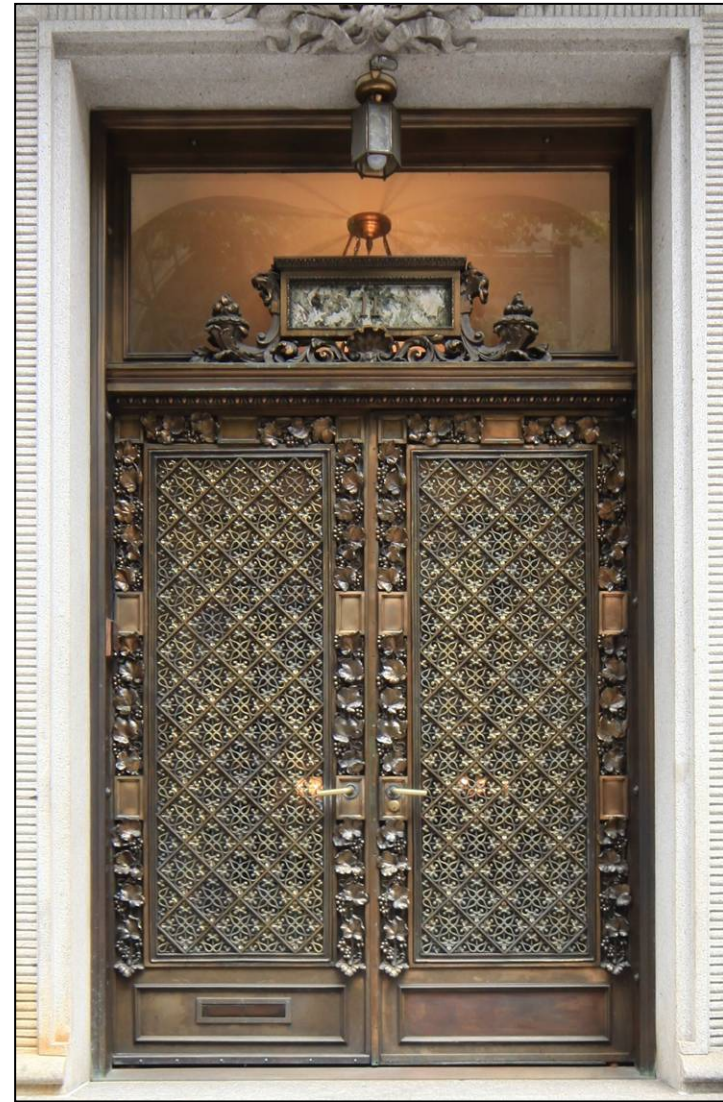
John Peirce Residence
 Detail of second story and balcony
Photo: Christopher D. Brazee (2009)



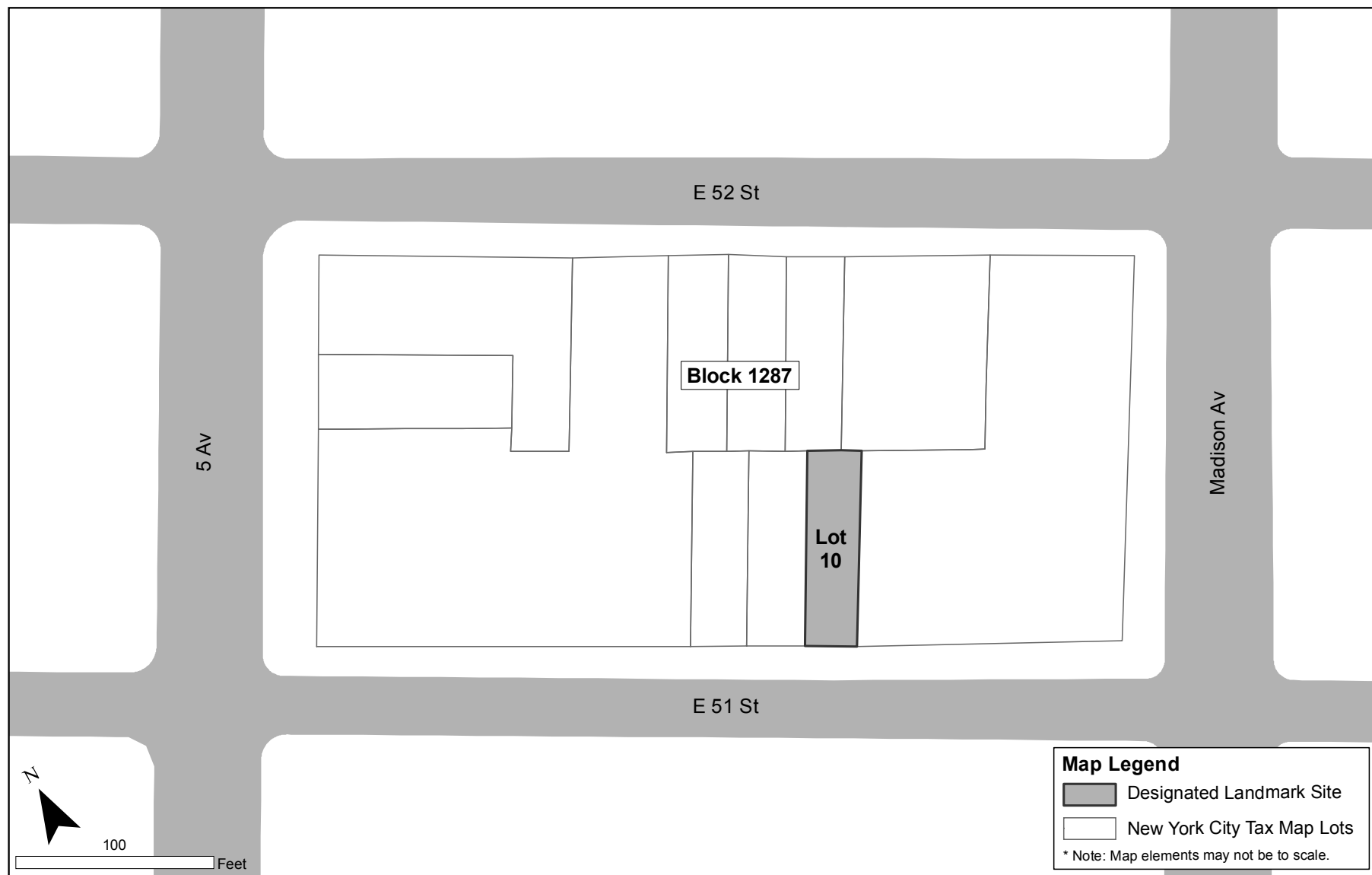
John Peirce Residence
 Detail of upper stories
Photo: Christopher D. Brazee (2008)



John Peirce Residence
Details of façade ornamentation
Photo: Christopher D. Brazee (2009)



John Peirce Residence
Detail of entrance door
Photo: Christopher D. Brazee (2009)



JOHN PEIRCE RESIDENCE, 11 East 51st Street.
Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 1287, Lot 10.

Designated: June 23, 2009

Graphic Source: New York City Department of City Planning, MapPLUTO, Edition 06C, December 2006.
Author: New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, JM.