

# Village Views

A Quarterly Review

Published by The Society for the Architecture of the City

Volume IV, Number 4 -- Fall, 1987

## CONTENTS

Pioneers of Preservation: Part III, by Anthony C. Wood An Interview with Commissioner Adolf Placzek: Preservation's Scholarly Roots: Talbot Hamlin and the Avery Library	3
Chronology	36
Briefly Noted: Sailor's Snug Harbor: Politics and Preservation	39
Another View of The Ladies' Mile: <i>Great Merchants of Early New York</i> , by Joseph Devorkin	43

*On the cover: Alma Mater, by Daniel Chester French, on the steps of the Low Memorial Library at Columbia University.*

---

Village Views is edited by Ronald Kopnicki, Matt McGhee, and Christabel Gough, with archival research by Dale L. Neighbors, produced by Eliza Bradley, and published by The Society for the Architecture of the City, Inc., 45 Christopher Street, Apt. 2E, New York, New York 10014. Village Views is printed by Dr. Clawson Cannon at Copymart, 474 Avenue of the Americas, New York. Photographs are by Christabel Gough unless otherwise attributed. Village Views, © copyright 1987, The Society for the Architecture of the City, Inc. Pioneers of Preservation, © copyright 1987, Anthony C. Wood. Great Merchants of Early New York: The Ladies' Mile © copyright 1987 Joseph Devorkin and The Society for the Architecture of the City. Village Views: ISSN 0893-9543.

Subscriptions: \$10.00. Checks should be made payable to The Society for the Architecture of the City, Inc., 45 Christopher Street, Apt. 2E, New York, New York 10014.



*Talbot Hamlin. (Photo courtesy of Commissioner Placzek.)*

## PIONEERS OF PRESERVATION: PART III

By Anthony C. Wood

\*\*\*\*\*

### PRESERVATION'S SCHOLARLY ROOTS: TALBOT HAMLIN AND THE AVERY LIBRARY

AN INTERVIEW WITH COMMISSIONER ADOLF PLACZEK

*This interview was recorded by Anthony C. Wood and Christabel Gough at Commissioner Placzek's apartment in New York on October 15, 1987. Commissioner Placzek is the Librarian Emeritus of the Avery Architectural Library and Professor Emeritus of Architecture of Columbia University. He is also past president of The Society of Architectural Historians and editor of the Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architecture. First appointed to the Landmarks Preservation Commission in 1984, he is now serving a second term. In this interview, his second with Village Views, Commissioner Placzek remembers colleagues who played important roles in the beginning of the historic preservation movement in New York.*

MRS. GOUGH

The last time we talked to you, Commissioner Placzek, in 1985, we talked about memory, and architecture, and I remember we talked about Nero's "Golden House" and how it was uncovered in the 16th century--how this affected architects then, whether it could affect architects now. And today we have a parallel concern. We are talking about how the Landmarks Law first got started, why people saw a need for it, whether their thinking might influence us still. We would like to hear from you, as an architectural historian. What led to the enactment of the Landmarks Law?

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

One of my theories has always been that it takes an absolute super-catastrophe, a Pennsylvania Station. But you don't get landmarks commissions, or landmarks laws or preservation consciousness overnight. The gradual--and this is still very general--the gradual rise in consciousness about preservation came together with

the study of American architecture in this country, which didn't really start seriously before 1945. I first came into the Avery Library in 1942, and first met Talbot Hamlin, who was Avery Librarian then. I admired him profoundly, and still do. Later he wrote *Greek Revival Architecture in America*. That, of course, was the great step. It was the first, I think--you must never make superlatives--but I can say this was the first very great book on American architecture. It still is, and it's still in print. There were others. But this was the time, and this was probably also the man who had this vast view of American architecture. And this was beyond our great mythology of Richardson, Wright, Sullivan, of course, the Sullivan-Wright progression. That's our great American architectural myth, in a way. But Hamlin went further back, into the greatness of the Greek Revival. But to answer the initial question, there was, in the years when I got into this, a great deal of interest in European architectural history, not in American. I learned a lot from Hamlin; there was this rise of consciousness for American architectural history; all these books started coming out. Then I think the loss of the Larkin Building was a national disaster. And that's as late as 1950.

MRS. GOUGH

And that was strongly felt by people here in New York?

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

The general consciousness--I would have liked, before we were to sit here together, to go and see what the newspapers said--I know the *Architectural Record* took note of this, a little bit. But the full impact--that the Larkin Building was one of the greatest buildings! It's site is still a parking lot today.

MR. WOOD

Oh. It would be interesting to do a check of how that was reported in *The Times*.

\*\*\*\*\*

*(Subsequently, only one reference, January 27, 1950, page 41:2, was found through The Times Index:*

BUFFALO LANDMARK SOLD

City Gets \$5000 for Building That Cost \$4,000,000 in 1906

Buffalo, N.Y. Jan. 26 (AP) The Larkin Administration Building which cost \$4,000,000 has been sold by the city for \$5,000. Title to the structure, acclaimed the most modern building in the nation when it was built in 1906, was transferred today to the Western Trading Corporation. City Controller

Edward A. Neider said conditions of the sale provided that it must be replaced before July 1, 1957, by a structure costing no less than \$100,000. Demolition of the long vacant structure designed by Frank Lloyd Wright already has begun. It is to be replaced by a modern warehouse and truck garage. The building, of modern brick and steel design, was the headquarters of the Larkin Company. The City took it over for taxes in 1945 after the company discontinued its food and soap products business in 1942.

\*\*\*\*\*

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

This was one of the prototypal and greatest buildings, not only by Wright, but in modern commercial architecture. And it went.

MRS. GOUGH

And just for speculation, too.

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

Yes. Yes. For the meanest reasons. As almost invariably these buildings go, anyway.

MRS. GOUGH

You mentioned also that Talbot Hamlin was very interested in the New York Public Library, as a building, and that he took you there once?

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

Well, he taught me.

MRS. GOUGH

He taught you?

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

He taught me. He took pleasure in it, I think. It was a very warm relationship, and lasted--not long enough. I was away in the Army, and then he left New York. But he always came back to "Have you seen this? Have you appreciated this?" It was the rear facade of the New York Public Library, the great one--the one we all have had gray hair from.

MR. WOOD

Right.

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

The interesting thing Hamlin taught me, was that in a way this was modernism too. "Don't think that all these Classic revival, neo-Renaissance, Beaux-Arts buildings have no modern spirit--which is in showing how the inside and the outside relate--or do not convey function. Now look at the rear of the public library. You see the stack arrangements, very clearly designated, the monumentality of the very simple, simple facade." This is so clear in my mind.

MR. WOOD

When he left the city--I'm just curious, can you tell me a little more about his career and background?

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

He went to live on a boat. The Aquarelle. He was a sailor. And I think he died on that boat. I actually had the great honor of writing his biography for the *Dictionary of American Biography*. He left Avery and went south, and spent much of his last year on the Aquarelle. He finished his last book there, a pioneer book in the field of architectural biography, the first Pulitzer prize winner in architecture; it's the *Benjamin Henry Latrobe* book.

MR. WOOD

So he basically retired from Columbia?

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

He retired rather early. He retired in 1954, and then in 1956 he died, already. So he was sixty-five.

MR. WOOD

And he came to Avery, or was appointed Librarian, in 1934.

MRS. GOUGH

So it was while he was at Avery that he prepared the book on the Greek Revival--

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

Exactly. Rather late. He started, you see, with his *Architecture through the Ages*, which he then revised, and re-revised. It's a very fine book. And there is a third revision-- which his publishers didn't see fit to publish--which James O'Gorman did. If you can plug that, it would be a great help. And you see, his interest started perfectly conventionally, started with some European architectural libraries. Of course in the concept of architectural libraries, he was ahead of his time, too. Clearly. And then that culminated with *Greek Revival*.

MR. WOOD

Which appeared in 1944.

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

Yes. And was followed by his big, four-volume *Forms and Functions*, which was a very ambitious project, I don't want to seem critical, but it never really--took off, it didn't quite do what he wanted it to do. It was meant to be a typology of modern architecture.

MR. WOOD

I see. He resigned from his position as Avery Librarian to do that project. Did he still at that time remain in New York and work?

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

Yes. He taught at Columbia, but was succeeded as Avery Librarian by James Van Derpool.

MR. WOOD

So he continued teaching at Columbia! There's this interesting connection between Avery Library and some very important people in getting Landmarks going. Obviously. The role of Hamlin is extremely important, and then Van Derpool's role was also a very exciting and important one at a key point in time.

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

Yes, yes.

MR. WOOD

And then Alan Burnham's role.

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

Indeed, Indeed.

MR. WOOD

Is this just a wonderful accident? Can you shed some more light on this?

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

Well, I would--I am not completely impartial there.

MR. WOOD

Well, that's all what I'd like to hear.

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

I would hope to say that a great architectural library and great architectural archives--to put it more generally than Avery--have an enormous role to play in assisting the preservation process. But I am also thinking, for example, of the Historic American Building Survey in Washington.

MR. WOOD

But the thing I found particularly intriguing about Van Derpool's role is that you can see, and I kind of assume, he was the type of person who is a librarian and scholar, and had that view of the world, and from that world to then make a move into a much more activist role, and really make things happen, is not exactly a usual transition. It's interesting, to me at least, that he would leave Avery, and go--and at that time, when he went to the Commission, it was before the law was passed, it was 1962.

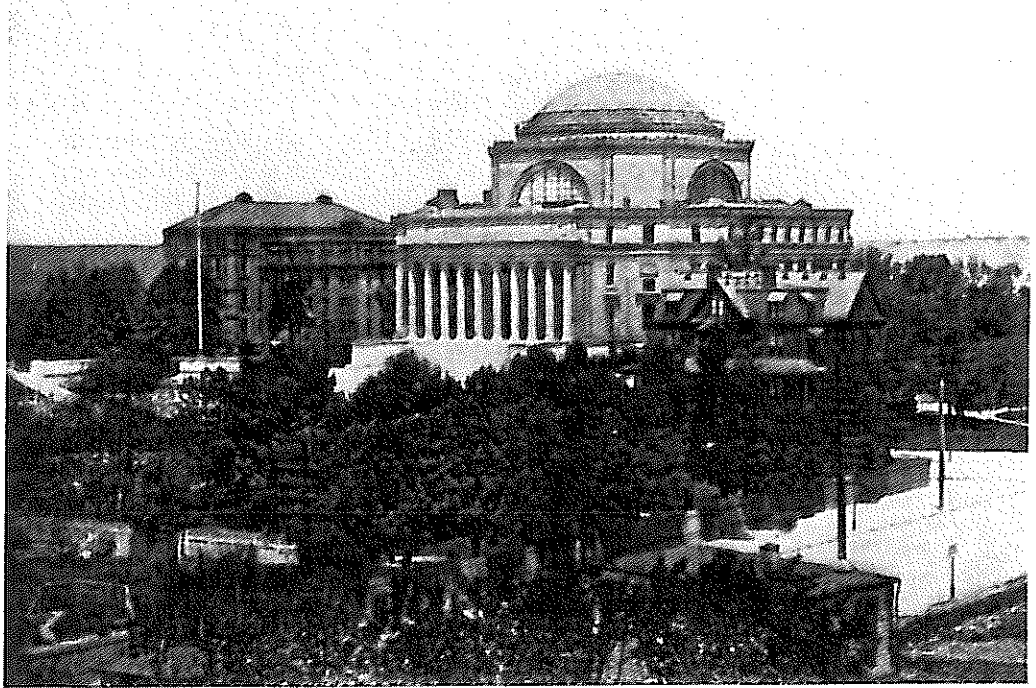
COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

I always had--I was corrected by Harmon Goldstone's and Geoffrey Platt's memories here, in your very fine issues. I always thought Van Derpool had a great part in this, but it didn't appear from the recollections of these protagonists.

MRS. GOUGH

Well, I think--we're very curious to know *your* impressions of that.





*Low Memorial Library, Columbia University as it appeared in a photograph published in 1903, in A Landmark History of New York, by Albert Ulmann. At that time, Avery Library was housed in the Low Library building. "The Avery Memorial Architectural Library was established as a branch of the then Columbia College Library in 1890 through the gift of Samuel Putnam Avery (1822-1904). It was to be a memorial to his departed architect-son Henry Ogden Avery (1852-1890). Its core was the approximately 2,000 fine volumes in architecture and the decorative arts left by young Avery; an endowment for the future purchase of books was added. Out of these relatively modest beginnings there developed one of the great libraries of architecture. First tucked away in a room in the 49th Street building, then the home of Columbia College, it moved in 1897 to the new campus on Morningside Heights and was given a room in the newly completed Low Memorial Library. In 1912 the Avery Library acquired a proud building of its own, Avery Hall. A four-story, neo-Renaissance Palazzo, it was built through the generosity of Samuel Putnam Avery II (1847-1920), son of the original donor. The architect was Charles Follen McKim (1847-1909) of the great firm of McKim, Mead and White, who had provided the master plan for the campus and had so brilliantly designed Low Library." ("The New Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library," by Adolf K. Placzek, in Columbia Library Columns, Vol. XXVII, No. 2.)*

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

He was very dedicated to it, and he did this with a great sense of excitement. The possibility of a Commission, of a Landmarks Law--

MR. WOOD

Certainly, when he came on board, I remember from other conversations just how excited Goldstone and Platt were. I guess they had gone to Van Derpool to say, "Can you recommend anyone to do this?" and he said, "I'll do it." They were swept off their feet to get him. But I think he came at a really crucial moment in 1962, because it was at that time that they were continuing all the research, and doing all of that, and stirring up interest in the city.

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

Yes, I just saw the other side of it. He called me, and he was then actually--I was acting Avery Librarian, and he was Acting Dean or Associate Dean. So it was an intermediate step in his career. And he said, "This has to be done. I'm going to leave Columbia. This is a very, very great thing happening."

MRS. GOUGH

That is a very dramatic moment. I mean, considering the academic world--

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

He left the academic world, never to return. I think he was dedicated to this, to landmarks.

MR. WOOD

And he brought such stature--to have somebody of that stature go into an agency that didn't even have a law yet, and help develop it, I think that was a crucial moment.

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

That I remember very well. And again, from this, we all learn. Because Van Derpool was a Renaissance scholar; Alberti was his great love. Going into this hurly-burly of New York preservation, that was a great step for him.

MR. WOOD

There's one particular story I had heard that I wanted to just run by you, to see if you had heard him mention it, or knew of it. And that was when he was at the Landmarks Commission--and this was also just before the law was passed--there was the wonderful, eleventh hour salvation of the Percy Pyne block on Park Avenue, you know, the ones that the Marquesa de Cuevas--

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

Yes, yes.

MR. WOOD

--the Rockefeller heiress, at the last minute, bought, and I've been exploring, trying to find out, how did that all fall into place? Van Derpool's name was mentioned as somebody played a significant role in making that all happen. Could you shed any light on that?

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

I remember that well. Van Derpool, you know, was a good friend too, in a way. I think he picked up the telephone, and there was some call. The story of how you can save by-by social connections. He knew people, and saw, "We're going to get this worked out."

MR. WOOD

So he operated in that society.

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

Yes. More than Hamlin. You brought up the Century, of which Van Derpool certainly was a member.

MR. WOOD

Right. I knew that.

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

But the way I remember it--and there may be more to it--is that he went to the telephone. Now, I think it is more difficult, because it's a greedier lot. The old civilities, as we know, don't pertain.

MR. WOOD

Now Van Derpool must have been also a colleague of Hamlin's. Was there a close relationship there, or--

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

It was a friendly relationship but I don't think that it was a personal friendship. Hamlin, particularly, was so turned into his own things, that--he was not some hail fellow well met.

MR. WOOD

Very, very focused on his interests?

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

He was not an activist. He never became president of the Society of Architectural Historians. I don't think he wanted to. Van Derpool did. And then I did. But he was a founder of the Architectural Historians, in 1941, which also is, you know, in this whole theme of awareness of architecture, an important aspect.

MR. WOOD

That's interesting, that date. When Architectural Historians was formed, in 1941, he was involved?

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

He was certainly involved.

MR. WOOD

The earliest reference I've been able to find--as you're aware, when Hamlin started to compile this list of buildings worthy of preservation, which played a key role, he started that, apparently, in the forties. He started to write this list, ["Tentative List of Old Buildings in Manhattan Built in 1865 or Earlier and Worthy of Preservation, November 14, 1942"] and the earliest date I've found anyone mention that they knew he was working on it was 1941. And the timing is

*Right: James Grote Van Derpool and Geoffrey Platt in front of the Percy Pyne House in 1965. (Photo: Courtesy of the Landmarks Preservation Commission.)*

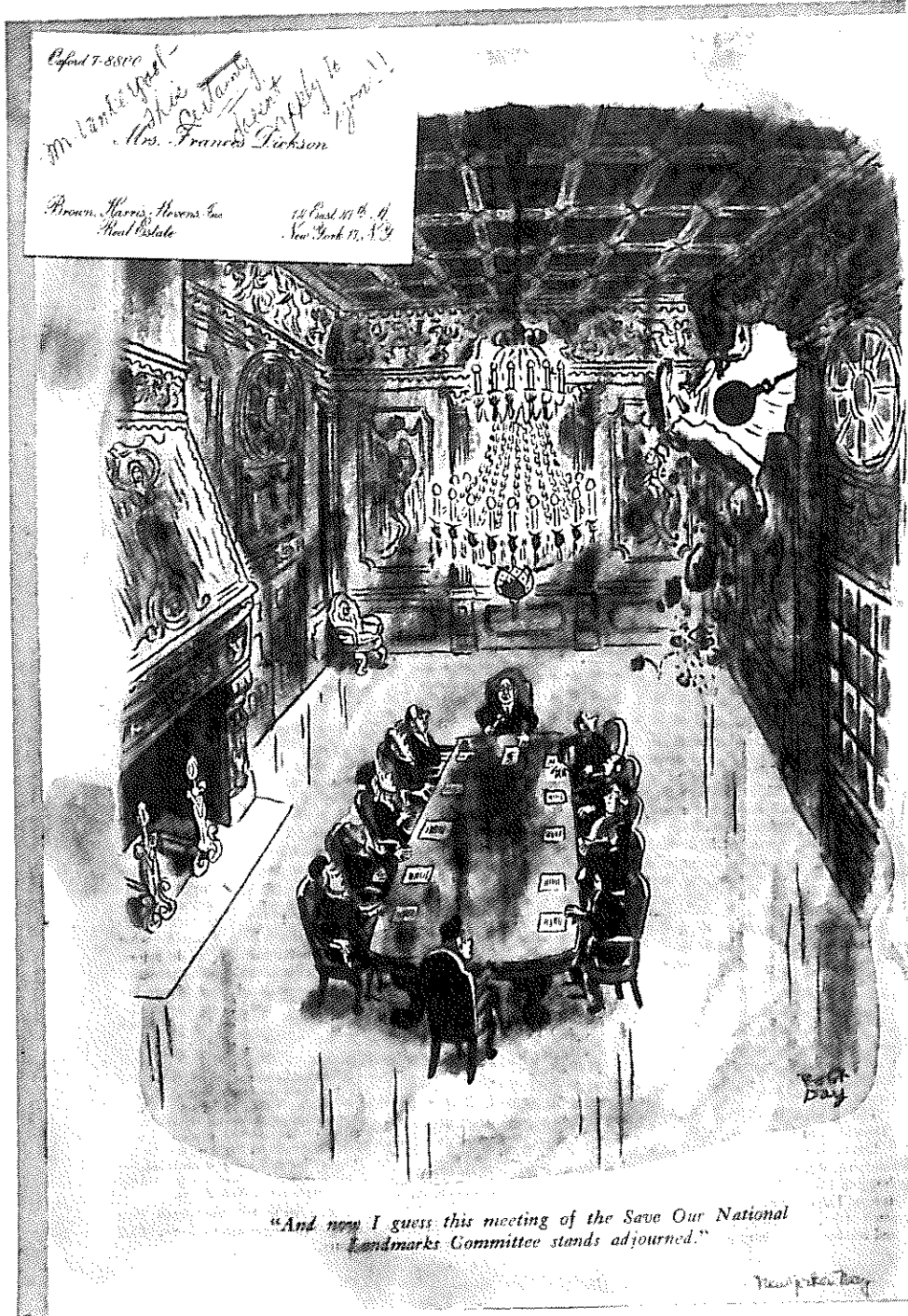


Ref. 7-8800

M. Lankford  
Mrs. Frances Jackson  
This is a family secret  
I will supply to you!!

Brown, Harris, Hovens Inc.  
Real Estate

14 East 40th St.  
New York 17, N.Y.



"And now I guess this meeting of the Save Our National Landmarks Committee stands adjourned."

New York Daily

interesting, why did he start--and this points up also, the Society of Architectural Historians, in terms of what was happening in New York City, that's just the time when Moses, in I guess it was 1939, that the civic community celebrated because they thought they had stopped Moses from tearing down the Aquarium for the ill-fated bridge he wanted to build. Well, in 1941, however, he turned around and socked it to the civic community by saying he had to now demolish the Aquarium and the old Castle Clinton, for the tunnel project that was the successor to the ill-fated bridge. And there was once again the Aquarium--and Castle Clinton was threatened. Just at that time period that there seems to have been a lot of interest, and that is also the early stage I found Hamlin's beginning of compiling this list.

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

You're bringing this to my memory very effectively, because I remember this absolutely ardent dislike--because you don't use the word, "hate" lightly--but almost that, that Hamlin had for Moses. It was, actually, fully reciprocated. (*Laughter.*) Moses had this very sweeping classification of "the do-gooders." Hamlin, of course was the epitome of the do-gooder.

MR. WOOD

Do you know if there were any direct clashes?

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

In the newspapers, I think there was certainly a nasty letter by Moses, on the do-gooders. You probably know of that. But I think Hamlin took that as himself, directly. I don't know whether Moses actually, directly, by name went after Hamlin. But Hamlin felt insulted. That I remember very clearly.

MR. WOOD

Was Hamlin involved because of the people he dealt with, the associations--because one of the hotbeds of people fighting Moses on Castle Clinton at that time was the Municipal Art Society. Albert Bard was very involved with that. Were they part of the same circle? do you know, by any chance?

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

I doubt it. I don't remember Bard.

*Left: A page from the Landmarks Preservation Commission's scrapbook. (Courtesy the Landmarks Preservation Commission.)*



*Left: Commissioner Placzek. "Good people are shy. And the other side is not shy. The ones who destroyed the Larkin, and Robert Moses, they were not shy." (Photo: from Commissioner Placzek.)*

MR. WOOD

You don't know if by any chance Hamlin belonged to the Century?

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

I know Van Derpool did. I doubt whether Hamlin did. Again, he was rather shy and withdrawn; this was part of his personality. Maybe at that time, many of these "do-gooders" were not as activist. Sort of--good people are shy. And the other side is not shy. The ones who destroyed the Larkin, and Robert Moses, they were not shy.

MR. WOOD

Moses would bring out the chopping block.



COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

Actually, I think with Pennsylvania Station, people became less shy. That they would actually walk up and down in front of it with a placard: I think that was new. You are an activist, and you express your opinions very forcefully, but we--I think that was also newer, that brings me back to the "super" disaster, which I think did it. I think Moses' depredations, his ruthlessness, did much to activate the other side. But Hamlin himself was not an activist in our sense. Centurion? He had the connections, and was rather shy too. And there is this dichotomy, and we know this in the preservation movement, between the scholar--which Hamlin was the epitome of--and the one who also can get things done.

MR. WOOD

It's interesting, the groundwork that Hamlin started, that body of information was the basis that the Municipal Art Society took and expanded: it was the basis for the original exhibits, and tours, and things in the fifties, all the groundwork that finally got to the point where people did something. Do you remember Hamlin ever talking of Castle Clinton, or the architecture of the building down in Battery Park, if it had struck him?

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

No, not specifically. I heard him often talk about the losses of New York architecture. There was one church particularly, and that, I remember quite clearly, was St. John's, in this book, which incidentally also--this is Nathan Silver, *Lost New York*, a wonderful book--you know it. You see again, Avery had a certain amount to do with this.

MR. WOOD

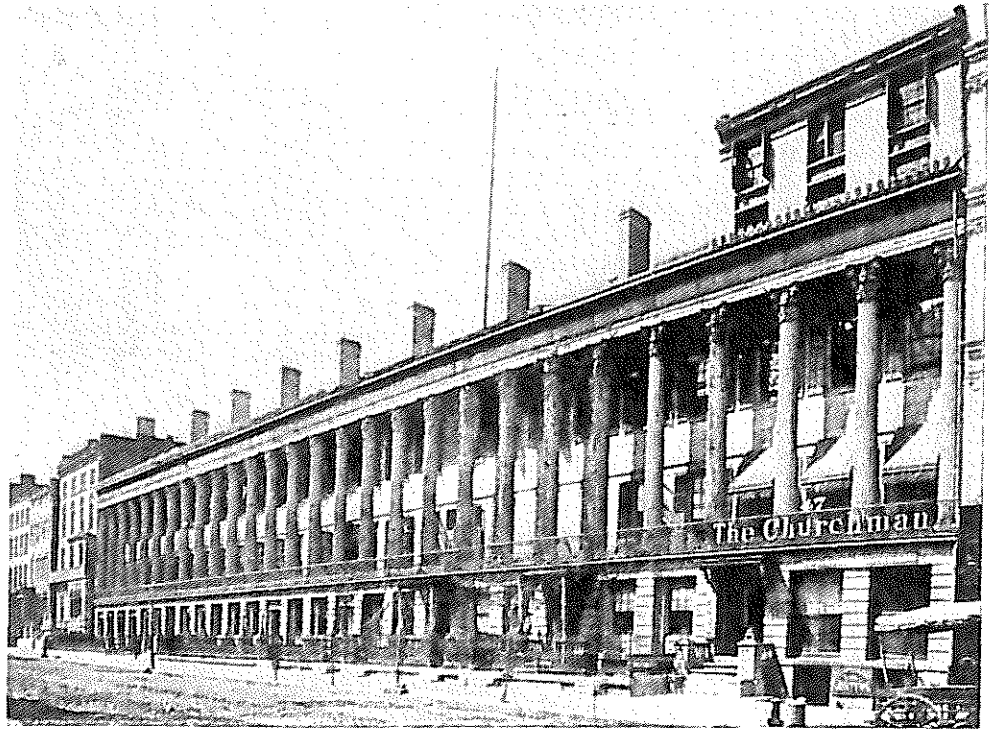
Ah.

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

I pride myself that I was of help. And there were all the old friends there, Van Derpool, Burnham. Hamlin, by that time, had died. But there are things Hamlin obviously would have-- This was very close to his interests. (*Commissioner Placzek is showing an illustration from Lost New York.*)

MR. WOOD

The Colonnade Row?



*The Colonnade Row, from King's Views of 1895.*

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

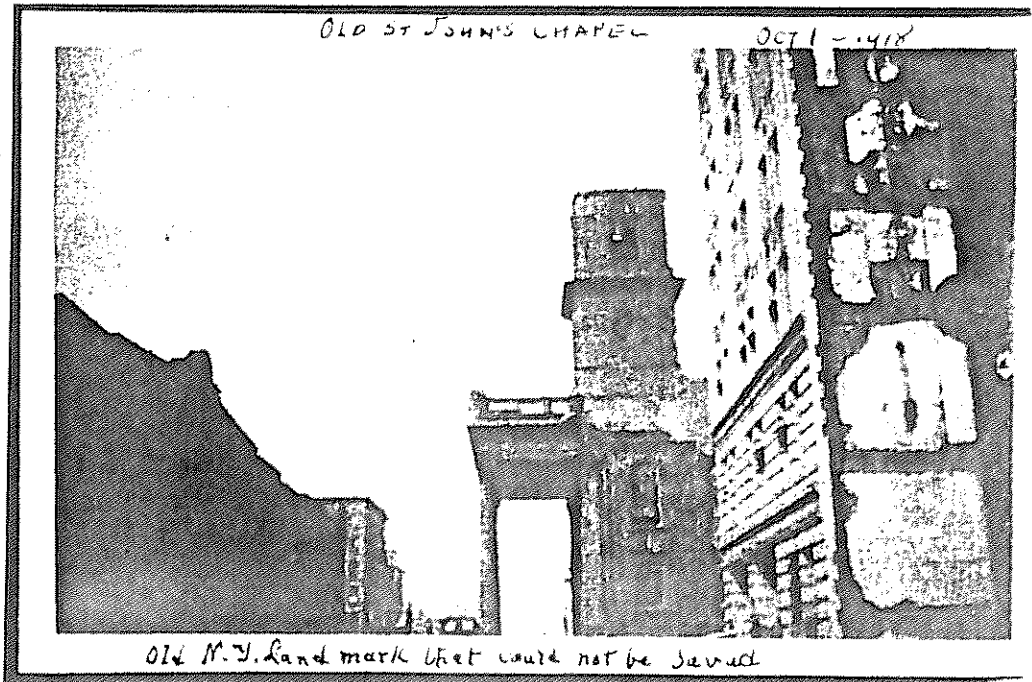
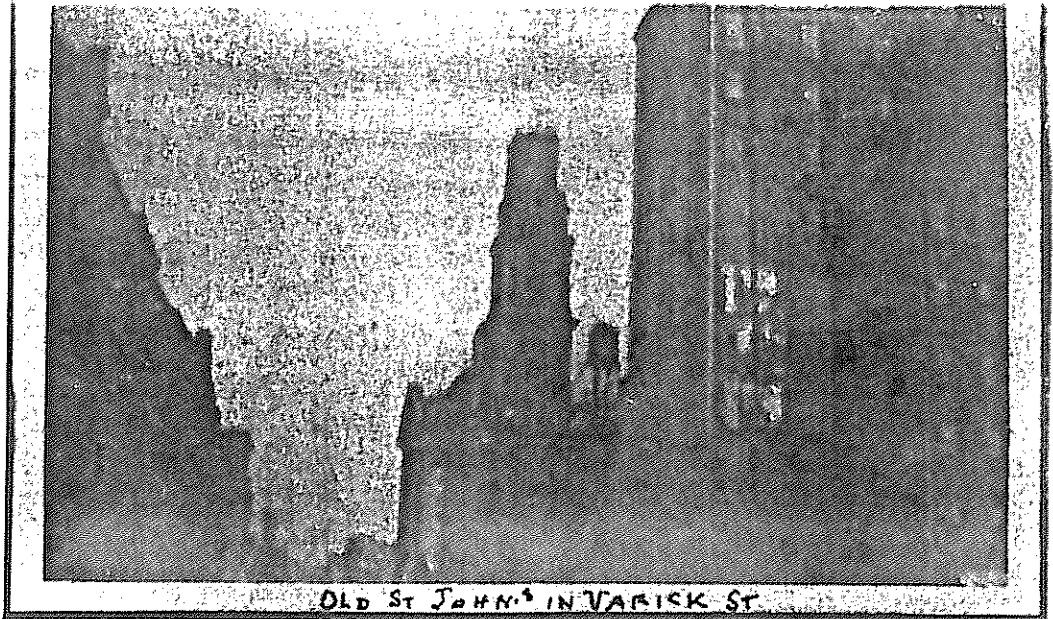
Of which only a fragment remains now. The original drawings are in Avery, and he shows it in the Greek Revival book, but he mourned for this.

MR. WOOD

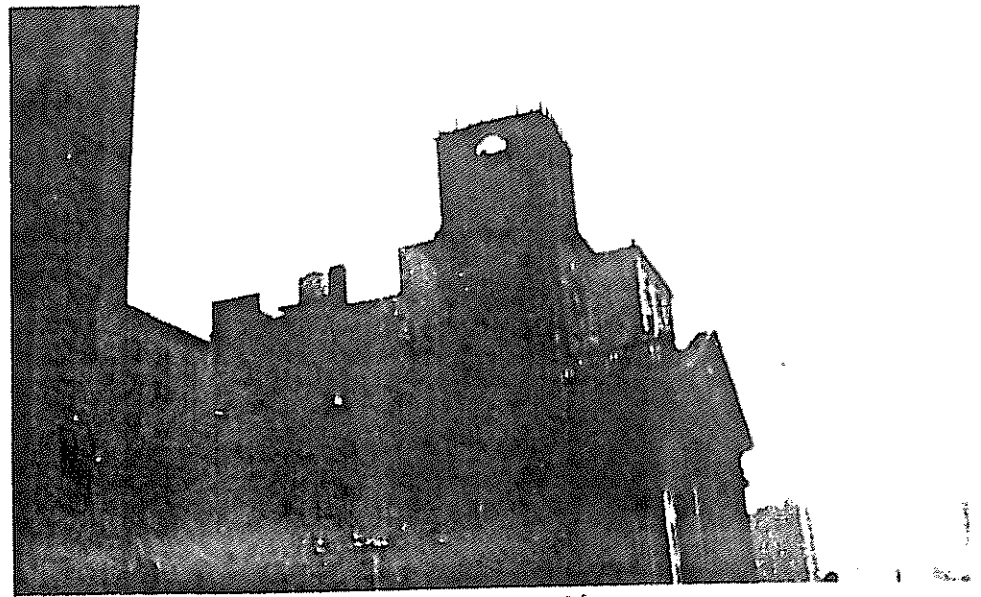
Do you have any idea when that went down?

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

We have it here. As early as 1901. This was one he came back to, in our talk. And then the other one was St. John's. I think I will find it here. And this, he thought, was the greatest loss in New York. That I remember well. St. John's Chapel, a masterpiece by John McComb. As Silver says, a church worthy to rank with St. Paul's. Rather ruthlessly destroyed, in 1918. "The city carelessly

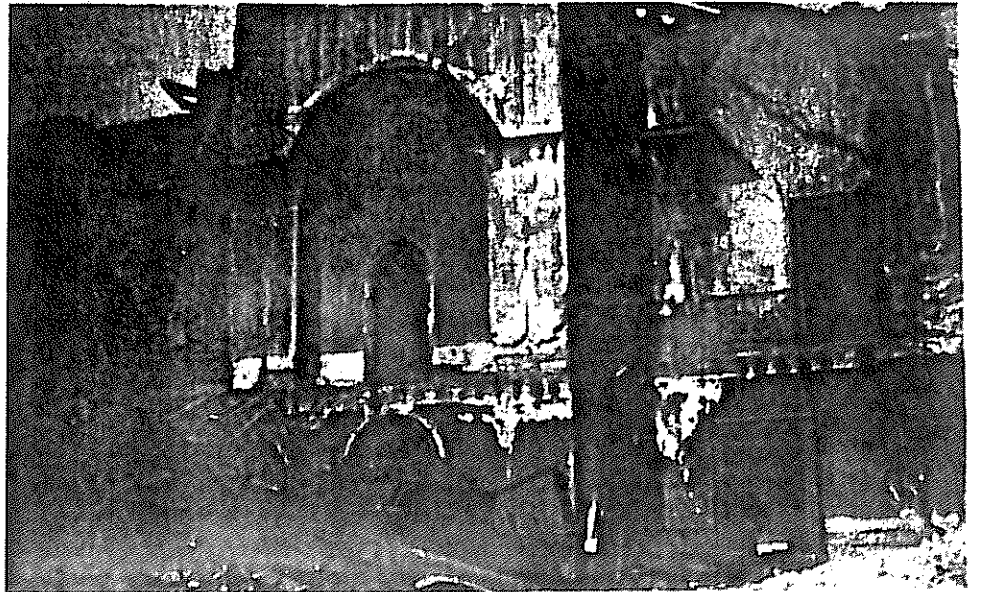


*The destruction of St. John's Chapel recorded by an amateur photographer.  
(Courtesy of the New-York Historical Society, New York.)*



Near the last Old St John's Varick St

Sept 1918



Old St John's FRONT WALL

(Photos: Courtesy of the New-York Historical Society, New York.)

destroyed"--you can see Nathan Silver's anger in this. And for one purpose only, to widen Varick Street. I would say this should also be a reminder to our clergy, of what can happen to great churches, if there is no Landmarks Law in place. (*As Commissioner Placzek is at home surrounded by his library, he is showing us books from his shelves. He picks one up.*) There is one I nearly forgot: this is one of Talbot Hamlin's most important things. It is out of print. That's the early one, and I think it should get high grades in the development of consciousness: *The American Spirit in Architecture*. 1926.

MR. WOOD

1926! Where was he at the time he pursued this?

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

He was an instructor at Columbia. This was long before he became Avery Librarian. He was an architect--again, this is not atypical--as a practicing architect, he never made his mark. As a scholar, as a librarian, and as, in a way, a pioneer of preservation he made an enormous mark. And there are others like that too. In a way you pay a price for your scholarship. Alan Burnham was another one. He did so much for preservation, that his career didn't particularly--

MR. WOOD

Only so many hours in a day, I guess.

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

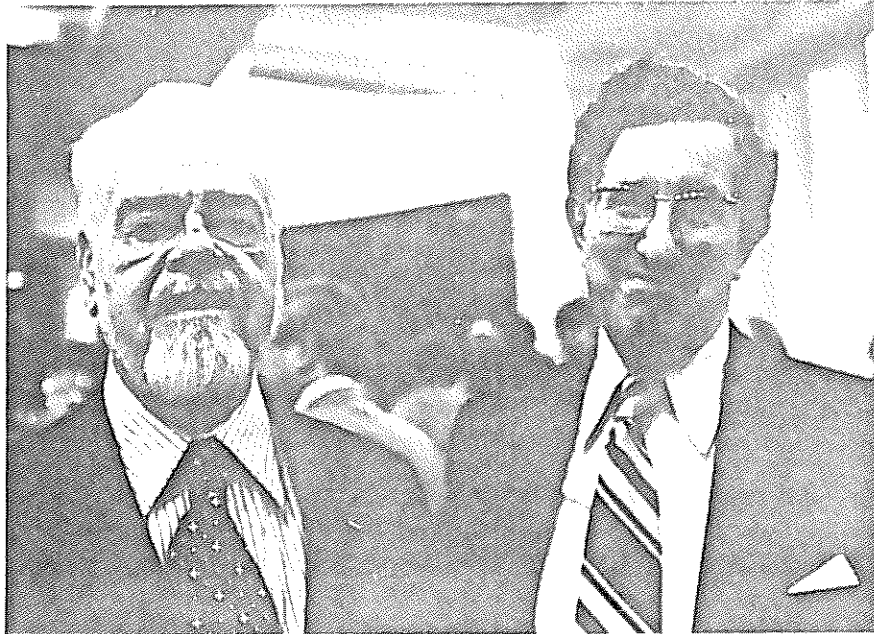
Only so many hours in a day. But in the end, I think he left his a greater mark by doing what he did. (*The American Spirit in Architecture is still in his hand.*) But put this in: it was a milestone of appreciation.

MR. WOOD

I think you're probably right there. Just so I get a better sense, not knowing that world as well, with Talbot Hamlin, I get the real sense he was regarded among architectural historians as the king of architectural historians--not in terms of ruling them, but he was revered.

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

He was revered. Yes. Then there came the young Turks of the other side, which was Hitchcock, with his *International Style* in 1932. And Hitchcock should get



*Henry-Russell Hitchcock with Commissioner Placzek. (Photo: courtesy of Commissioner Placzek.)*

your nod, too, because this was one of the most useful things. (*Another book from Commissioner Placzek's shelves.*) A bibliography of American architectural books, which includes all the pattern books. This is later now. This (*the Hamlin book*) was 1926; this (*the Hitchcock book*) is 1962. And it was re-issued, actually, by me. I am very humbly pleased with that.

MRS. GOUGH

Oh, from Da Capo.

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

Yes. This new one, which is still in print, also contains a chronological shortlist by date. So when you go to see what pattern books, say, the Staten Island people would have had in 1830, you could look that up here. We had this very pleasing Staten Island designation recently, I think the first house was 1830ish. There is an exact list here, of what they could have seen: Asher Benjamin, probably, and Lafever. And when you do research, I think you will find it quite valuable. The one who did the short list, the chronological list, is William Jordy, another great

historian of American architecture. So in other words, Hamlin was revered, was "king," but others came up.

MR. WOOD

Right. I understand that. You've given me a better sense of the influence his work would have had. Then the next, moving in a chronological order, was of course Alan Burnham, coming in 1966 to the Commission, replacing Van Derpool when he stepped down. And he, of course, was working with the MAS on expanding those lists, and turned it into the book that came out in, I guess, 1963.

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

A classic of its kind.

MR. WOOD

So he certainly played a major role. What are your memories of his--

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

Alan Burnham was a very good friend. And first when he taught at Columbia, and then as a fairly regular user of the Library. You know, he had this great project which, alas, was never finished, on Richard Morris Hunt. There must be papers. Again, he paid a price for his activism and his dedication. The New York landmarks book went ahead of what he might have done on Richard Morris Hunt. He gave this great priority, and his concern was everlasting. His last call to me was that he had worked on the Bryant Park.

MR. WOOD

That's right. He was getting involved.

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

This was through the Municipal Art Society. This was a day before he died, he called me.

MR. WOOD

He called you?



*Alan Burnham. (Photograph courtesy of Mrs. Burnham.)*



COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

Just as a friend. What he was so deeply concerned about was the integrity and visibility of the west facade.

MR. WOOD

I think he died just at the time I had begun to do my first interviews, and that was 1984.

MRS. GOUGH

Yes, 1984, but of course the Bryant Park project was well started by then.

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

It was his last call to me, a day or two before he died. In the evening. This sense of profound shock--when I saw that he had died. And then this thing was proposed--

MRS. GOUGH

The restaurant---

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

I am just reminiscing about his concern, to the last day of his life. This was one of his last things, that I had any contact with him about. I think he asked me about this Hamlin story, because I had mentioned that to him, that Hamlin always said that this is the first of the modern facades in a Beaux-Arts building. There is also a Mumford reference to it. He tried to track that down. And the next thing he was gone. But I remember, this west facade, this appreciation by Hamlin, this grave concern by Alan Burnham.

MR. WOOD

Burnham was one of the people I had planned initially to interview, and he was misleading in his looks. He looked so much younger than some of the other people I was dealing with, I thought, well at least I have a lot of time there, and I was wrong. It was a loss.

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

Yes. Yes. He was aware of it. He was trying to wind up his affairs. We talked about that.

MR. WOOD

He certainly had quite a lot of influence too.

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

Yes, I repeat, the book is a classic, still.

MR. WOOD

It was extremely very well received when it came out. The time was also important, because it was 1963, and that's when they had already started demolition of Penn Station.

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

Actually I think it's interesting that his classification in the back of the book still stands. Pretty well. I think, seeing from what you know now--we all would say that's an all right list. You could put things in which he didn't, but on the whole, this is a splendid list.

MRS. GOUGH

It's interesting, as we move through time-- Hamlin's last date was in the 1860s, on his list of buildings to be preserved. For a while, some buildings didn't get onto lists, just because people felt they were virtually new. For example, Commissioner Goldstone was talking about Mrs. Dana, who was a member of the board of the Municipal Art Society--her family house was decorated by Stanford White. And she was a woman I suppose in her forties or fifties when she first met Goldstone, so it can't have seemed very much of an antiquarian interest to her, the person who decorated her parents' house. And as we move on, we lose those connections. And begin to see more landmarks. That must have been true for Hamlin, and for Burnham, I would imagine.

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

I didn't do my homework, on how much either Hamlin or Burnham would have been conscious of the cast iron, which I don't think that they were, very much.

MRS. GOUGH

That's a very interesting question. The consciousness of that came from England, I'm told. From Nikolaus Pevsner.

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

Yes. I drove, actually, John Summerson through the Cast Iron District.

MRS. GOUGH

Did you, indeed.

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

Together with Wittkower.

MRS. GOUGH

And how did they like it?

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

Well, absolutely. But they of course played the Renaissance motif on that.

MRS. GOUGH

They were interested in the Renaissance styles?

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

Sanmichele. And of course these were colossal revelations for me at the time. Summerson said, "You realize this is all Venetian, Venetian Renaissance, not Florentine." Of course, standard "book-learning" was that it was the Roman and the Florentine palaces. "Not at all, it's all Venetian."

MRS. GOUGH

When would this have been, before designation?

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

No, this was after designation. This was fairly recently. He knew it extremely well from books. And he certainly appreciated it. Possibly more than Burnham or Hamlin did. But we learned a lot there.

MRS. GOUGH

The cosmopolitan approach. It's interesting.

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

Of course how architectural forms are passed on in history--but to come back to this Burnham and Hamlin point, what I find is that our taste is rather widening. Particularly when we come to the second half of the 19th century. And we now, of course, are in the thick of it.

MR. WOOD

Heavens, yes.

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

Need I tell you?

MRS. GOUGH

Would you say that some of those "Young Turks" you referred to earlier were partly responsible for that?

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

Well, "Victorian" was a bad word for a long time. Of course there was still the Bauhaus strain--architects, not architectural historians--who are of course also opinion makers, and would have said "Victorian" was a derogatory term. Before that, the century of the South German baroque was "a bad thing," again, these changes of taste of course, affect us all. The early Bannister Fletcher gives it a half-page, and says, it can't be all bad, because it has some very nice urban vistas; you can read that in Bannister Fletcher, in the 1890s. Now, we do not think that. We say "Victorian," a Victorian house, and imply this is something we must preserve. This change, of course, took place during these years, and in that sense we also owe them a great debt. Hitchcock's book on the early Victorian architecture in England, this came out in the fifties, of course, I think that was an important step.

MR. WOOD

Back to something else you mentioned earlier, the founding of the Society of Architectural Historians. Who else was involved in that as well as Hamlin?

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

Carroll Meeks, of Yale. He died in 1966. He was interesting, again, because he wrote a great book about railway stations--in our widening of appreciation, it

predates Pennsylvania Station. And he also wrote a book on 19th century Italian architecture, something which nobody would have taken seriously before. In that sense, again, a pioneer in widening our taste into the 19th century. And then this beginning to appreciate building types--the railroad station as a building type--as a building type of importance! It didn't have to be a church to be worth preserving. Conant was another one; Meeks, Hamlin, and Conant, they were the ones that come to mind, although there were several others. Kenneth Conant. One of the giants of American architectural history, but interested *only* in Romanesque. When you go to Cluny, you will find a rue Conant. But I don't think Victorian architecture, railroad stations, would have interested Conant. He was at Harvard. He was a very great figure. One of the first great American architectural historians. The diversity of interest which Hamlin brought to it, however, he did not have. And there was of course Henry-Russell Hitchcock, also an early SAHer. We have already talked about him.

MR. WOOD

Before that time--the Architectural Historians--which I've always thought is such a wonderful group--I would have thought they would have existed forever. The fact that at that particular point in time that group came forward--had there been groups like that before, did it show an evolution--

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

Well, they are really a break-off from the College Art Association, which is the older and wider--it took in all art historians, but also painters, studio people, so it was wider in that sense. Whereas then the architectural historians then began to take in the other side of the spectrum, the preservationists, the city planners and landscape architects, so we drifted apart, with the painters and sculptors on one hand, and of the preservation people, practicing architects, urbanists on the other side, pulling the architectural historians somewhat in that direction. Then there was an amicable divorce, eventually--we had been meeting together, but the architectural historians was a rather small group, when it started. In the seventies it became three or four thousand.

MR. WOOD

So really it does show the evolution of the way architectural historians were looking at themselves, and the way they thought about themselves.--

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

And now there is also a preservation group chapter. You may have been participating in that. With a regular paper called *The Forum*. But it is not an activist group. It's a national group. There is a local chapter in New York.

MR. WOOD

I know they have gotten involved in several specific issues, over time, but, appropriately, they have a different emphasis.

MRS. GOUGH

I should know this, but when was Avery founded?

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

1890. It rose to eminence, really, under Hamlin. It became *the* great library under Hamlin, in Hamlin's time. He started the Avery Periodical Index, which is still going. A vast thing. And it's in print, and, I would think, very useful for purposes like yours. It was actually put into book form under my administration. It's one of the things I really take great pleasure in looking back on.

MRS. GOUGH

Tell me something else. The School of Preservation at Columbia--

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

I'm glad you brought that up. That's another milestone, I think. That was started in the fifties, with James Marston Fitch. And of course he also wrote a history of *American Building*, as he put it. He didn't call it "American Architecture," he called it *American Building*.

MRS. GOUGH

Meaning an emphasis on vernacular architecture?

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

Including the vernacular, and the technical. Bridges, railroad stations, this whole question of typology, which Hamlin was after too, in fact, in his *Forms and Functions*. He was of course not the first. There was Julien Guadet in France, (*Elements et Theorie de l'architecture*, in 1902-1904) and others before him. But in the American context, it was highly innovative. And its impact on preservation

clear. In fact, the cast iron story is almost implied in that. This nefarious distinction between architecture and building which Ruskin makes--he said, what is literally called a railroad *shed* is "building," a church is "architecture." And we have suffered from that, and we have suffered from Gropius, on the other extreme.

MR. WOOD

Now when Fitch started--the date you mentioned, the fifties, I think I remember officially that program became certified, or whatever, in the early sixties, but did he start actually teaching--he must have started the developing course-work--

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

He came to Columbia in 1954, and the course work started. And most of my own teaching, seminars, research, and teaching, which I did soon as well, was in that program.

MRS. GOUGH

How was it that he came to Columbia? He was brought there, particularly, because of this interest?

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

I think there was the vacuum with Hamlin's departure. They wanted to have somebody teach architectural history, in the School of Architecture. This brings up another point, you know. This teaching of architectural history, beyond the traditional, the Classic orders, actually, the teaching of 19th century architecture in schools of architecture is also something that happened after 1945. And I think it also had great effect. There are now several preservation programs in other universities: a very fine one at Pennsylvania, and Cornell has one. And now this new profession of "Preservation" has come out of these preservation programs.

MRS. GOUGH

But for quite a time Columbia had the only one?

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

The first and the only one. We always called it the pilot program, and Fitch was the first to pilot it. But this was post-Hamlin.

MR. WOOD

Right, right.

MRS. GOUGH

Who was the Dean of the School of Architecture at that time?

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

Leo Arnaud. He was more of a man with the background of the Beaux-Arts, a French background, and as so many of these Deans were, a Classical enthusiast. I don't think he would have been a cast iron enthusiast, but I don't want to put words into his mouth posthumously. But I am glad that you brought up that point, too.

MR. WOOD

Columbia certainly had an influence, with that program. I mean they're really a national--I jokingly refer to it as "the Columbia Mafia" because it is really is a wonderful network of professional preservationists as well as architectural experts, and this has given a whole level of expertise, it's the first really trained generation of preservationists. And now we have reached the point where the people who actually went to the school are moving into leadership roles in the preservation movement. It's another level of evolution.

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

I have a list of books from the twenties on. Do you need them?

MRS. GOUGH

I think we should, don't you?

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

Fiske Kimball. He wrote this *Domestic Architecture of the American Colonies*. That's 1922. This all led to the great Greek Revival book. And Howard Major, *The Domestic Architecture of the Early American Republic*, 1926. Then we were really beginning to get off--I mean, I am stressing this appreciation of the American heritage. And Tallmadge, *The Story of American Architecture*, in 1927. These were good books; these were steps on the way to what we know now. And before that, as I noticed as I went through the Avery Catalogue, it was almost all about Colonial, yards and yards of books, our colonial ancestors here, our



colonial ancestors there. But then, it was a long way until we thought that Pennsylvania Station was a masterpiece too. There was Mumford's *Sticks and Stones*, in 1924, a pioneer book. Of course, Louis Mumford was a great figure. He knew Hamlin well. An extraordinary early example of consciousness of loss is this John Mead Howells, *Lost Examples of Colonial Architecture*--came out in 1931. An underestimated book. But these were milestones in awareness of American architecture.

MR. WOOD

That's interesting, because the books also were reflecting what was going on nationally: the sites that people found important were always the patriotic ones that could be used to educate the new immigrants to American ways, to what it meant to be American--the Mount Vernons. To see that reflected in the scholarly work is logical.

MRS. GOUGH

But how long do you think it takes? The Landmarks Law allows thirty years from the time a building is built before it can become a landmark. But to me it seems that for a building actually to be appreciated by another generation, it's more than thirty years; it's more like seventy-five. I mean considering what people thought of cast iron architecture--I mean, I remember Flagg writing about how unsatisfactory it was.

MR. WOOD

I think you're right, Christabel, that in the past it has taken that long. But I think now people are more conscious also of the fact that taste does change, for instance now, with some of these Michael Graves proposals, a Michael Graves type architecture--that building which some people may like, or some people don't--I think a lot of people realize that that is another stepping stone.

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

Precisely.

MR. WOOD

And should be kept as part of our record.

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

And actually, in our hearings, "In thirty years it will be a landmark"--

MR. WOOD

Keeps coming up?

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

As an architectural historian--sitting there as an architectural historian--it interests me very much, thinking, in thirty years it will be a landmark? That's a new one. So it's one to think about.

MR. WOOD

It is, because there's a growing historical sense, at the moment, I mean in people's minds. I don't know why, but people are thinking in those terms more, "Maybe it is a new one." God knows what the next new one that comes down the line will be.

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

And will the AT&T Building, about which there is no consensus, will that be called a landmark? A future Landmarks Commission will have to designate this, like the Woolworth Building?

MRS. GOUGH

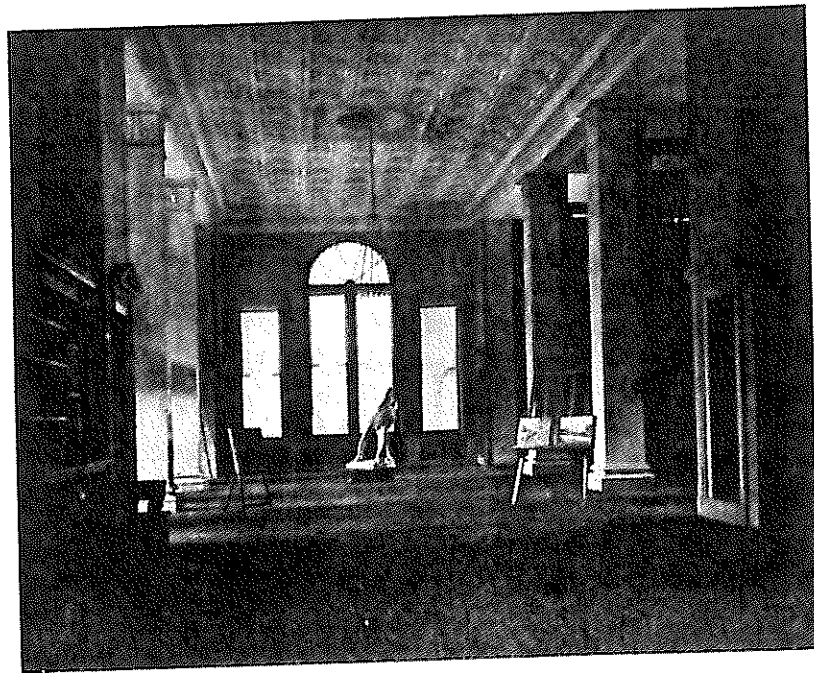
Wait and see.

COMMISSIONER PLACZEK

We are ending this with a question mark.

MR. WOOD

Always the best way.



*The reading room of Avery Architectural Library as designed by Charles Follen McKim. (Photo: Courtesy of Commissioner Placzek.)*