



**New York's Pioneer of Planning and Preservation: How George  
McAneny Reshaped Manhattan and Inspired a Movement**

By Charles Starks

The New York Preservation Archive Project

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Cover image: The New York Public Library. (1935 - 1945). New York World's Fair - Employees - George McAneny Retrieved from <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/5e66b3e8-ce49-d471-e040-e00a180654d7>

## Foreword

Who is George McAneny and why should you care about him? If you have read *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*, or *Shaping the City: New York and the Municipal Art Society*, or my book *Preserving New York: Winning the Right to Protect a City's Landmarks*, you may remember George McAneny as a recurring player in major New York City planning and preservation dramas from the late 1890s through the 1950s. However, if McAneny's name is unfamiliar to you, don't feel bad. You are in good company. George McAneny has suffered the same fate as such other significant but largely obscure historic New York civic giants as Albert S. Bard, C.C. Burlingham, and Andrew Haswell Green. Today, their contributions to the fabric of New York City remain as visible as their involvement in achieving them has become forgotten.

Even those who have heard of George McAneny are likely to think of him only in the context of one, or possibly two, of his planning and preservation accomplishments. Yet if you know him as the Borough President who tried unsuccessfully to save historic St. John's Chapel, razed in 1918 to widen Varick Street, or for his vision of a coordinated subway system, or as the victor over Robert Moses in the decade-long battle to save Castle Clinton, or as the long-serving and articulate leader of the Regional Plan Association, or as the persuasive President of the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society, then you've only seen one small piece of the complex genius who was George McAneny.

Confronted by the absence of scholarly work individually focused on McAneny, and in light of his importance to the story of preservation and planning in New York City, the New York Preservation Archive Project commissioned historian Charles Starks to focus his talents and energy to fully bring to light George McAneny's role in shaping our

City. Thanks to meticulous analysis of McAneny's own papers, probing explorations in other archival collections, and a careful combing of existing scholarship, Starks has connected the puzzle pieces and constructed the fullest picture yet of this great New Yorker. Entitled *New York's Pioneer of Planning and Preservation: How George McEnany Reshaped Manhattan and Inspired a Movement*, Starks's 157-page monograph unearths valuable details from the vaults of history and makes it accessible to present and future preservationists.

This work joins an earlier publication commissioned by the New York Preservation Archive Project, *Building and Rebuilding New York: The Radio Urbanism of Robert C. Weinberg, 1966-71* by Christopher Neville. Indeed, commissioning this type of original research is just one of the many ways that the New York Preservation Archive Project advances its mission to preserve, document, and celebrate the history of preservation. It is our passionate belief that preservation's history is an invaluable part of the preservation movement's intellectual capital. Preservation's story—which includes the life and work of George McAneny—has the ability to inspire, inform, and instruct. As funding becomes available, we hope to continue this important series of publications illuminating largely forgotten but critically important New York City civic leaders and preservationists.

If George McAneny is unknown to you, we are delighted to introduce him. If he is an old friend, you'll be surprised how much more there is to learn about him. Either way, the Archive Project is delighted to welcome you to the world of George McAneny through this new publication, which is available for reading on the NYPAP website.

Anthony C. Wood



## **Acknowledgements**

This work has come to fruition with the generous support of the New York Preservation Archive Project. I would like to personally thank NYPAP's president, Anthony C. Wood, for encouraging me to undertake a study of George McAneny, and its executive director, Matthew Coody, for providing administrative and publicity support.

The research relies on the rich archival resources that have been collected and made available to the public by institutions in the New York City region. Steve Laise, now retired from the National Park Service, generously provided access to the Service's carefully maintained archives at Fort Wadsworth and patiently entertained my questions about Federal Hall National Memorial, where he worked for many years. Archivists and librarians at the New-York Historical Society Library, the Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library of Princeton University, the Rare Book & Manuscript Library of Columbia University, the Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives, and the Manuscripts and Archives Division of the New York Public Library were unfailingly helpful.

Randall Mason also provided helpful research guidance.

Charles Starks

## **1. Introduction**

George McAneny, who likely had a more profound influence on the 20th-century built environment of New York City than any single individual except Robert Moses, today is remembered more for his individual achievements in separate fields than for the sum of his career. The numerous awards he received in life and tributes he received after his death have largely been forgotten, the plaque on the main floor of Federal Hall National Memorial on Wall Street declaring him “Pioneer in City Planning / Protector of Historic Places / Leader of a City / Friend Beyond Compare” barely glanced at by visitors. Subway historians know McAneny as Borough President of Manhattan in the 1910s, in which role he was the chief negotiator of the so-called dual contracts that built much of the city’s rapid transit network, facilitating the dispersal of population from congested lower Manhattan tenements to newly developing areas of the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens. Historic preservationists revere him for his role as Robert Moses’s antagonist in two major preservation campaigns at the Battery at Manhattan’s tip, where he led the fight to prevent Moses from marring the park with a giant bridge and then spent much of the last years of his life trying to save the park’s historic Fort Clinton from Moses, who had determined to destroy the monument. McAneny is less well remembered by city planners, but in his lifetime he was considered New York’s foremost planning advocate, and his work to institutionalize planning in the city and its region proved highly consequential both for their subsequent physical growth and for the development of the field of city planning itself. Working in the very crucible of this new profession in the early 1910s, he conceptualized transit expansion, zoning, and comprehensive planning as a holistic package of reforms that would reshape the physical fabric of the city and



**Figure 1.** Three years after George McAneny's death in 1953, a marble plaque commemorating his achievements was unveiled in Federal Hall National Memorial, which was preserved as a historic shrine largely due to his efforts. Designed by the sculptor Paulanship, the plaque was unveiled by McAneny's granddaughter, Katharine McAneny Faron, shown here with McAneny's widow, Marjorie Jacobi McAneny.

Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library. George McAneny plaque. Retrieved from <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/904dceec-a8a8-0af7-e040-e00a18066f51>

"Plaque Honors George McAneny," *The New York Times*, May 17, 1956.



**Figure 2.** In 1945, the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society created a historic preservation award named after George McAneny. The profile of McAneny was designed by Paulanship.

Image courtesy of Anthony C. Wood.

"Remarks by Rodman Gilder," May 28, 1946, George McAneny Papers, New-York Historical Society, Box 1, Folder 3.

forever resolve its congestion problem. His efforts to implement these reforms found success, though as with many such sweeping schemes, his vision was never fully realized.

Over time, a tension gradually developed between McAneny's planning and preservationist impulses, and in the last decade of his life, influenced by the Battery fights, he was drawn firmly into the preservation camp. But both before and during these fierce campaigns, his activities in the field of preservation went well beyond his well-known role in the battles with Moses. Before the late 1930s, McAneny's activities in preservation were always adjunct to, and often subsumed by, larger city-building schemes that did a great deal of damage to historic fabric. Still, early on, he helped to restore City Hall and preserve its park, and in 1914, his Committee on the City Plan took on as one of its first tasks the attempted preservation of St. John's Chapel, an early city landmark, demonstrating the possibility of a role for preservation in the centrally planned, modern city. In 1939, in the midst of the Battery Bridge controversy, he was instrumental in preserving what is now Federal Hall National Memorial, which commemorates the site of the nation's first capital. In fact, the greatest significance of McAneny's role as savior of Federal Hall and Fort Clinton was not the preservation of the sites themselves, but rather his fusion of what had heretofore been a purely local preservation movement with the national forces that ultimately created the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Near the end of his life, McAneny became the chairman of the organization that birthed the National Trust, a role he was able to play because of his leadership and the relationships he had developed with Washington figures in the Federal Hall and Castle Clinton campaigns.

In this role, he also contributed to the transition of the historic preservation movement in New York City from one concerned largely with the protection and glorification of patriotic sites of civic memory into a broader and more pervasive campaign to preserve and make visible the city's complex historic fabric. This transition required a considerable evolution in McAneny's own approach to planning and preservation. While he spent his early years as a political leader frustrated with the fetters that the American system of overlapping layers of government had placed on the municipal government's ability to develop and execute grand plans, he would later learn to skillfully manipulate the complex machinery of this system of checks and balances to thwart Robert Moses, who in some ways embodied the kind of figure that McAneny in his younger years had hoped would lead the city. By the end of his life, McAneny was encouraging preservationists to do their utmost in the cause of saving what he simply called "the old places" from the forces of change, but his final decline and death came just as the transition was taking place. It would fall to the next generation of preservationists, informed and inspired by McAneny's example and methods, to infuse the preservation movement and the places they saved with new messages and meanings relevant to the postwar world.

## **2. From Reporter–Reformer to Politician–Planner**

In the late spring of 1892, George McAneny, Jr., was an ambitious 22-year-old New York journalist with a decision to make. He had taken the *Dominion* steamer from New York to Old Point Comfort, in what is now Hampton, Virginia, where he was assigned to write up the social and philanthropic doings of high society. Old Point, as it was commonly known, was a so-called winter resort, popular with wealthy New Yorkers.

Lingering in nearby Virginia Beach, McAneny barely made his scheduled return steamer, which sailed every two days. Arriving home, he found a telegram from Charles Watson, a man active in reform circles of New York City politics. The telegram inquired whether McAneny would be interested in becoming the assistant secretary of the National Civil Service Reform League—and if he wanted it, he would need to get himself on a train to the league’s conference in Baltimore that very afternoon. McAneny made it to the station on time and gave up his seven-year-old newspaper career to “hitch his wagon to the star of reform,” as an admiring editorialist would write years later.<sup>1</sup> In 1909, this reporter-turned-reformer, a graduate of Jersey City High School who had never attended college, would be swept into public office as Borough President of Manhattan—a position that, at the time, was almost equivalent in power to that of the mayor of New York. In that office, he would propel a reengineering of the urban landscape, succeeding in attempts to decongest and rationalize the chaotic city where reformers had been scheming and failing for years.

In the early 1890s, multiple “stars of reform” were beginning to shine brightly. Civil service reform was one of the most important reform movements of the day, but it was not a new cause. After the Civil War and the seeming fulfillment of their ideal, younger abolitionists who remained active in politics had begun to search for new causes; among them was reform of the patronage system that had come to control government employment. Men like George William Curtis, the founder of the National Civil Service Reform League, and Carl Schurz, his German-American successor, both of whom had

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<sup>1</sup> “The Reminiscences of George McAneny,” 1949, Columbia University Center for Oral History; “His Friends Always Used to Say That George McAneny’s Luck Is of That ...,” 1909, Box 197, George McAneny Papers, Princeton University.

been keen abolitionists and radical delegates to the Republican National Convention of 1860 that nominated Abraham Lincoln, sought to end the system of patronage that they felt was bloating and distorting the mission of the federal government. While Curtis founded the National Civil Service Reform League and campaigned against patronage in the pages of the magazines he edited, *Harper's Weekly* and *Harper's Monthly*, Schurz became a senator from Missouri and then secretary of the interior in the administration of Rutherford B. Hayes, in which role he implemented the first federal civil-service laws, though he was stymied in his efforts to expand them to other departments.<sup>2</sup> Both men, especially Schurz, would play key roles in McAneny's ascendancy in the 1890s.

It is ironic that civil service reform, which was intended to help shrink the bloated patronage system, eventually became linked with the expansion of government and bureaucracy. But broader changes were occurring in American society as government and business alike were becoming larger in scale and scope, and the initial impetus for reform lost its relevance. The early reformers like Schultz had seen the introduction of a merit-based system as a bulwark against government excess impinging on the liberal laissez-faire system and individual freedom; the hope among some of the more utopian of these reformers, was that government would eventually wither away, a view which most famously found expression in Edward Bellamy's 1887 utopian novel *Looking Backward*. But as the nation's institutions and the challenges of their management grew larger toward the end of the century, it increasingly seemed that, far from withering, centralized control was needed more than ever to cope with new economic and social arrangements.

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<sup>2</sup> Gordon Milne, *George William Curtis & the Genteel Tradition* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1956), 163–66; Hans L. Trefousse, *Carl Schurz: A Biography* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 240–1.

It turned out that a professionalized civil service was made to order for the task.

Beginning in the 1890s, the movement toward professionalism and control would be especially important in cities, which were growing wildly with rapid immigration and becoming more important to the nation's economic and social life than ever before. Both in and out of government, a professional middle class of bureaucrats and administrators emerged to shape urban social and economic institutions and the physical landscape of cities.<sup>3</sup>

In New York, among the reformers' goals were to purify the city of vices (in particular, ignorance and slovenliness among the general population, and corruption and waste among machine politicians and their clients) and engineer a modern, efficient and bureaucratic metropolis. Politically, to achieve these ends, reformers felt it would be necessary to drive Tammany Hall, the Democratic Party machine, from power and thoroughly repudiate the city's degenerate, graft-riven 19th-century polity. All too frequently finding themselves locked out of public office by the tenacity of the machine system as well as their own political missteps, these reformers developed alternative nodes of political activity: a network of civic associations that would act as hybrid political-social clubs to attract "a body of men of similar tastes and views and who have capability for the sort of companionship which a club is calculated to afford," in the words of one City Club president. The members of these clubs would be business and professional men, not limited to the old elite. Women, too, joined parallel organizations

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<sup>3</sup> For perspectives on the evolution of the reform movement, see Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1967); Michael E. McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003).



such as the Women's Municipal League. Organizations with related motives, such as settlement houses, also formed alliances with the good-government clubs.<sup>4</sup>

It was into this rapidly evolving world of reform that George McAneny Jr. was propelled when he accepted the position as assistant secretary of William Curtis's National Civil Service Reform League. It is likely that McAneny was offered the job after he came to the attention of Curtis, whose *Harper's Weekly* had hired McAneny as a contributor in 1891. However, three months after McAneny met Curtis in Baltimore and accepted the secretarial position, Curtis died. His successor as chairman was Carl Schurz, under whom McAneny continued at the League for nine years. McAneny must have made an impression on Schurz, whom he would later describe as "a sort of godfather of mine."<sup>5</sup> He began to spend time at Schurz's summer home at Bolton Landing on Lake George in upstate New York, where he mingled with other notable New York families—among them Abraham and Mary Putnam Jacobi, a well-known and respected husband-and-wife pair of New York City doctors who were pioneers of pediatric medicine in tenement neighborhoods. Jacobi, born to a German Jewish family, had been a comrade of Schurz when the two were involved in a revolutionary movement in Germany; both eventually fled separately to the United States and remained friends. McAneny married the Jacobis' daughter, Marjorie, in 1899, thereby adding a prominent family connection to his reform credentials.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Skolnik, "Civic Group Progressivism in New York City," *New York History* 51, no. 4 (July 1, 1970): 410–39.

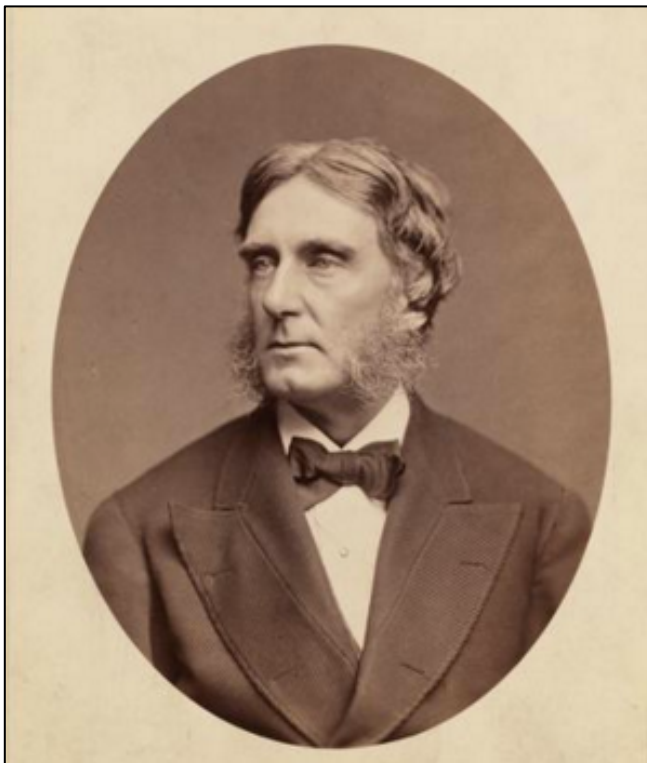
<sup>5</sup> "The Reminiscences of George McAneny," 19.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Derrick, *Tunneling to the Future: The Story of the Great Subway Expansion That Saved New York* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 120–22.



**Figure 3.** George McAneny (1869-1953) probably posed for this portrait in the first decade of the 20th century.

Image source: Library of Congress



**Figure 4.** George William Curtis (1824-1892), shown here just before the Civil War, was the editor of *Harper's Weekly* who sought McAneny for secretary of the Civil Service Reform League.

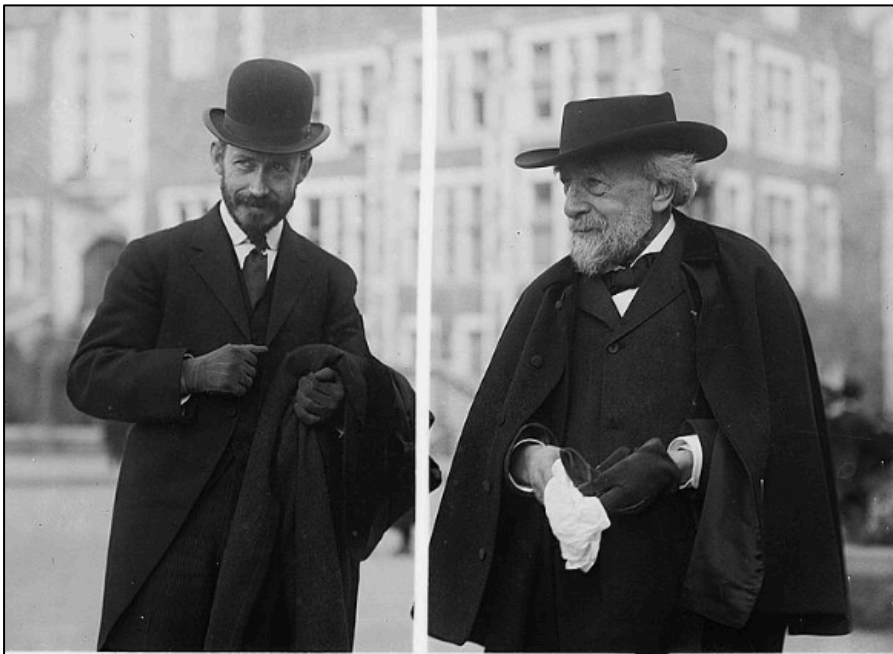
From the collection of the Museum of the City of New York. Warren's Portraits, ca. 1860.

[http://collections.mcny.org/Collection/\[George%20William%20Curtis.\]-24UPN4NQ730.html](http://collections.mcny.org/Collection/[George%20William%20Curtis.]-24UPN4NQ730.html)



**Figure 5.** Carl Schurz (1829-1906), McAneny's mentor in the 1890s, here poses for a portrait in his younger years. Before devoting himself to civil service reform, Schurz served as a civil war general, senator from Missouri, and federal cabinet secretary.

Image source: Library of Congress



**Figure 6.** George McAneny, left, is shown here with his father-in-law, the pediatrician Abraham Jacobi (1830-1919), on the campus of the City College of New York.

Image source: Library of Congress

Although McAneny lacked a college education, which even in the late 1800s was unusual for a New York reformer, it would be an exaggeration to suggest that he arose from either poverty or utter obscurity, as some commentators have suggested.<sup>7</sup> The eldest male child in his family, George Jr. was born in 1869 in Greenville, New Jersey, which today is a hardscrabble, industrial neighborhood of Jersey City, but in the mid 19th century, before it was invaded by railroads, was an independent town that provided a bucolic, semi-rural residential environment. McAneny's father, George Sr., had himself had been a reporter for New York dailies and edited various newspapers in the Jersey City area. He was later the town clerk of Greenville, was given a sinecure with the Jersey City government after the town was annexed by the city in 1871, and served for many years as the president of the local chapter of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. George Jr.'s mother, Katherine Dillaway McAneny, seems to have been active in organizing society and charitable events. When he died in 1892, George Sr. was remembered in multiple lengthy obituaries in local newspapers—an unlikely tribute for a supposedly impoverished man.<sup>8</sup> In fact, on the small stage of Jersey City, George Sr. had obtained moderate success in many of the activities—newspaper, municipal, and charity work—in which George Jr. would distinguish himself on the much bigger stage across the Hudson. It was likely with his father's help that McAneny began reporting for local Jersey City newspapers upon graduating from Jersey City High School in 1885 (he

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Caro calls him “a poor boy from Jersey City who left school at the age of fifteen,” while Gregory Gilmartin says he was “born poor” and “began his working life as a barefoot boy selling newspapers.” Robert A Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Knopf, 1974), 654; Gregory Gilmartin, *Shaping the City: New York and the Municipal Art Society* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1995), 181.

<sup>8</sup> A collection of obituaries and other articles about George Sr. can be found in the George McAneny Papers at Princeton University. Typical is “George McAneny Dead: Peaceful but Unexpected End of a Busy Life,” December 28, 1892, Box 197, George McAneny Papers, Princeton University.

composed the class song), and he soon began to write for New York City papers as well.<sup>9</sup> As a journalist, McAneny apparently fit into high society with ease, as many of his assignments sent him to summer and winter resorts around the eastern United States to report on the goings-on of the wealthy. Whether he pursued a career as a reporter rather than going to college for financial or academic reasons or simply out of personal desire is not known. Regardless, when his father died after a brief illness, George Jr., then 23, began to assume responsibilities for the family finances.<sup>10</sup>

Upon leaving the newspaper world, McAneny served as secretary of the National Civil Service Reform League until 1902, distinguishing himself sufficiently that he was tapped to join Mayor Seth Low's reform administration as the chairman of the city's Civil Service Commission. Illness soon forced him to step down from that role, and instead he began working in the office of Edward M. Shepard, a prominent lawyer. Under Shepard, McAneny was chiefly a lobbyist for the Pennsylvania Railroad, which was seeking approval from the New York State Legislature for its plan to build Penn Station, a project of enormous scope that included a series of connecting railways under the Hudson and East rivers and within Queens, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. The illness must have been short-lived, because his new job began sending him regularly to both the Pennsylvania's headquarters in Philadelphia and to the state capital in Albany, where he pressed the railroad's case to legislators. The political connections that McAneny had

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<sup>9</sup> Clippings of his articles can be found in the George McAneny Papers at Princeton University.

<sup>10</sup> McAneny frequently was short of money for many years. He paid tuition for his younger brother, Harold, who attended boarding school in Massachusetts and then Hamilton College in the first decade of the 1900s. Another brother attended Columbia University in the 1890s.

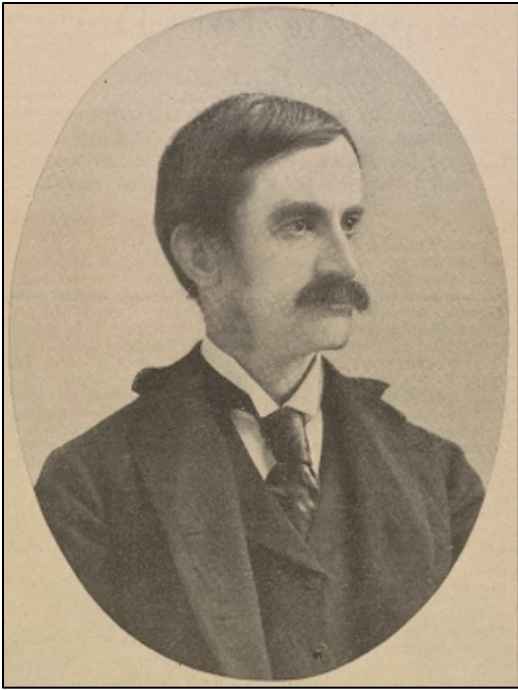
made in his years as a lobbyist for civil service reform undoubtedly served him well as he worked on the railroad's behalf.<sup>11</sup>

Although McAneny intended to become a lawyer, at one point even applying to take the bar exam, he left Shepard's office in 1906 to devote himself fully to the promising world of good-government advocacy. Perhaps he sought a more direct opportunity to put into practice what he later called the "ideas about city planning" he had obtained while working for Shepard and the railroad; he was already a member of such organizations as the City Club and the Municipal Art Society. Moreover, despite having abruptly left public service in 1902, during his lobbying interlude McAneny had evidently retained and even enhanced his prominence among urban reformers. Having risen in status above the secretarial positions he had formerly occupied, he now became president of the City Club, already known as a venerable and effective organization 14 years after its founding. While McAneny held the presidency, the City Club's work focused on some of those issues that McAneny would make the primary concentration of his term in office: transit, streets, and governmental efficiency. This work also indirectly paved the way for the 1909 election of a slate of reformers, including McAneny, to high city offices; under McAneny's direction, the club worked together with other civic organizations to investigate and expose corruption involving the borough president of Manhattan, John Ahearn, and the societies argued forcefully for his resignation. Ahearn was removed from office in 1908, the year before McAneny ran for the seat.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> "The Reminiscences of George McAneny"; "George M'Aneny, 83, Dead in Princeton: Zoning and Transit Expert Was City Controller, President of Manhattan Borough," *The New York Times*, July 30, 1953.

<sup>12</sup> "City Club Asks Ahearn's Removal," *The New York Times*, July 26, 1907; "Civic Clubs Plan to Oust Ahearn," *The New York Times*, December 24, 1907; Gilmartin, *Shaping the City*, 110–11.



**Figure 7.** Edward M. Shepard was a prominent New York City lawyer who employed McAneny in the early 1900s. Shepard ran as the Democratic (Tammany Hall) candidate for mayor in 1901, but was defeated by Republican Seth Low. The following year, McAneny left a position to which he had been appointed by Low to work in Shepard's office. Although nominally a Democrat, McAneny, like many in his circle, considered political party identity unimportant.

The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Print Collection, The New York Public Library. (1901). *Edward M. Shepard*, from a photograph by Pearsall, Brooklyn. Retrieved from <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/b16926af-3f72-6b2f-e040-e00a1806531a>



**Figure 8.** Excavation work proceeds for Penn Station in Manhattan, 1908. The station was only one component of a massive construction program that impacted four boroughs of New York City. It included tunnels under the Hudson and East rivers, a bridge connecting Queens to the Bronx, and a railroad spur into Brooklyn. Shepard's office handled legal and political work for the railroad as it prepared to undertake this project, an assignment that frequently sent McAneny to Albany and Philadelphia.

Image source: Library of Congress

In 1907, the City Club devoted significant effort to organizing a conference on Manhattan's street conditions, in which it collaborated with such diverse groups as automobile clubs, settlement houses, and hospitals. The conference, which had a strong public health focus, largely dealt with improving the cleanliness of streets and the need to educate citizens on the importance of hygiene. But the club also had larger concerns. In 1908, as part of the exhibition of the Committee on Congestion of Population, the City Club presented an exhibit emphasizing the need for rapid transit and land use regulation as part of a coordinated system of city planning that would decongest the central city and develop the outer boroughs. This so-called "congestion show," which set the stage for a bigger conference in Washington, D.C., the following year, was a milestone in the establishment of the modern field of city planning in the United States. The Club also worked on developing methods of financing the new subways during this time—a problem that McAneny would handle directly as borough president.<sup>13</sup> By 1909, McAneny had come far from his early background in reporting and civil service reform. He was well prepared to begin playing an active role in the reshaping of New York City. In so doing, he would exert his influence, not only on the growth of New York City, but on the development of the fields of preservation and planning in the United States.

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<sup>13</sup> "Conference Committee on Street Conditions," May 13, 1907, Box 3, Folder 9, City Club Papers, New York Public Library Manuscripts and Archives; "The City Club of New York: A Social Club with a Civic Purpose," n.d., Box 3, Folder 9, City Club Papers, New York Public Library Manuscripts and Archives; Derrick, *Tunneling to the Future*, 113; "Minutes of City Club Board of Trustees," February 24, 1909, Box 112, George McAneny Papers, Princeton University.



### **3. Preservation and Planning in the Late 19th- and Early 20th-Century America**

Historic preservation started to become a serious endeavor in the United States shortly after the country's independence, but in the 19th century it largely lacked philosophical underpinnings, professional standards, or unifying national or regional movements. Instead, a number of isolated preservation campaigns emerged, led by amateur historians and antiquarians, socialites, and determined zealots, who focused on saving works of architecture significant to Revolutionary and pre-Revolutionary history. The problem that has always faced preservation campaigns in the throwaway culture of America—how to find uses for historic buildings deemed obsolete mere decades after being constructed—haunted these early campaigns; when buildings were successfully saved, they were generally turned into museums, and there was little notion of what much later would come to be called adaptive reuse. Sometimes, these early preservationists had to content themselves with salvaging relics, such as doors or windows, which might be added to the collection of a local historical society.<sup>14</sup>

Sometimes state officials could be roused to appropriate funds for the acquisition of a significant site, such as Hasbrouck Hall in Newburgh, New York, but this was not typical in laissez-faire 19th-century America. Instead, preservationists had to drum up funds through subscription campaigns. While these often failed, a transformative success was recorded at Mount Vernon in Virginia, where, on the brink of the Civil War, Ann Pamela Cunningham led an association that raised the astronomical sum of \$200,000 to

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<sup>14</sup> Charles B. Hosmer, *Presence of the Past: A History of the Preservation Movement in the United States Before Williamsburg* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1965), 21–22, 29–40.

purchase the estate from a descendant of George Washington.<sup>15</sup> Apart from campaigns to save treasured sites, preservation also occurred as an adjunct of other activities during this period; significantly, the federal War Department had designated and was maintaining a number of historic battlefields and memorials by 1890.<sup>16</sup>

As a young newspaper reporter, George McAneny bore witness on at least one occasion to the 19th-century attitude toward preservation in his home place, the Greenville section of Jersey City. In 1891, he reported an article for the *New York Herald*, which was reprinted in the *Bayonne Times*, on an old mansion called Retirement Hall that had been built on the New Jersey banks of New York Harbor in the mid-1700s by a wealthy privateer named Tom Brown, who married a New York woman, Mary Ten Eyck, from an old Knickerbocker family. “No manor house in Jersey colony or state was so widely known or so closely connected with local history,” McAneny wrote of the mansion. Nevertheless, “it stands on the strip of shore front lately bought by the Pennsylvania Railroad. Improvements are coming and it must make way.” According to McAneny’s account, a few years prior to being purchased by the railroad, the mansion, having fallen into disrepair in the mid-1800s, had been briefly restored as a personal residence by A. J. Hudspeth, the speaker of the New Jersey Assembly.<sup>17</sup> Once acquired by the railroad, the home’s fate was sealed, and there is no record of a campaign to save it. Still, McAneny’s story, illustrated with a drawing of the structure, provided a sort of a

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 42–50.

<sup>16</sup> Barry Mackintosh, *The National Parks: Shaping the System*, 3rd ed. (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 2005).

<sup>17</sup> George McAneny, “A Bit of Greenville History: The Story Told of Old ‘Retirement Hall’ Down on the Shore of the Bay,” *The Bayonne Times*, February 26, 1891, Box 145, George McAneny Papers, Princeton University.

memorial for the building. He would later claim that the Retirement Hall assignment was his first venture into the preservation field.<sup>18</sup>

In the late 19th century, the principal cause around which McAneny would build his political reputation, city planning, was also yet to emerge as a coherent field of endeavor in America. Unlike preservation, the design of cities had long been a central concern of architects. But in the early days of the American republic, long-term planning according to architectural principles was difficult to sustain, even in the national capital at Washington. Even the massive expansions of the nation's great cities, such as New York, Philadelphia, and Boston, were laid out largely by surveyors acting at the behest of landowners or government agencies, who favored simple gridiron schemes to facilitate rapid land development.<sup>19</sup> As the cities exploded in size and wealth, the social, practical, and aesthetic shortcomings of the ubiquitous gridiron became apparent. Beginning in midcentury, attempts were made to appropriate for new city districts the design vocabulary of large urban parks. In 1860, New York City commissioned Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, designers of Central Park, to lay out the blocks of Upper Manhattan in a picturesque manner. Although their plan never came to fruition, Andrew Haswell Green's Central Park Commission was subsequently commissioned to design a street network incorporating parkways and promenades for the district.<sup>20</sup>

As the 19th century progressed, a separate so-called municipal improvement movement emerged, emphasizing order, cleanliness, and beauty in the urban

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<sup>18</sup> "The Reminiscences of George McAneny," 67–68.

<sup>19</sup> Many of these early plans have been collected in John Reps, *The Making of Urban America: A History of City Planning in the United States* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965).

<sup>20</sup> Virginia Tuttle Clayton, "The Hudson River Villas of Upper Manhattan: Rediscovered Maps and Plans," *Journal of Garden History* 12, no. 4 (1992): 269–97; Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 924.

environment. The crusaders for municipal improvement, often women's organizations, railed against such ills of the industrial city as billboards, smoke, garbage in the streets, and unhygienic behavior, and advocated for beautification projects such as street trees, flower gardens, and street cleaning. Where Olmsted and Vaux regarded cities warily and cast their large parks, wide boulevards, and leafy suburban enclaves as spaces of escape that could restore urban dwellers' (or commuters') health and morality, the champions of municipal improvement believed that the quotidian environments of the cities themselves could be upgraded to uplift citizens without the necessity of a long journey to a park.<sup>21</sup>

Although the two movements were ideologically at odds, cities borrowed from both, and by the end of the 1890s they had blended into a distinct mode of planning that became known as the City Beautiful. While the term suggests an overriding concern with beautification and embellishment, the ideology it represented was in fact very complex and nuanced, and by the 1910s it had come to be strongly associated with efficiency. The strands of thinking that formed the City Beautiful began to coalesce in the design of the so-called White City of the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago.<sup>22</sup> This Potemkin "city," set on a lagoon in an Olmsted-designed network of parks and boulevards, provided an extraordinary vision of the possibility for the comprehensive physical redevelopment and sanitary operation of American cities on a large scale. Its chief planner, Daniel Burnham, also added a distinct aesthetic element to the mix: rejecting cramped Victorianism, the White City's heroic neoclassical architecture was designed by notables such as the New York architect Charles McKim and embellished with artworks

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<sup>21</sup> William H. Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989), 38–45.

<sup>22</sup> Actually, many of the buildings of the White City were colored, but this detail has been obscured by the monochrome photographs of the exhibition.

and murals by leading sculptors and painters. In the same year, the architect Richard Morris Hunt, the first American to attend the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, became the first president of the Municipal Art Society in New York, which would strive to institutionalize the collaboration between artists and architects that had been so successful at the exposition. A network of these societies emerged in cities throughout the East, lending an artistic flourish to the emerging City Beautiful. In the early 1900s, a multitude of City Beautiful-inspired comprehensive plans were prepared for American cities, most notably the 1903 McMillan Plan for Washington, D.C., and the 1909 Plan of Chicago, both of which were led by Burnham and other architects who had been instrumental in designing the White City. These plans sought to impose a metropolitan-scale order that would relieve slum congestion, facilitate commerce, and uplift the citizenry.<sup>23</sup>

Several plans were also drawn up for New York City during this time, although the City Beautiful ideal of comprehensive, artistic replanning never found the success in New York that it did in Washington or Chicago. Still, even before the 1890s, New York City had already begun to redevelop its central slum districts, which were uncomfortably close to City Hall and the downtown business district, along lines that would be recognizable to City Beautiful planners. In 1889, following furious lobbying by anti-tenement crusader Jacob Riis, the notorious Five Points slum was partially cleared for a park, and other parks were constructed nearby over the next few years.<sup>24</sup> These halting steps would be followed with more expansive schemes for boulevards and plazas, most of

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<sup>23</sup> Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement*, 53–70.

<sup>24</sup> Max Page, *The Creative Destruction of Manhattan, 1900-1940* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 85.



**Figure 9.** Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted conceived Central Park as an anti-urban recreation ground in which city dwellers could breathe freely in a green, undulating landscape, as suggested in this Currier & Ives lithograph. Its many driving paths helped attract upper-class support for the tax revenue needed to build the park. Those of more modest means could use the pedestrian walks, although for many slum dwellers, the large park was far from home and difficult to reach on a regular basis.

Image source: Library of Congress



**Figure 10.** The municipal improvement movement championed beautification within existing city neighborhoods, including the provision of smaller parks within deprived areas. Mulberry Bend Park, shown here, was built in the 1890s on land near City Hall that had been occupied by slums. However, the razed housing was not replaced.

Image source: Library of Congress



**Figure 11.** The 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, centered on the so-called White City of classically arranged beaux-arts buildings, many designed by prominent New York architects, emphasized sanitation, order, and cleanliness. The fair presaged an era in which reformers dreamed that America's cities could be re-planned on a large-scale basis to be both beautiful and functional.

Image source: Library of Congress



which were never built. With the notion of comprehensive planning in its infancy and preservation hardly a force at all, the fate of historic buildings and neighborhoods—and the people living in them—was generally not considered in such proposals.

The real planners of cities in the 1800s, and of New York until as late as 1910, were private interests, and no private interest had greater influence on the shaping of cities than the railroads. In New York City and its suburbs, elevated railroads were built to connect dense districts of Brooklyn and what would later become the Bronx with downtown Manhattan, while a vast network of street railways served lower-density areas. By enabling the concentration of population around transit stations, the high-capacity elevated lines facilitated congestion in outlying districts, which reformers feared would come to resemble the inner-city slums.<sup>25</sup> Although the streets of some of the new districts were laid out in a picturesque fashion, for the most part the railroad-driven expansion was not accompanied by careful planning, and little consideration was given to historic buildings. Just as Retirement Hall was doomed by the expansion of the Pennsylvania Railroad in Jersey City, so too were the mansions, farmhouses, and cottages of the suburban villages in Upper Manhattan, the Bronx, and Brooklyn destined for oblivion.

One such structure, which had once been a residence of Edgar Allen Poe, became the subject of an improbable preservation campaign. Standing on Kingsbridge Road within walking distance of train stations offering rapid transport to Manhattan, the cottage, which had become a noted tourist attraction, was threatened with demolition after a subscription campaign to save it failed. Although relocated by a sympathetic property owner when the road was widened in the 1890s, it was then overshadowed by

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<sup>25</sup> Derrick, *Tunneling to the Future*, 114–15.

tall apartment buildings in the following decade before finally being moved into a nearby city park in 1913.<sup>26</sup> The Poe cottage, a humble work of vernacular architecture notable only for its association with the poet, was a singular case. The major preservation causes that animated New York City activists around this time were largely buildings that had associations with the time of the Founding Fathers: the Morris-Jumel Mansion, where Washington stayed; Fraunces Tavern, where he gave a farewell address to his officers; Hamilton Grange, the residence of Alexander Hamilton; and City Hall. Contrary to the preservation ideology that would develop later in the 20th century, which emphasized urban context and layered history, one of the primary concerns of preservation activists of the day was to remove these buildings from the complex urban environment that had grown up around them over the 19th century and place them on a pedestal in isolated settings where they could be appreciated as relics of a heroic past era.<sup>27</sup>

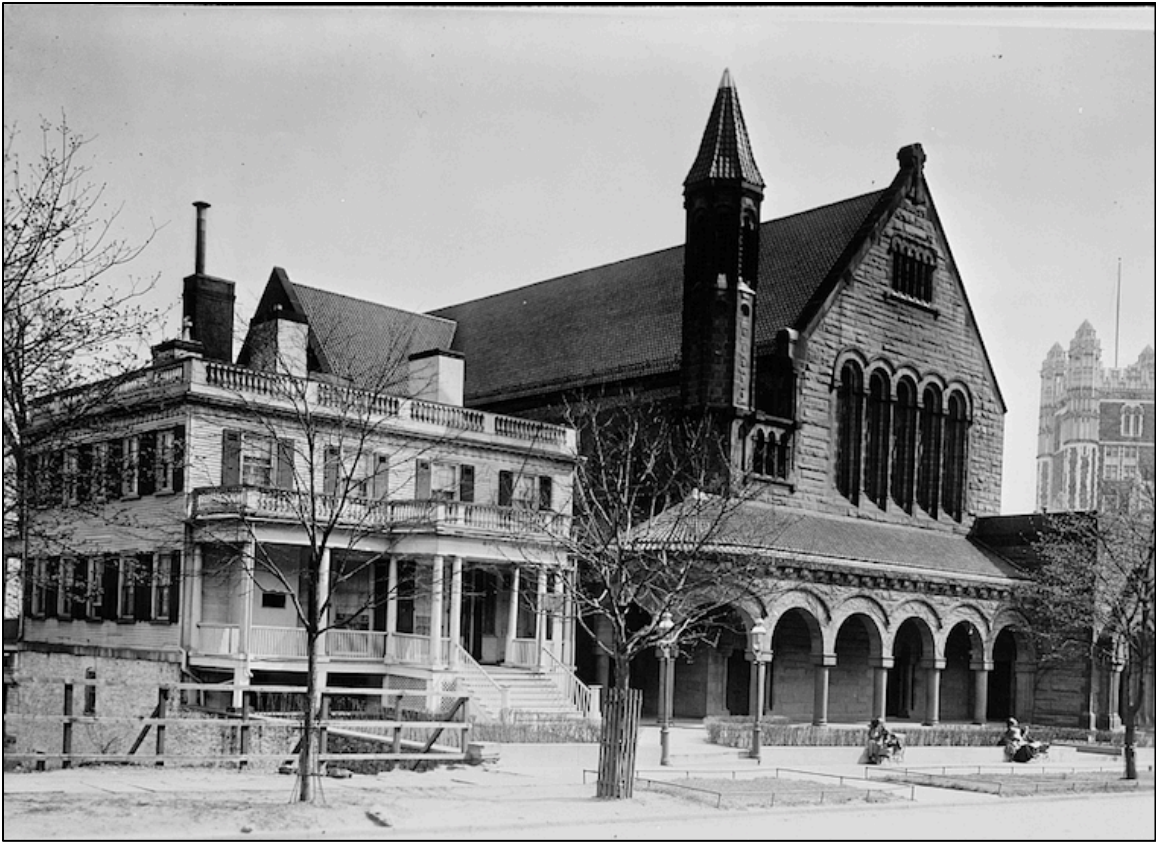
It was not merely associations with great men or great events, but also related architectural values that drove these preservation campaigns. In 1893, the City Club resolved

“That the city authorities are earnestly requested on no account to permit the destruction of the present City Hall, not only because of its historical associations, but also because it

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<sup>26</sup> “To Save Poe’s Home: The New-York Shakespeare Society Has the Project in Charge,” *The New York Times*, September 23, 1895; Appleton Morgan, “History of the Poe Park in the Bronx,” *The New York Times*, September 3, 1905; “Poe’s King’s Bridge Road Cottage,” *The New York Times*, September 1, 1901; “Would Buy Poe House: Literary Shrine Now Obscured by Tall Apartments in the Bronx,” *New York Times*, December 1, 1912; Orville G. Victor, “The Poe Cottage: Reasons for Its Removal to the Park Opposite,” *The New-York Tribune*, January 10, 1913.

<sup>27</sup> Max Page and Randall Mason, “Introduction: Rethinking the Roots of the Historic Preservation Movement,” in *Giving Preservation a History: Histories of Historic Preservation in the United States*, ed. Max Page and Randall Mason (New York: Routledge, 2004).



**Figure 12.** Hamilton Grange (left) was typical of the buildings with which New York's preservation activists concerned themselves in the early 1900s. The building, originally a farmhouse, was a century old, designed by a notable architect (John McComb), of substantial size and an identifiable architectural style, and closely associated with a Founding Father. The American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society sought to remove the home from the property of a church, where it had been moved in 1889, and place it on a larger site where it could stand apart from the urban scene.

Image source: Library of Congress



**Figure 13.** The diminutive Edgar Allen Poe Cottage (left), which had been hemmed in by suburban development in the Bronx, became the subject of an unlikely preservation campaign. After private preservation efforts failed, it was eventually moved to a park by the city government and operated as a museum.

Image source: Library of Congress

is one of the most beautiful and celebrated architectural monuments of our city and country.”<sup>28</sup>

The City Club’s expression of its rationale for desiring to save City Hall anticipated subsequent attempts by noted preservationists like Edward Hagaman Hall, president of the New York-centric American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society, and the Bostonian William Sumner Appleton, founder of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, to develop and apply theories of preservation. The position championed by Appleton was that a historic building could be valued solely for reasons having to do with the aesthetics, style, and provenance of its architecture. Far ahead of his time, Appleton developed a set of architectural criteria to be applied to houses he sought to preserve. To Hall, however, historical values were distinct from architectural values. He emphasized that an old building or place could be treasured for its “use-value,” that is, its associations with past events that had happened there or people who had spent time there, regardless of the quality of its architecture. He also suggested that some buildings could be worth saving simply because they were old; this was called “time-value.”<sup>29</sup> Hall made use of these concepts to judge the worthiness of individual buildings proposed for preservation. Notably, in the 1910s, he claimed that the Branch Bank of the United States on Wall Street, dating to 1822, was neither old enough nor historical enough to merit preserving.<sup>30</sup> (Other preservationists disagreed, and the Federal-style façade of the building was saved and eventually installed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.) Not until the regional preservation organizations came under the influence of the centralizing

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<sup>28</sup> “Save the City Hall!” (City Club, n.d.), Box 110, George McAneny Papers, Princeton University.

<sup>29</sup> Randall Mason, *The Once and Future New York: Historic Preservation and the Modern City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 93n94; Hosmer, *Presence of the Past*, 261–63.

<sup>30</sup> “No Use for Front of Assay Office,” *New-York Tribune*, January 9, 1915; Hosmer, *Presence of the Past*, 262.

tendencies of the federal government in the aftermath of the New Deal—a series of events in which McAneny played a central role—would they coalesce into a national movement and spawn a new, professionalized form of preservation.

While preservation was undergoing a gradual evolution in the early 20th century, the modern profession of city planning in the United States emerged almost fully formed out of a series of conferences on city planning and congestion of population held from 1908 to 1910. These conferences, though initiated by the social reformers Florence Kelley and Mary Simkhovitch, quickly became dominated by the architecture, engineering, and business interests that had heretofore championed the City Beautiful.<sup>31</sup> The shapers of the new field, led by Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., envisioned city planning as playing a coordinating role between the various actors shaping the urban landscape, including civil engineers, property developers, architects, and social scientists. By conceiving an overall framework for planning and serving as a clearinghouse for knowledge and ideas gleaned from across the nation and abroad, the conferences set the stage for the programs of comprehensive planning and zoning that would become widespread in the following two decades.<sup>32</sup> As president of the City Club, McAneny agreed to preside at one of the meetings, and, as has been mentioned, his club contributed

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<sup>31</sup> The term “City Beautiful” remained in McAneny’s vocabulary for many years after the watershed conferences of the early teens set city planning in a new direction. At times, he claimed the mantle of the City Beautiful for his purportedly scientific methods of planning, but he also disparaged its focus on “beauty” or aesthetics as a peripheral concern. In 1914, McAneny told a group of New Jersey mayors: “It is not the city beautiful we are thinking about. It is the city practical.” In 1930, he wrote that although it was “not the basic purpose of planning, ... [t]he one sure path to the ‘City Beautiful’ is that which begins with a definite and scientifically determined program which can be consistently developed in a practical and orderly manner.” “McAneny Tells City Planners of Mistakes of Past,” *The Jersey Journal*, January 31, 1914, Box 1, George McAneny Papers, Princeton University; George McAneny, “Beauty in the Regional Plan,” *Bulletin of the Municipal Art Society of New York*, January 1930.

<sup>32</sup> Jon A. Peterson, “The Birth of Organized City Planning in the United States, 1909–1910,” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 75, no. 2 (March 27, 2009): 123–33.

an exhibit on mass transit to the 1908 conference in New York.<sup>33</sup> Chronologically, the birth of the new field was aligned almost perfectly with the ascent of McAneny and his fellow reformers to the pinnacle of power in New York City politics. For a brief few years, McAneny and his colleagues would shape the practice of city planning as they sought to enshrine it as a core governmental function of the nation's largest city. However, they lost power before planning could be fully entrenched locally, and McAneny would repeatedly return to this unfinished task in a variety of public and private positions in the 1920s and 1930s, most significantly as the president of the Regional Plan Association, the original aim of which was to implement a private plan that had been created in response to the failure of the city government to engage in planning.

He began as Manhattan borough president, an office to which he was elected on a slate of so-called Fusionists in 1909. Seeking to drive Tammany Hall, the patronage-driven Democratic machine, out of office, a group of reformers who were less attached to party identity than to reform ideology formed a multi-party "fusion" slate, nominated by the Republicans, against the Tammany candidates for the city's elected public offices that year. McAneny, technically a Democrat, was on this ticket, at the top of which were were Otto Bannard, a Republican, for mayor; John Purroy Mitchel, a Democrat, for president of the Board of Aldermen; and William Prendergast, a Republican, for comptroller. Although Bannard lost to Tammany's William Gaynor, who would prove to be quite independent-minded himself, the other Fusionist candidates won. McAneny, Prendergast,

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<sup>33</sup> Benjamin Marsh to George McAneny, March 20, 1908, Box 113, George McAneny Papers, Princeton University; Derrick, *Tunneling to the Future*, 113–15.

and Mitchel would be elected again in 1913, with Mitchel as mayor, Prendergast remaining comptroller, and McAneny as president of the Board of Aldermen.<sup>34</sup>

Today, the five borough presidencies of New York City government are chiefly bully pulpits, but when George McAneny was elected borough president of Manhattan, the offices, especially his, held substantial power. In 1910, New Yorkers were not yet accustomed to thinking of the newly consolidated city as a unitary municipal organism; twelve years after the merger, its mastermind Andrew Haswell Green already felled (in a case of mistaken identity) by an assassin's bullet, the city's governance was in thrall to what was proudly called borough autonomy. The major municipal functions of building code enforcement and many public works, including street construction and maintenance, fell under the purview of the borough presidents, not the mayor. Further, the borough presidents had equal representation with the mayor on the city's powerful Board of Estimate, which had to approve all appropriations and debt issues; the city's legislative branch, the Board of Aldermen, was regarded as a marginal actor in municipal government, largely consumed by trivialities and patronage. Then, too, to an extent that is difficult for 21st-century New Yorkers to conceive, in the first decade of the 20th century Manhattan really was "the city"; Brooklyn still held a strongly separate identity, and although urban expansion was proceeding rapidly, much of Greater New York was still a semirural and suburban mix of villages, farms, forest, and marsh. Under these circumstances, the Manhattan borough presidency was nearly equal in status to the mayoral office. It followed that a strong borough president could exercise quasi-mayoral

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<sup>34</sup> Derrick, *Tunneling to the Future*, 86–87; "The Reminiscences of George McAneny," 5, 60.

power, particularly in the area of public works, which the rapidly growing city desperately needed on a large scale.

Upon taking office, McAneny had to quickly transform himself from an outside critic and advocate of government efforts to a political actor and leader. He was well prepared, as the Citizens' Union, a good-government association that cooperated with the City Club, had just founded the Bureau of Municipal Research, which, after the election of McAneny and other reformers, would have unprecedented access to and influence on the internal workings of government operations. McAneny and his staff set the BMR to work analyzing the efficiency of Borough government operations; soon enough, he would begin laying off bathhouse workers and reorganizing street cleaning operations. But McAneny had more expansive ideas about reshaping the city than simply streamlining government operations and rooting out patronage. His years in railroad work had, he said, implanted ideas in his mind about what was coming to be called city planning.<sup>35</sup>

#### **4. Manhattan's Barber: Widening Streets, Streamlining Architecture**

Although he may be best remembered as borough president for his role in negotiating subway contracts—a natural undertaking for a man whose thinking about city planning was shaped by his work for the Pennsylvania Railroad—McAneny's term in office was also marked by an efflorescence of projects to physically reshape the surface of the city along the lines of European metropolises with boulevards and plazas. Having pioneered the development of the grand municipal parks that foreshadowed the City Beautiful, New York was consumed by the politics of consolidation in the years

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<sup>35</sup> "The Reminiscences of George McAneny," 18–19.



surrounding the turn of the century when the City Beautiful movement was in full flower elsewhere in the United States. Its political institutions still finding their footing, the city was unable to embark on any grand organizing schemes until the second decade of the twentieth century. Two kinds of schemes emerged when the city's planning capacity began to emerge from its torpor: the modernization of New York's existing streets and avenues, and the insertion of new streets and public places into the existing urban fabric.

The project to modernize the existing streets and avenues was referred to in contemporary accounts as "widening." Unlike the later widenings of Varick, Houston, Allen, and other streets, which used the city's eminent domain power to expand the public right-of-way and resulted in the demolition of many buildings, the widenings of 1909 to 1912 mostly did not seek to condemn private property and enlarge the rights-of-way of the avenues. Instead, the method was to widen the roadways within the existing rights-of-way by reallocating space from the sidewalk to the roadway and, where possible, to compensate for some of the lost sidewalk by removing structures and architectural projections from the remaining sidewalk area. In the building practices that had been used in New York City for decades, commercial buildings and many houses generally occupied the entire frontage to the building line. Outward from the building line, various architectural projections—stoops, pediments, porticoes, walled terraces, and even enclosed lawns—extended into the public street. As in today's city, restaurant cafés also occupied parts of the public right of way, some of these converted from private courtyards. All of these encroachments, extending up to 15 feet into the sidewalk area, were supposedly justified by ordinances that had been passed by the Common Council in

the 1830s and 1840s.<sup>36</sup> Sidewalks varied in width but were often wider than those of today's avenues, while the roadways for wagon and car traffic, often filthy and badly paved, were comparatively narrow.

McAneny appears to have seized upon roadway widening upon taking office in 1910 with great zeal in part because, unlike hopelessly grandiose and expensive schemes for boulevards and plazas that had gone nowhere for years, there was already considerable momentum behind widening, and much of the cost could be passed off to private property owners. Nationally, the prominent City Beautiful advocate Charles Mulford Robinson was promoting street widening as a component of comprehensive replanning around the turn of the century.<sup>37</sup> In New York City, the idea was first suggested to the city's short-lived Board of Public Improvement in 1900 by a local gadfly named John D. Crimmins, who argued to anyone who would listen that Fifth Avenue's roadway should be widened from 40 to 60 feet, that the sidewalks should be narrowed, and that encroachments should be removed to compensate for the loss of sidewalk space. The board's engineer reported favorably on Crimmins's idea, but the board members themselves stated that the sidewalks were so congested with pedestrians that the expansion of the roadway would be infeasible. Perhaps more important, these officials were unwilling to challenge the property owners whose many courtyards and stoops extended into the right-of-way.<sup>38</sup> In any event, the Board of Public Improvement was

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<sup>36</sup> "Oppose Fifth-Ave. Widening: City Authorities Antagonistic to the Proposed Scheme," *New-York Tribune*, May 11, 1901; "Fifth Avenue Stoops Infringe the Law: Sidewalks May Be Widened to 30 Feet, Delany Tells Mayor," *The New York Times*, June 15, 1906; Gilmartin, *Shaping the City*, 148–49.

<sup>37</sup> Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement*, 73.

<sup>38</sup> "Not to Widen Fifth Avenue: Board of Improvement Files Report Recommending Fifty-Six-Foot Roadway," *New-York Tribune*, May 9, 1901; "Oppose Fifth-Ave. Widening: City Authorities Antagonistic to the Proposed Scheme."

done away with by charter amendments effective in 1902. Widening was not pursued again until 1906, when it re-emerged in an almost accidental way.

In 1903, the city, then under the brief reform administration of Seth Low, had sued the Knickerbocker Trust Company for violating the building code with its newly constructed bank building in neo-Greek Revival style. Knickerbocker's Stanford White-designed portico, with its massive marble columns, extended well into the right-of-way of Fifth Avenue. For several years, this case churned through the court system, and in 1906 a Supreme Court judge finally rendered a decision favorable to the city, whose corporation counsel began to agitate for the removal of all such encroachments on the grounds that they were illegal encumbrances and that the amount of traffic on Fifth Avenue was so great that the city could no longer tolerate them.<sup>39</sup> (Ironically, the city ultimately granted Knickerbocker an exception, allowing its extrusions to remain.) Although property owners continued to appeal in court for two more years, the 1906 decision was sufficient to demolish earlier assumptions that the encroachments were sacrosanct, and talk of widening Fifth Avenue resurfaced. In 1908, after appeals were exhausted in the Knickerbocker case, the Board of Estimate, led by Mayor George McClellan and Borough President John Ahearn, ordered the removal of all encroachments, the narrowing of the sidewalk, and the widening of the roadway from 23rd to 47th streets. One of the most prominent victims was the Waldorf-Astoria, across the street from the Knickerbocker, which lost its gardens. The removal of encroachments gained further inducement from a new building resolution passed by the Board of Estimate in 1909 that required all structures to keep within the building line below a

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<sup>39</sup> "Fifth Avenue Plans: Property Owners Hurt: Many Changes Necessary If Street Is Made Wider," *New-York Tribune*, November 9, 1906.



**Figure 14.** The generous width of sidewalks and narrowness of roadways pre-widening is evident in this photo of 23rd Street in 1895. The roadway was roughly four cart-widths across, while pedestrians had ample room between the street and the building line.

Irma and Paul Milstein Division of United States History, Local History and Genealogy, The New York Public Library. (1885). *Manhattan: 23rd Street (West) - 5th Avenue*. Retrieved from <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47dc-fbbf-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>



**Figure 15.** Knickerbocker Trust, on the corner of 34th Street and Fifth Avenue, had massive columns that projected well into the public right-of-way on the avenue. The city's victory in a lawsuit against the building's owner over the encroachments helped make McAneny's widening program legally and politically possible.

Image source: Library of Congress

## 36

height of 10 feet. Warnings that this law would prevent the ornamentation of buildings at street level went unheeded, and aside from the aforementioned legal challenges by property owners, the Fifth Avenue widening did not attract significant public opposition once it was finally implemented.<sup>40</sup>

With a prominent street widening under the city's belt and the new resolution and several favorable court decisions as ammunition in fights over encroachments, McAneny entered office ready to pursue widening in a far more systematic way than the Tammany-aligned McClellan and Ahearn, who had largely responded to public pressure relating to specific streets. It probably seemed to McAneny that street widening was a project that could achieve quick and dramatic results, and it did: by 1912, McAneny's removals of encroachments had reclaimed for the city 425,000 square feet of space on 21.5 miles of streets.<sup>41</sup> He began relatively uncontroversially in 1910, widening two more midtown arteries: 34th Street and 42nd streets. Property owners on 42nd Street sought relief from congestion, but on the other hand were not so desperate as to accept the radical solution that had already been proposed several times over the previous few years—a grade crossing at Fifth Avenue, an expensive scheme which they feared would speed up traffic so much as to bypass their establishments, and for which they had no interest in paying assessments to construct. The widening and loss of encroachments, which sacrificed architectural projections designed to lure customers into theaters and hotels, seemed like a reasonable compromise. On 34th Street, the widening was actually requested by a coalition of property owners, the Manhattan Central Improvement Association.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Gilmartin, *Shaping the City*, 150–53.

<sup>41</sup> "Pa Knickerbocker Has Made Millions by Acting as Barber for Buildings," *New-York Tribune*, August 18, 1912.

<sup>42</sup> "In the Real Estate Field," *The New York Times*, January 6, 1910.



# Pa Knickerbocker Has Made Millions by Acting as Barber for Buildings

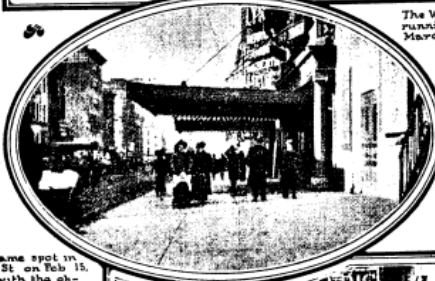


The Street Widening, City Beautifying Work Done Under Direction of Borough President McAneny Has Returned to New York's Control 425,000 Square Feet of Land Upon Which Various Structures or Establishments Had Encroached Without Legal Right.



The Waldorf Astoria, on Feb. 5, 1912, after relinquishing the sidewalk.

The Waldorf Astoria, over-running the sidewalk, on March 25, 1911.



The same spot in 42nd St. on Feb. 15, 1912, with the obstructions removed.



West of Broadway the old street line which had until recently been out over the sidewalk all the way to the curb took down those encroachments one by one, leaving the sidewalk free and clear.

In 36th street the Waldorf-Astoria hedge and ornamental driveway approach to the main entrance of the hotel gave way to a comparatively plain but substantial building front, level sidewalk and beautiful marble sheltering the main entrance. This alteration removed one of the most familiar landmarks in the city.

In 23d street the last of the old stone houses between Lexington avenue and

owner to require the defendant, his heirs, to remove a bay window which projected three and one-half feet on Riverside Drive, near 23d street. A permit had been issued by the Commissioner of Parks, but this was held to be no defense to the action. The court said that to support such a permit would be practically to nullify Section 71 of the Charter, which provides that the city's title to its streets shall be inalienable. Although the action was brought by one property owner against another, the right of the city to take similar action on its own initiative was recognized.

This was followed in 1905 by the case of the city vs. Knickerbocker Trust Company 128 A. D. 225, where the court held that a resolution of the Board of Aldermen which attempted to grant to the owner the right to erect a porch and steps in front of his building projecting about fifteen feet on the sidewalk was absolutely void. The judgment in this action was subsequently modified, however, by limiting its application to such encroachments as were beyond the stop line. The original complaint had been amended at the trial so as to include also such encroachments as were within the stop line, but this amendment was overruled by the court on the ground that it constituted an entirely new cause of action (131 A. D. 746, 1907). Here the city was permitted by the court to exercise its own right to clear the sidewalk of encroachments, although there was no complaint by any citizen.

In 1909 the city began another action (City vs. Rice, 128 A. D. 860) of a similar nature. The action here involved the right of the Commissioner of Parks to permit the erection of an ornamental wall encroaching six or seven feet beyond the building line on Riverside Drive, near 8th street. The court again declared such a permit invalid and directed the removal of the encroachment. The case was carried all the way to the Court of Appeals, where a judgment was finally rendered to the effect that neither the Municipal Assembly (now the Board of Aldermen) nor any city department has any power to consent to the private use of any public street.

Finally, in 1911, the very recent case

**Figure 17.** As Manhattan borough president, McAneny maintained close ties with the press to ensure that he was the public face of the street widening program. This article in the *Tribune* was one of several that featured him prominently.

Image source: "Pa Knickerbocker Has Made Millions by Acting as Barber for Buildings," *New-York Tribune*, August 18, 1912.

By widening Fifth Avenue and countless other streets, McAneny was engaging in the modernizing work of city planning simply by reclaiming the city's own resource, the right of way surveyed a hundred years earlier. McAneny noted that "the tremendous growth of street traffic requires the freeing of every square foot of available space upon the more crowded thoroughfares," obliging the city to "re-enter" areas of the public right-of-way that had been encroached upon by neighboring property owners. But McAneny did not cast his widening as merely a project of congestion relief. Instead, this was a project that was intended to change the city's physical aspect—and do so in a hurry. In 1912, he worked with a friendly newspaper, the *Tribune*, to prepare a report that appeared in the newspaper's Sunday edition bragging that countless municipal "landmarks" had been obliterated in one fell sweep:

"No municipal improvement in some time has so changed the physical appearance of certain neighborhoods. In one slice, as it were, off came the gardens, ornamental door yards, steps and porte cocheres, stone balustrades and vaulted stoops along 5th Avenue from 47th Street to the entrance of Central Park. Noticeable here is the changed appearance in the Vanderbilt and Belmont residences, St. Patrick's Cathedral, the Buckingham Hotel, the University Club, the St. Regis Hotel and other notable landmarks. ... On 42d, 34th, 23d and 14th Streets quite as conspicuous changes in the city's modern topography were made almost in a night time ... The Grand Union Hotel tore down its three small houses which it erected on the sidewalk. The Lincoln Trust Company pulled in its armor-like grill work front. The Hotel Knickerbocker took down an



expensive balcony and vaulted entrance near Broadway. West of Broadway the theatres which had cumbersome hood-like structures out over the sidewalk all the way to the curb took down these encroachments one by one, leaving the sidewalk clear and free. On 34th Street the Waldorf-Astoria hedges and ornamental driveway approach to the main entrance of the hotel gave way to a flat building front, level sidewalk and a single small marquee sheltering the main entrance. That alteration removed one of the most familiar land marks in the city.”<sup>43</sup>

The report boasted that on 23rd Street, the last of the old stoop residences were removed, while downtown, the widening was chipping away at “such landmarks as the entrance to the Standard Oil Building at 26 Broadway, the enormous pillars of the New York Life, the steps and yawning areaway at 11 Broadway, which became world famous during the Titanic disaster in April, the famous pillars at Nos. 42 and 100, and the steps of the old Evening Post building at the corner of Fulton Street.” In fact, the publicity was getting ahead of reality. Although purely decorative and nonstructural elements, such as canopies and porte-cocheres, could be—and were—removed immediately, the structural alterations needed to recess the entrance façades of skyscrapers would take longer. It was not until 1920, in conjunction with an addition to the building, that the pillars of 100 Broadway, the American Surety building, were moved back.<sup>44</sup> Still, on many streets the effect was immediate and dramatic. McAneny himself contended that on streets that had

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<sup>43</sup> “For Release Sunday Morning, Aug. 18” (Draft of press release, August 7, 1912), Box 37, George McAneny Papers, Princeton University.

<sup>44</sup> Breiner, David, “Bowling Green Offices Building, 5-11 Broadway (aka 5-11 Greenwich Street), Manhattan” (New York, N.Y.: Landmarks Preservation Commission, September 19, 1995); Gale Harris, “American Surety Company Building: 100 Broadway (aka 96-100 Broadway, 1-5 Pine Street), Manhattan” (New York, N.Y.: Landmarks Preservation Commission, June 24, 1997).

been subject to widening, “the usual result has been that the buildings are not injured architecturally; but in many cases improved.” He acknowledged that “many expensive fronts are coming down,” but even this had a benefit: “the buildings in general are taking on a more modern dress,” and Fifth Avenue in particular had acquired an aspect of “increased beauty and utility.”<sup>45</sup>

Perhaps more to the point, building owners benefited financially from the removal of encroachments, McAneny argued. Although the loss of existing structures in the public right-of-way in the first two and a half years of McAneny’s term, in aggregate, cost property owners between \$4 and \$5 million, their financial prospects going forward would be improved, he claimed. “Property owners and shop keepers admit that houses and store fronts rent more readily and to better advantage without stoops, railings, cellar entrances, etc., obstructing the passage to and from the stores,” the report stated. The mutilation of so many building façades and encroachments would become one of McAneny’s proudest achievements. Late in life, McAneny still boasted that the owner of the Waldorf-Astoria, initially distressed at the municipal order to destroy the hotel’s ornamentation, later thanked him for ordering the removal of encroachments because it increased the hotel’s walk-in business.<sup>46</sup>

After years of municipal sclerosis, the rapid pace and broad scope of McAneny’s widening took many New Yorkers by surprise.. An editorial cartoon in the *Tribune*, titled “The Debonair Knickerbocker,” consolidated complaints about widening with the apparently passive attitude of the old urban elite toward the changes in their city. It

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<sup>45</sup> McAneny, George, Typewritten notes, (August 3, 1912), Box 37, George McAneny Papers, Princeton University; “For Release Sunday Morning, Aug. 18”; “Pa Knickerbocker Has Made Millions by Acting as Barber for Buildings.”

<sup>46</sup> “The Reminiscences of George McAneny.”



**Figure 18.** This postcard image shows the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel with its encroachments, which included plantings and areaways on Fifth Avenue and 34th Street and an enormous brick porte-cochere with a wooden extension along 34th Street, right. To facilitate widening of the roadway and the expansion of the sidewalk toward the building, the plantings were removed in 1909, and the porte-cochere came down in 1911.

Courtesy of the Art and Picture Collection, New York Public Library.  
<http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-9b8f-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>



**Figure 19.** This image shows the base of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel ca. 1920. The plantings are gone, and the porte-cochere has been removed and replaced with an overhanging canopy, typical of the changes that were made after sidewalk encroachments were removed.

Irma and Paul Milstein Division of United States History, Local History and Genealogy, The New York Public Library.  
 (1920). *Manhattan: 5th Avenue - 33rd Street*. Retrieved from  
<http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47dc-e307-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>



**Figure 20.** This 1880 view of St. Patrick's Cathedral shows the grassy churchyard that formerly existed at 50th Street and Fifth Avenue. The churchyard was removed when Fifth Avenue was widened.

Courtesy of the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints, and Photographs, New York Public Library.  
<http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e0-1f38-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>



**Figure 21.** This crowd scene looking north on Fifth Avenue at 49th Street shows the projecting stoops on the left side of the avenue and the raised churchyard in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral on the right. The churchyard and stoops were removed when the street was widened.

From the collections of the Museum of the City of New York. Photographed by Edwin Levick, 1902.  
[http://collections.mcny.org/Collection/\[5th%20Avenue,%20north%20from%2053rd%20Street.-2F3XC5I6AOIA.html](http://collections.mcny.org/Collection/[5th%20Avenue,%20north%20from%2053rd%20Street.-2F3XC5I6AOIA.html)





**Figure 22.** This view looking north on Fifth Avenue at 48th Street shows some of the courtyards and stoops that characterized the streetscape before the city's widening program. All of these features projected into the public right-of-way.

From the collections of the Museum of the City of New York. Photographed by Edwin Levick and Frederick Lewis ca. 1900.  
[http://collections.mcny.org/Collection/\[5th%20Avenue%20north%20from%2048th%20Street.\]-2F3XC5I6QX3J.html](http://collections.mcny.org/Collection/[5th%20Avenue%20north%20from%2048th%20Street.]-2F3XC5I6QX3J.html)



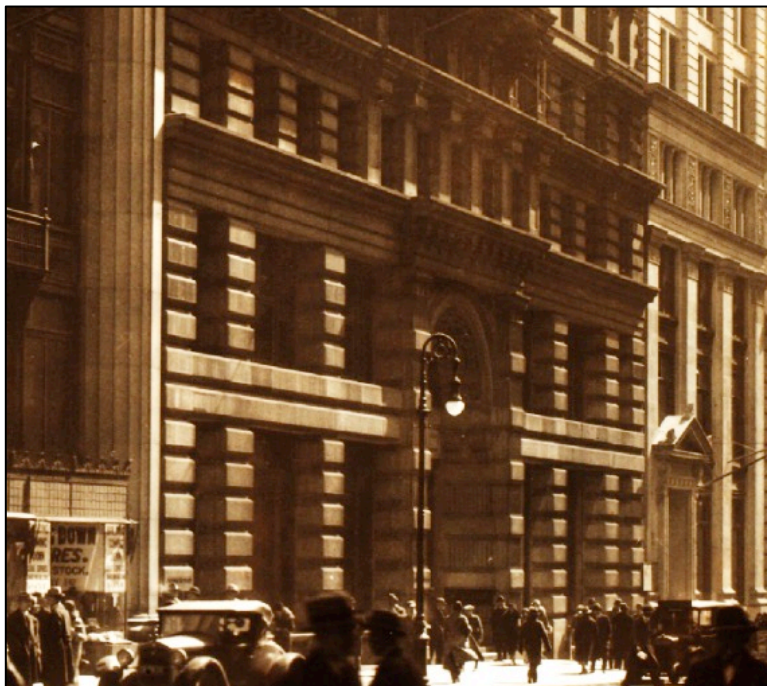
**Figure 23.** This 1925 view of Fifth Avenue looking north from 47th Street shows the changes in the streetscape post-widening. The stoops and courtyards in front of the buildings have been removed, while the roadway has been widened, accommodating a large number of automobiles and lending the street a more commercial appearance. New, higher buildings were also built.

Irma and Paul Milstein Division of United States History, Local History and Genealogy, The New York Public Library. (1925). *Manhattan: 5th Avenue - 47th Street*. Retrieved from  
<http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47dc-e600-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>



**Figure 24.** This image shows the base of 42 Broadway before the city required the removal of architectural features that encroached into the sidewalk.

Irma and Paul Milstein Division of United States History, Local History and Genealogy, The New York Public Library. *Manhattan: Broadway - Morris Street*. Retrieved from <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47dd-253f-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>



**Figure 25.** Here, the base of 42 Broadway is shown in the 1920s after encroachments were removed. Note that the original banded columns were removed, and the frontispiece over the entrance was shortened and set back.

Irma and Paul Milstein Division of United States History, Local History and Genealogy, The New York Public Library. *Manhattan: Broadway - Exchange Place*. Retrieved from <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47dd-2543-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>





**Figure 26.** This photo, from 1900, shows the lower façade of the Cunard Building, 11 Broadway, before the removal of encroachments. Note the central staircase, made famous in photos showing men awaiting news of the *Titanic* pacing nervously on and in front of it.

Image source: Library of Congress



**Figure 27.** This photo, from 1919, shows the base of the Cunard Building after removal of encroachments. The two sets of wide steps on either side of the building were withdrawn behind the column bays, which themselves were flattened, and the piers were cut back to be flush with the façade. The famous staircase was also made smaller and the areaways flanking it were narrowed.

Image source: Library of Congress

depicted an elderly gentleman, wearing old-fashioned dress to personify the city's traditional elite, with a broken leg and crutches, gamely picking his way through a wrecked street. Outlines of construction equipment and tall buildings litter the background of the scene. According to the caption, the "gentleman is swindled by speculators; has his pocket picked and his house robbed; falls into needless street excavations; is run over by reckless drivers ... is jostled and jammed in a suffocating subway; and is overcharged for almost everything; yet submits ... with almost perfect equanimity."<sup>47</sup> An editorial in the *Times* complained more about the inconvenience of torn-up streets than the loss of character: "The work of widening ... requiring the transformation of the fronts of many buildings ... would be nuisance enough. But the roadway is upturn too ... This kind of work should be done ... with some regard for the safety and comfort of the public, which seem to be the last things the contractors and the officials responsible for them seem to think of," the editors grumbled.<sup>48</sup> Two years later, in the heat of an election campaign, a letter to the editor of the *Tribune* railed against McAneny's "obsession" with widening: "Mr. McAneny has caused more needless direct expense to the property owners and tenants of the city than any other man who ever held public office. His course has depreciated rental values, entailed lawsuits between landlord and tenant ... and has depleted the funds of widows and orphans ..."<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> "The Debonair Knickerbocker," *New-York Tribune*, October 18, 1911.

<sup>48</sup> "An Uptorn Town," *The New York Times*, October 18, 1911.

<sup>49</sup> Davis, Albert E., "Clearing the Sidewalks: Another Protest Is Lodged Against Mr. McAneny's Policy," *New-York Tribune*, October 27, 1913.



THE DEBONAIR KNICKERBOCKER.



This easygoing gentleman is swindled by speculators; has his pockets picked and his house robbed; falls into needless street excavations; is run over by reckless drivers of automobiles and wagons; is jostled and jammed in a suffocating subway, and is overcharged for almost everything; yet he submits to all these remediable wrongs and many others with almost perfect equanimity.

**Figure 28.** This editorial cartoon summarized feelings about not only the inconveniences of McAneny's street programs, but also about the character of life in rapidly modernizing New York City.

Image source: "The Debonair Knickerbocker," *New-York Tribune*, October 18, 1911.

## **5. Neighborhood Reactions to McAneny's Widening Program**

Although there was no shortage of general complaints about torn-up streets, inconveniences, and costs to property owners, most widenings and removals of encroachments did not generate the sorts of fierce controversies about quality of life, architecture, and neighborhood character that New Yorkers later in the 20th century would have expected such proposals to generate. However, there were notable exceptions. The organized reactions that sprang up to counter or mitigate proposed widenings of Second Avenue, in a heavily immigrant area of the lower East Side, and Fifth Avenue above 47th Street, in transition from wealthy residential enclave to commercial corridor, demonstrate that even before World War I, streets and streetscapes were a potential arena for contests between officialdom and neighborhood interests. The opposition to these widenings was also an early harbinger of the direction that preservationists would take later in the century; although this opposition had little or nothing to do with the organized preservation movement of the day, the opponents' causes, arguments, and methods would likely seem familiar to preservationists in the 1950s and later.

In 1911, McAneny's proposal to widen and remove encroachments on a stretch of Second Avenue below 23rd Street led to a flurry of nostalgic reports in daily newspapers defending the street in its existing configuration as a venerable "lovers' lane." In the *Telegram*, the romantic possibilities of Second Avenue were explained by Father D. J. McMahon, rector of the Church of the Epiphany, who urged: "For the sake of the sentiment and the oldtimers who remember when cars were kept off Second Avenue ... do not destroy the avenue's ancient privilege. It is still needed as a lovers' lane for the east side. We need and hope for more marriages there." Sympathizing with the priest, the

*Tribune*'s editors sighed: "It is a cruel alternative, the choice between facilities for love-making and facilities for traffic." The *Telegram* painted McAneny's widening as threatening a nostalgic and bucolic scene. "Still, on summer evenings, the wide sidewalks are still congested with the young and old of the neighborhood, who seem to feel that the day is incomplete without a stroll on the avenue. Girls in summer frocks stop beneath the spreading willow trees in St. Mark's cemetery to gossip with their boy friends. Many elderly persons of the avenue, smoking ancient pipes, circle Stuyvesant Square before they retire." The newspaper fretted that the widening "will mean the beginning of the destruction of the cemetery" and "will necessitate tearing away the fences of Stuyvesant Park and destroying many trees in the park."<sup>50</sup>

Protests also concerned the impact on ethnic businesses, social life, and religious institutions. The neighborhood, which had attracted many Germans in the 19th century, was still known as something of a German enclave, and journalists worried that the street's European flair would be threatened by the widening. But their defense of the street's Europeanness rested upon an implicit association with ethnic groups whose presence had been established for several decades, and not on the new immigrants then pouring in from eastern Europe. "The neighborhood has not changed as much as other sections of the city," the *Telegram* insisted. "Many of the Irish and German people who made up the population of that part of the city twenty-five years ago are still there." In their view, the physical streetscape was bound up with these nostalgic associations. "Few streets in any section of the city boast of the wide sidewalks that Second Avenue does.

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<sup>50</sup> "Oppose Widening of East Side Lovers' Lane," *The Telegram*, September 23, 1911, Box 37, George McAneny Papers, Princeton University; "Second Avenue and Traffic," *The New York Tribune*, September 22, 1911.

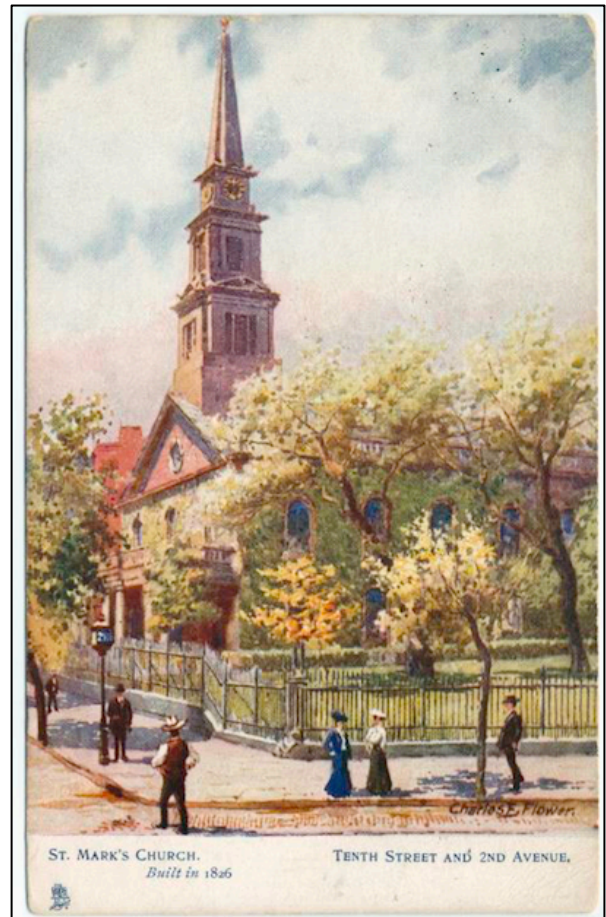
Despite the march of progress the avenue still retains its individuality,” said the *Telegram*. According to the *Tribune*, “Lower Second Avenue is an institution, picturesque and worth preserving for its own sake. With its wide sidewalks, filled with open air restaurants, cafés and beer gardens, it is like part of a foreign city in the heart of New York.” Moreover, “The stress is all on the human side on Second Avenue ... they have time to eat, even at noonday; time to talk, to frequent open-air cafés, to stroll and to make love. But all that is because traffic has not invaded their paradise.”

The parties whose protests of the widening were most visible were not residents, but rather representatives of churches, charities, and hospitals in the neighborhood, who formed an *ad hoc* coalition of Jewish and Christian institutions. In a letter to the editor printed in the *Times*, Morris Loeb, the president of the Hebrew Charities Building, complained that McAneny had ignored his and other religious and philanthropic leaders’ protestations of “the uselessness of such widening” and its negative effects on Stuyvesant Park, churches and hospitals. In September, a group of protestors, including the Hebrew Charities Building, the Church of the Epiphany, whose Rev. McMahon had decried the loss of “Lover’s Lane,” and representatives of a Jewish girls’ school and a hospital, among others, also sent a letter to the Board of Estimate in which they complained about the widening. Both McMahon and Loeb also appeared directly before the board’s September 21 meeting to petition the officials in person. Perhaps recognizing that the Board would have little sympathy for the sentimental arguments they had made in the press, their protests focused on the unfairness of forcing charitable institutions to pay the costs of the widening and, secondarily, on the increased noise to which the institutions



**Figure 29.** In the early 1900s, Stuyvesant Square on lower Second Avenue was depicted as a lively gathering place for neighborhood residents young and old. Protestors feared that the widening of the avenue would disrupt this lifestyle.

From the collections of the Museum of the City of New York.  
Drawing by Vaughan Trowbridge, 1904.  
[http://collections.mcny.org/Collection/\[Stuyvesant%20Square\]-2F3XC5UNX2ZJ.html](http://collections.mcny.org/Collection/[Stuyvesant%20Square]-2F3XC5UNX2ZJ.html)



**Figure 30.** The churchyard of St. Mark's-in-the-Bowery, shown here in a postcard view from 1906, was a valued green space on Second Avenue. It was cut back 15 feet to accommodate the widening.

Art and Picture Collection, The New York Public Library.  
(1906). *St. Mark's Church. Tenth Street and 2nd Avenue*. Retrieved from  
<http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e2-8b79-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>



**Figure 31.** The Café Boulevard restaurant on Second Avenue, shown here in a view that appears to be from the turn of the century, was a beacon of the café society that was facilitated by the avenue's wide sidewalks. Note the two-story terrace that projected from the front of the building; this and the projecting canopy were likely removed during the widening of the avenue, which took place in 1912. By 1915, the venerable eatery had closed.

From the collections of the Museum of the City of New York. Photograph by Robert L. Bracklow. Retrieved from <http://collections.mcny.org/Collection/Cafe%20Boulevard,%20Third%20Avenue%20and%209th%20Street-2F3XC5U07OFV.html>.

See also "Terpsichore on East Side," *The New York Times*, August 5, 1900; "Cafe Boulevard at Auction," *The New York Times*, March 14, 1915; "Second Avenue Mansions of Yesteryear," *Off the Grid* (weblog), May 13, 2011, <http://gvshp.org/blog/2011/05/13/second-avenue-mansions-of-yesteryear/>.



**Figure 32.** This postcard depicts the interior of Café Boulevard. Frequented by the city's political class, it had a reputation that extended well beyond the confines of its neighborhood.

From the collections of the Museum of the City of New York. Ca. 1906. Retrieved from <http://collections.mcny.org/Collection/Souvenir%20from%20Cafe%20Boulevard%20N.%20Y.%20Second%20Ave%20&%20Tenth%20Street-2F3HRGCX1M6.html>





**Figure 33.** This view of the New York Eye & Ear Infirmary at 13th Street and Second Avenue gives an indication of the extraordinary 30-foot depth of the pre-widening sidewalk on Second Avenue, bottom left.

From the collections of the Museum of the City of New York. Photograph by Irving Underhill, 1904. Retrieved from <http://collections.mcny.org/Collection/Eye%20&%20Ear%20Infirmary.%202nd%20Avenue%20and%2013th%20St.-2F3408J6HYC.html>



**Figure 34.** This post-widening image shows the corner of Second Avenue and 11th Street. The mansard-roofed structure in the foreground is the Old Rutherford House, a neighborhood landmark. Although McAneny's 6.5-foot allowance permitted stoops and courtyards to be retained, the previously generous sidewalk that gave the avenue a "lovers' lane" reputation was narrowed.

Irma and Paul Milstein Division of United States History, Local History and Genealogy, The New York Public Library. (1887 - 1986). *Second Avenue - 10th Street*. Retrieved from <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e2-0163-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

might be subjected if the widening were to be completed. The board asked McAneny to prepare a response to their complaints.<sup>51</sup>

Not all the newspapers were sympathetic to the nostalgic view of the avenue. The *Times*, more skeptical of what it termed the “newly dubbed ‘Lovers’ Lane’,” examined Second Avenue in the context of a rapidly changing city. “Whether it will become a business thoroughfare or a tenement house street is uncertain. It possesses elements of both,” the editors remarked. As for historic character, the *Times* could find “few reminders of earlier days” in the neighborhood, apart from the 1799 St. Mark’s Church and a few surviving mansions which, it hastened to point out, had been carved up into apartments. The *Times* also played down the café-and-beer-garden nostalgia in which the other papers indulged. Only a single well-known café, it said, attracted denizens of the city’s more fashionable and upscale districts. More ominously, the *Times* noted “the rapidly increasing population of foreign descent in the neighborhood. Besides its strong Jewish affiliations, the neighborhood is a great Hungarian and Polish centre,” Meanwhile, “the Teutonic residents have gradually been pushed to new centres further north on the east side.” In some cases, redevelopment would be welcome indeed: one corner of the avenue hosted “the most despicable wooden shacks that can be found in the city,” which “have been there long enough.” In defense of the proposed narrowing of the sidewalk, the *Times* also sarcastically pointed out that the term “lovers’ lane” had never before been applied to a street of such great width, and that removing encroachments would ease

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<sup>51</sup> “Second Avenue and Traffic”; “Oppose Widening of East Side Lovers’ Lane”; Loeb, Morris, “Second Avenue Widening: Protests Against President McAneny’s Forthcoming Report as Unjust,” *The New York Times*, September 21, 1911; *Minutes of the Board of Estimate and Apportionment of the City of New York: Public Improvement Matters from July 1st to September 30th, 1911* (New York, N.Y.: Lecouver Press Company, 1913), 2674–75.



movement for the avenue's purported young couples.<sup>52</sup> By casting aspersions on the street's claims to historic and cultural value, the *Times* aligned itself with the efficiency-based reform ideology of McAneny and the other reformers. To them, sentimental and nostalgic associations alone were not sufficient reasons to invoke preservation; only buildings with specific historical associations could potentially stake a claim on competing with the demands of modernization. One of the few buildings in the area that was of interest to the reformers as an object of preservation, St. Mark's Church, did not front directly on the avenue, though its churchyard was cut back 15 feet for the widening.<sup>53</sup>

In the Board of Estimate and Apportionment meeting on October 11, McAneny, having studied the Second Avenue protesters' complaints, emphatically rejected them. He ignored concerns about the demise of neighborhood character, focusing on numerical costs and benefits. Although the *Telegram*'s nostalgic account had characterized Second Avenue traffic as benignly congested by pedestrians enjoying summer strolls, McAneny and the Board of Estimate, seeing a grimmer sort of congestion on the avenue, were primarily concerned with speeding the movement of vehicular traffic. McAneny decried what he termed the "inequitable distribution of space devoted to pedestrian traffic and vehicular traffic" on Second Avenue, by which he meant that too little space was allocated to vehicles and too much to pedestrians. He cited measurements of pedestrian traffic showing that the generous sidewalks of lower Second Avenue accommodated a far lower level of pedestrian traffic than did the narrower sidewalks of Midtown streets,

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<sup>52</sup> "Sharp Contrasts in Lower Second Avenue, Now Called the East Side Lovers' Lane," *The New York Times*, October 1, 1911.

<sup>53</sup> "City to Descend on Old St. Mark's," *The New York Times*, June 19, 1912.

concluding that the number of pedestrians on lower Second Avenue did not justify the existing sidewalk width; from this perspective, a wide sidewalk was inefficient and narrowing was justified. McAneny also trotted out statistics to refute the protestors' complaints about the cost of modifications to their buildings. He pointed out that, on average, architectural projections on Second Avenue between Houston and 23rd streets extended slightly over seven feet into the right-of-way, and that even after widening, the city was allowing owners to retain up to 6.5 feet of those encroachments—hardly a burden for the average property owner. Of course, this ignored the fact that on Second Avenue, which hosted a range of buildings of different kinds, the encroachments were of varying widths, which helped give the street its distinctive character. In summation, McAneny said, the costs of the widening of Second Avenue, which would be only an average of \$589 per affected property owner, would be “insignificant in comparison with the benefit which will accrue to the general public who use the street cars and the vehicular thoroughfare.” Defending what they must have then realized was a lost cause, the Rev. McMahon and three other representatives of churches and hospitals nonetheless stood up again before the board to lodge their final protest. With no further discussion, the board then voted unanimously to proceed with the widening.<sup>54</sup> Subsequent photographs of the area reveal that at least some buildings retained their encroachments into the 1920s, given the 6.5-foot allowance. Between these grandfathered encroachments and the wider roadway, pedestrians were squeezed onto a narrower sidewalk.

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<sup>54</sup> *Minutes of the Board of Estimate and Apportionment of the City of New York: Public Improvement Matters from October 1 to December 31, 1911* (New York, N.Y.: Lecouver Press Company, 1913), 2805–07; “City Must Widen Lovers’ Lane, Borough President Declares,” *The Sun*, October 5, 1911, Box 37, George McAneny Papers, Princeton University.

McAneny's unsympathetic response to the objectors on Second Avenue reveals an aspect of his approach to planning and governance that might make 21st-century planners flinch. Put simply, McAneny believed in rule by a small elite who were to be held accountable only after they had been given ample time to enact their plans. In 1913, he approvingly commented to the City Club of Cleveland that New York's 77-member Board of Aldermen had been left with "very little to do" as its functions had been usurped by the much smaller Board of Estimate, which consisted of the borough presidents, the mayor, and a few other high-ranking officials. Praising New York's legislative arrangements that handed most powers to this small group, he commented: "I cannot repeat without too much emphasis that the legislative control of purely business routine of the city should be kept within a small board and within the influence, more or less, of the Mayor and his advisers."<sup>55</sup> If there was a problem with this style of government, it was that often, those holding public office were simply not trusted enough by those they served. As he patronizingly put it in a Fourth of July address:

"It will be part of the larger patriotism of the future ... to support a government because it is the government, just so long as we believe its purposes to be honest, and just so long as its measures are entitled to fair trial. Frequently, we will find that those who have done the thinking, and those who have wrought out their plans accordingly, have been wiser than we. ... I, for one, shall welcome too the day when less time shall be given to attack upon public officers as such, and more of both time and attention given to constructive programs of public progress. ... We have cities to build and charters to write; we have

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<sup>55</sup> George McAneny, "Address of the Honorable George McAneny, President of the Borough of Manhattan, New York City, Before the City Club of Cleveland, O.," April 5, 1913.

great public works to be fashioned for the benefit of city and state ... we have social problems to solve.”<sup>56</sup>

Still, some constituencies required more courtesy than others. To defend the widening of streets with more powerful advocates than neighborhood pastors, young lovers, and vendors, McAneny took a different approach. Unlike on Second Avenue, where neighborhood institutions mounted an ineffective protest that was largely ignored, in conjunction with the widening of upper Fifth Avenue McAneny convened an advisory commission whose purpose was to make that street, in McAneny’s words, “one of the most beautiful streets in the world.” Serving on this commission were such notables as the architect Arnold Brummer, the Board of Estimate’s chief engineer Nelson Lewis, and realty and business leaders. Notably, among McAneny’s stated goals for the commission was to control the style of the architecture of new buildings. Said the *Times*: “This, he believes, would be an important step in making the avenue more beautiful.”<sup>57</sup> McAneny was echoing calls from the Municipal Art Society to enhance the powers of the city’s Art Commission, which already had review power over public works of art and architecture, but such sweeping authority over private property would not be forthcoming in a city that, at the time, lacked even the rudiments of planning controls. The commission’s recommendations, issued five months later, were notably weak: they punted on the question of aesthetic controls and could not even recommend street trees due to the number of vaults beneath buildings. Narrowing the roadway to accommodate “beauty” was obviously out of the question. The commission did, however, suggest the imposition

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<sup>56</sup> George McAneny, “Address of Honorable George McAneny, President of the Board of Aldermen, New York City, at Glens Falls, New York,” July 4, 1914, Box 1, George McAneny Papers, Princeton University.

<sup>57</sup> “Citizens to Advise Fifth Ave. Changes: McAneny Appoints Commission to Aid Him in Making a ‘Street Beautiful,’” *The New York Times*, November 10, 1911.

of a height limit, a step that, while initially rejected, would later help form the genesis of citywide zoning—a tool to which preservationists would turn again and again in their quest to retain neighborhood character.<sup>58</sup>

McAneny may have judged the convening of this commission providential in light of the attacks that were being made on his Fifth Avenue widening project by the *Evening Journal*. “Hundreds of workmen with saw and hammer and chisel are destroying the peace and beauty of Fifth avenue between Forty-seventh and Fifty-eighth streets these days,” lamented the newspaper in an article labeling what it called “historic Fifth Avenue” a “sad wreck.” The paper decried the loss of what it termed “open-air dining rooms” belonging to several hotels, as well as the loss of gardens and porticoes attached to mansions belonging to W.K. Vanderbilt, Mrs. Collis P. Huntington, and W.W. Astor, among others, and the loss of courtyards in front of St. Patrick’s Cathedral and the Union Club. The complaints were motivated partly by the newspaper’s antipathy to the current members of the Board of Estimate, but also by the perceived change to the status of Fifth Avenue above 47th Street, which was still an upscale district of mansions, posh hotels, and clubhouses.<sup>59</sup> Where lower Fifth Avenue had already become one of the city’s major business corridors, and the widening could be cast merely as relief for a hopelessly congested commercial district, the modernization of upper Fifth Avenue seemed to be designed to provoke an actual change in the character of the street. It was a change that the Vanderbilts, in particular, had been fighting against for years by imposing restrictive covenants on the lands around their buildings.<sup>60</sup> Ordered by the city to remove their

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<sup>58</sup> “Fifth Avenue Only a Dignified Street: That Is the Best McAneny’s Commission Can Promise After Its Investigation,” *The New York Times*, March 24, 1912.

<sup>59</sup> “Historic Fifth Av. Now a Sad Wreck,” *The New York Evening Journal*, September 19, 1911.

<sup>60</sup> Page, *The Creative Destruction of Manhattan, 1900-1940*, 50.

encroachments—also proud symbols of wealth and taste—to accommodate more vehicles on the avenue, the Vanderbilts and their neighbors had no choice but to comply. The restrictive covenants would not last much longer, and by the 1920s most of the remaining mansions were demolished.

Although the protests over the Second Avenue and Fifth Avenue widenings were only minor hiccups in the City Beautiful transformation of New York that reformers pursued in the early 1900s, they are nonetheless notable. However ineffective and muted, these protests demonstrated that there were competing ideas among city residents about the values of streets, buildings, and history. Buildings, even if they lacked associations with the Founders, could still be considered historic; works of architecture, even if only a few years old, could still be considered landmarks. Even though most of the high-profile buildings whose encroachments were removed were not old at all, that was enough for one newspaper to declare that “historic” upper Fifth Avenue was being wrecked by their removal. Significantly, although individual voices are largely absent from the public record, the newspaper accounts and the doomed protest by Second Avenue business owners before the Board of Estimate demonstrated that there was a stirring of a sentiment toward preservation among people who had very different ideas about what was worth saving, and why, than the prevailing attitudes of the time. Faced with an imminent loss, people with as widely differing agendas as the Rev. McMahon and the wealthy set on upper Fifth Avenue decided to stay and fight for reasons that they may not have even been able to fully express themselves; it would take years for preservationists to develop compelling arguments powerful enough counter the logic of the City Beautiful.



**Figure 35.** The mansion of Collis Huntington, at the corner of 57th Street and 5th Avenue, featured an entrance stairway (note the two posts) leading to a huge arched opening (left) and courtyards bordered by wrought-iron fencing. Note also the bay window facing 57th Street (right).

From the collections of the Museum of the City of New York. Photographed by the Byron Company, 1898.

<http://collections.mcny.org/Collection/House%20of%20Huntington.-2F3XC5TZ7BC.html>



**Figure 36.** The Huntington mansion lost its entrance staircase and courtyards when the encroachments were removed by street widening, and the bay window facing 57th Street also had to be removed.

Irma and Paul Milstein Division of United States History, Local History and Genealogy, The New York Public Library. *Manhattan: 5th Avenue - 57th Street*. Retrieved from <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47dc-e71e-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>



**Figure 37.** The boxy, twin Vanderbilt mansions on Fifth Avenue between 51st and 52nd streets featured deep courtyards. The formal entrance of the mansion at 51st Street, center, was aligned to the avenue.

From the collections of the Museum of the City of New York. Photographed by Wurts Bros., ca. 1905.  
<http://collections.mcny.org/Collection/640%205th%20Avenue%20at%2051st%20Street.%20F.%20W.%20Vanderbilt%20house.-2F3XC57Q4O.html>



**Figure 38.** Post-widening, the twin Vanderbilt mansions were increasingly out of place on a Fifth Avenue that was becoming busier with commercial traffic. The courtyards and grand entrance, which encroached into the public right-of-way, were removed, and the open space behind the walls that had formerly set the buildings off from the street was now a public sidewalk.

From the collections of the Museum of the City of New York. Photographed by Arthur Hosking, ca. 1916–1921.  
[http://collections.mcny.org/Collection/\[William%20H.%20Vanderbilt%20residence.%205th%20Avenue%20and%2051st%20Street.\]](http://collections.mcny.org/Collection/[William%20H.%20Vanderbilt%20residence.%205th%20Avenue%20and%2051st%20Street.])



Certainly, the Second Avenue protestors' cause was doomed from the moment they began to try to cast it in the reformers' terms of economics and efficiency; McAneny, backed by a city bureaucracy he himself had transformed to measure and promote efficient operations, was easily able to demolish their arguments using the statistical evidence it had collected. Indeed, what was likely most shocking to the preservationists who valued the historic character and sentimental associations of their streets and buildings was the rapidity with which the new administration transformed those streets. Whereas previous administrations managed after 10 years only to widen only 24 blocks of one street, McAneny widened over 21 miles of streets in just two years. The inefficient and scandal-plagued administrations that preceded McAneny had inadvertently served the values of these preservationists by delaying action. While preservation was the furthest thing from reformers' minds when confronted with protests over a modernization proposal that did not affect a building that they regarded as truly historic, it would be several decades before the advocates of nostalgia and community character would become confident and articulate enough to obtain the imprimatur of policy and law.

## **6. Planning New York: Subways, Zoning, and Sites of Civic Memory**

The street widening program was the most immediately tangible result of the urban restructuring agenda of McAneny and his fellow reformers. But they also advanced a number of schemes designed to make an even more significant impact on the cityscape. They proposed various schemes for a grand civic center in the vicinity of the existing City Hall and radial boulevards that would link it to surrounding bridges (and, not coincidentally, wipe out nearby tenement areas), as well as other such schemes elsewhere

in the city. It seemed that every week the *Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide* was featuring another proposal for a physical restructuring of some part of Manhattan.<sup>61</sup> Two much-discussed schemes were a proposal to slash a massive diagonal boulevard through Midtown that would link Penn Station and Grand Central Terminal and a plan advanced by Mayor Gaynor for a boulevard aligned to the grid between Fifth and Sixth avenues.<sup>62</sup> The reformers with the most comprehensive view of city planning advanced regulatory schemes that would limit the height and bulk of buildings, occasionally going so far as to propose architectural review of exterior facades. They promoted a concept known as excess condemnation, which would have allowed the city to capitalize on its own infrastructure investments by acquiring more land than needed for new streets and subways and in order to consolidate small parcels and sell them for redevelopment at higher values. Even more sweepingly, they sought to decongest the tenement districts and promote the development of suburban housing for the masses by building rapid-transit lines into heretofore rural areas of the outer boroughs, where private developers would build new, more salubrious housing for workers. Yet they also commissioned outlandish schemes for beaux-arts monstrosities, including a plan that would have run a boulevard directly over the top of Upper Manhattan's Inwood Hill, which would have been leveled

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<sup>61</sup> One of the more outlandish schemes was a plan to extend Central Park 15 blocks north and redevelop the area below 72nd Street as a series of oversized blocks containing "villa plots" for millionaires. More typical was Ernest Flagg's proposal for a diagonal avenue connecting City Hall with Greenwich Village. "A New Design for Central Park," *Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide* 90, no. 2334 (December 6, 1912): 1067; "Ernest Flagg's Plan: For a Diagonal Street to the City Hall for the Lower West Side," *Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide* 89, no. 2310 (June 22, 1912): 1338.

<sup>62</sup> "It Is an Extremely Encouraging Piece of News That ...," *Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide* 85, no. 2202 (May 28, 1910); "The Advantage of Diagonal Streets," *Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide* 92, no. 2385 (November 29, 1913): 990.

into a series of enormous platforms.<sup>63</sup> And what they actually succeeded in accomplishing typically fell far short of their lofty ambitions.

Taken as a whole, the bewildering jumble of ideas for remaking the city that surfaced in the 1900s and 1910s hardly amounted to a comprehensive or even coherent vision of how the city would evolve in the new century. As has been described, city planning was coming into its own as a distinct field of endeavor during this time. Designers, boosters, and politicians borrowed liberally from the stew of architectural and planning ideas that had simmering since the 1890s: the City Beautiful ideals that emphasized parks, sanitation, aesthetic harmony, order and cleanliness were still prevalent, and the “City Beautiful” epithet was still frequently invoked to describe the ideals of the planners. Also still influential was the municipal art movement that championed collaboration between city builders and artists. Yet the emerging field of city planning sought not only to beautify the city, but moreover to shape its efficient growth through land-use regulations and a heightened degree of public control over infrastructure investment. By the mid 1910s, McAneny in particular desired to embed a comprehensive planning function within the municipal government to bring order to the entire metropolis.

In the 12 years between consolidation and the Fusionists’ taking office in 1910, there here had been many attempts, private and public, at planning the city. A short-lived Board of Public Improvements, intended to coordinate the city’s infrastructure planning, had been created in 1898, but it was abolished in charter amendments passed in 1902.

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<sup>63</sup> This plan was commissioned by George McAneny and prepared by Arnold Brunner and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., in 1913. By comparison, Robert Moses’s later Henry Hudson Parkway in roughly the same location, which aroused vocal opposition, was a model of environmental sensitivity.



**Figure 39.** The above study appeared in a plan prepared for George McAneny in 1913 by Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., and Arnold Brunner. It shows their proposal for a massive complex of neoclassical buildings that would have obliterated the crest of historic Inwood Hill.

Image source: Brunner, Arnold W., and Frederick Law Olmsted. "Proposed Change of Map for Riverside Drive Extension: Report and Plans." June 1913. Retrieved from <https://archive.org/details/proposedchangeof00brun>

Later that year, the Municipal Art Society spearheaded the creation of a group called the Conference Committee on the City Plan, which brought together representatives from the art societies, the business community, and the architecture and civil engineering fields. The conference produced a report that emphasized dock expansion and the creation of new streets and subways to speed the flow of freight and commuter traffic. In 1903, outgoing reform mayor Seth Low managed to consolidate responsibility for infrastructure improvements in the Board of Estimate, and a new body, the New York City Improvement Commission, was subsequently constituted to plan those investments. Still, the Tammany-controlled government that had been swept into office in 1904 lacked the resources and the energy to act on most of its recommendations.<sup>64</sup> Nonetheless, the Municipal Art Society continued to propose street improvements; in 1904, its Committee on Transportation projected numerous street extensions—including a Seventh Avenue extension southward through Greenwich Village, which McAneny would later shepherd through as Manhattan borough president, as well as more outlandish ideas such as an elevated extension of Park Avenue through the middle of Grand Central Terminal.

By 1908, the intellectual energy of New York's city planning movement began to expand from a concern with infrastructure and beautification to a more forceful emphasis on comprehensively reshaping the form of the city—and that implied asserting more public control over the private sphere. The exhibits of the Committee on Congestion of Population revealed that the tenement conditions that Jacob Riis had exposed two decades earlier were still very much present in a city that continued to expand in

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<sup>64</sup> Gilmartin, *Shaping the City*, 82–97.

population, suggesting that the half-measures that had been adopted since that time—pocket parks, the new tenement law of 1901, and philanthropic efforts to build better housing—had not gone far enough. The congestion exhibit suggested that answers could be found in wholesale replanning of city districts and dispersal of the tenement population to suburbs. In 1910, the city’s most assertive advocate for this new mode of planning was Benjamin Marsh, a journalist who had been hired by Mary Simkhovitch and Florence Kelley as the secretary of the congestion committee. Marsh, though clearly of socialist orientation, set out to advocate with the city’s resolutely capitalist real estate community for a number of reforms, including land-use zoning, excess condemnation, and a Henry George-style property tax regime that would have raised rates on vacant land, which he thought would help the city build its way out of its housing crisis. Although the real estate interests had little faith in Marsh’s ideas about taxation, the notion that public policy, and not just infrastructure investment, could be used to transform the city was gaining increasing currency.<sup>65</sup>

Immediately upon taking office as borough president, McAneny set out to put city planning on the front burner by proposing that the Board of Estimate create a municipal city planning commission. Although he had participated in the exhibition of the Committee on Congestion as City Club president, the proposals he made after being elected were somewhat retrograde, harking back to the improvement schemes that the Municipal Art Society had advanced during and after the Low administration. In an address to the City Club, he called for “a great city plan contemplating all future developments for our city, the laying out of new boulevards, subways, waterfronts,

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 168–69, 182; Peterson, “The Birth of Organized City Planning in the United States, 1909–1910.”

avenues, and streets, even into the distant future.” These stirring words were quickly tempered: “First, however, we must make our start by taking hold of immediate conditions and working for their improvement”—meaning the removal of encroachments. Later in the speech, he endorsed a moving sidewalk under Nassau Street in lower Manhattan to reduce congestion.<sup>66</sup> The planning commission idea was not adopted, and while a powerless “commission” was subsequently appointed to conduct a study on city planning, McAneny instead set to work on the more immediate problems he had alluded to in the speech: street widening, yes, but also subways, a field on which he was to stake his political reputation and make his name as a farsighted public servant who could get things done.

Like many others in the civic elite, McAneny was coming to share the ambition of Simkhovitch and Marsh to disperse the poor into suburban areas, and he saw that the expansion of the subway system into undeveloped lands within the city’s boundaries would allow for the construction of new homes on a large scale. In a 1912 speech to the City Club of Philadelphia, he stated the crux of this idea: to build new subway lines “into districts that are not congested, but which offered the opportunity for the building of small homes.”<sup>67</sup> The difficulty lay in persuading the rapid transit companies to build a large number of lines into underdeveloped areas, which they feared would be unprofitable. Instead, the companies wanted to build new lines only in existing built-up areas, where there was already a guaranteed base of customers. However, McAneny feared that a plan catering only to the companies’ bottom lines would merely exacerbate

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<sup>66</sup> Gilmartin, *Shaping the City*, 182; “New Commission to Develop City: Will Plan for Present and Future,” *The New York Times*, December 20, 1910.

<sup>67</sup> Derrick, *Tunneling to the Future*, 202.

the congestion problem. For years, fruitless negotiations, often spilling into the political arena, were conducted between city officials, state officials, and railway companies, over the shape of subway expansion.<sup>68</sup>

In 1911, McAneny became the chairman of a new transit committee of the Board of Estimate. He and the other members worked out a complex compromise with the state Public Service Commission, which had to authorize the franchises, and the railroad companies. Several lines would run through the densest part of Manhattan's core, where high ridership was assured, but they would link to a dozen new and expanded lines running to less developed areas of the outer boroughs. Control of the new lines would be split, and in some cases shared, between the IRT and the BRT. This arrangement, which became known as the Dual Contracts, was approved by the PSC in 1913, while McAneny and his fellow Fusionists were preparing to run for re-election. Over the succeeding years, this plan would result in the extension of subway lines to far-flung areas of the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens, making land accessible for lower-density development that would help disperse the congested population of the inner city.

While the plan did result in the construction of a number of subway lines to underdeveloped areas, the layout of subways in Manhattan was quite different from the earlier proposals of the Municipal Art Society, which would have more evenly distributed the lines across the island. Instead, to give the transit companies the ridership they craved, all of the lines were concentrated in the island's core, furthering the concentration of business in the central spine and leaving isolated the waterfronts with their docks and industries. In fact, to support the subway plan, McAneny diverted millions of dollars in

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<sup>68</sup> These negotiations, including McAneny's role in them as borough president, are described in detail in Derrick, *Tunneling to the Future*.





**Figure 40.** George McAneny, on reviewing stand, left, attends a groundbreaking for subway construction at 67th Street and Lexington Avenue, July 31, 1911. The Lexington Avenue line north of Grand Central Terminal was among the first to be constructed as part of the dual contracts that McAneny successfully negotiated.

Image source: Library of Congress

bonds that the city had originally designated for port upgrades, including a freight subway that would have served waterfront areas. As a result the docks continued to be hobbled by outmoded infrastructure. McAneny doubtless was personally sympathetic to port improvements, but he also was a man who was willing to make considerable sacrifices to achieve a singular objective that was within his grasp.<sup>69</sup>

Seeking political advantage, the press baron and mayoral hopeful William Randolph Hearst inserted himself into the controversies over the negotiations, attacking McAneny and the other members of the administration for what he characterized as excessive fealty to the transit companies, especially the IRT and its banker, J.P. Morgan. After the contracts were signed, Hearst kept up his attacks, pressuring the legislature into mounting a corruption investigation that ultimately bore no fruit. Hearst's motives were largely political, but Benjamin Marsh, likely frustrated with his rapidly dwindling influence, glommed onto this attack, accusing McAneny of pressuring his allies into supporting the contracts for nefarious reasons.<sup>70</sup> Neither a Marsh-style radical nor a Hearst-style demagogue, McAneny was more than willing to seek compromises with powerful members of the city's establishment; they placed their trust in him, and in return he did his best to work with them to achieve mutually satisfying ends. This strategy was fundamental to McAneny's character and his success as a planner; he became known as a persistent negotiator who kept his word, and as he employed it time and again, he built up a deep reservoir of trust among the civic elite that he was able to draw upon very effectively in his later years, when he was facing down Robert Moses. In the subway matter, despite the private misgivings of some, the results of his compromises would be

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 200–220; Gilmartin, *Shaping the City*, 183–85, 213.

<sup>70</sup> “Marsh Is Expelled from the City Club,” *The New York Times*, March 4, 1916.

acclaimed by nearly everyone, with the exceptions of Marsh, Hearst, and the city's dock commissioner, Calvin Tompkins, whose dreams of a modernized port were sacrificed for the subway plan.

The second area, zoning, in which McAneny was to make his name as a planner followed closely on the heels of the resolution of the subway contracts. In his early years as borough president, McAneny began to show enthusiasm for land-use regulation. The idea of height restrictions had been discussed by some of the city's architects in the decade before McAneny took office, and Benjamin Marsh in 1908 began to propose much more radical steps recommending not only controls on the height and area of buildings, but also on their uses. His aim was to use the restrictions to create planned industrial-residential suburbs across the East River as a replacement for the crowded tenement districts.<sup>71</sup> Although this idea probably seemed outlandish at the time, something like it was adopted within a decade, shepherded by McAneny.

Still, zoning became politically possible in New York City for a much less utopian reason. As residential holdouts on Fifth Avenue south of 57th Street gradually decamped, the avenue was becoming the city's preeminent shopping street. Because the property along the street was divided into small, separately owned parcels with narrow frontages, slender office buildings of much greater depth than width began to sprout on the avenue. As property values and taxes rose, more and more landowners were compelled to build higher. One of the effects of this process of infilling was to block the side windows which had originally let in light and air into the high buildings, rendering the interiors too poorly ventilated to be divided into offices. Instead, the lofts began to fill

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<sup>71</sup> Gilmartin, *Shaping the City*, 169–70.

with garment factories that desired to be near the shops to which they sold their products. Property values then began to fall, upsetting landowners, and shop owners feared that their wealthy female clients would be driven away by the presence of uncouth garment workers on the streets.<sup>72</sup>

As this process was evolving, an organization of merchants and landowners, the Fifth Avenue Association, was formed to promote improvements on the avenue. Somewhat similar in concept to the business improvement districts that would spring up in the late 20th century, the association was purely voluntary and had no connection with the city government—but it did have friends in the new city administration, including George McAneny, who, in his capacity as borough president, gave a talk on street widening at the association's first annual dinner in 1910.<sup>73</sup> The following year, McAneny announced to the association that he was appointing the Fifth Avenue Commission to study the problems of the avenue.<sup>74</sup> While mainly concerned with beautification and “improvements” such as widening, it was also charged by McAneny with considering the imposition of height limits for factory buildings and even “the control of the architecture of private buildings facing the avenue, with a view toward securing at least a harmonious scheme.”<sup>75</sup> The camel's nose of zoning was under the tent: Restrictions that had seemed radical a few years earlier were now being considered by an official city body. It was not long before McAneny was sponsoring legislation before the Board of Estimate that would have implemented a height limit on the avenue, which he

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 189–90.

<sup>73</sup> “Depew Bemoans Lack of Civic Pride,” *The New York Times*, November 30, 1910.

<sup>74</sup> “Citizens to Advise Fifth Ave. Changes: McAneny Appoints Commission to Aid Him in Making a ‘Street Beautiful.’”

<sup>75</sup> “To Increase Beauty of Fifth Avenue,” *The New York Times*, November 22, 1911.



**Figure 41.** In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, tall, thin buildings sprouted on Fifth Avenue lots below 23rd Street that had formerly contained townhouses. Many of these buildings filled with textile factories, whose uncouth workmen created an atmosphere that repelled affluent shoppers. This image shows one such building at Fifth Avenue and 22nd Street.

From the collections of the Museum of the City of New York. Photographed by the Byron Company, 1899. Retrieved from <http://collections.mcny.org/Collection/Fifth%20Avenue%20and%2022nd%20Street.-2F3XC58HA1UY.html>



**Figure 42.** This image depicts Fifth Avenue north from at 37th Street in 1910. Commercial development was moving north along the avenue, and merchants feared that factories would invade, as had occurred farther south on the avenue and on nearby side streets. Their efforts to limit building heights here set the stage for the city's adoption of zoning.

Irma and Paul Milstein Division of United States History, Local History and Genealogy, The New York Public Library. (1910). *Manhattan: 5th Avenue - 37th Street*. Retrieved from <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47dc-e3fa-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

declared was “the first step toward” a citywide zoning law.<sup>76</sup> This particular bill was defeated, but McAneny deployed his customary persistence, and in 1913, he convinced the Board of Estimate to appoint a commission that would consider height limits not just on Fifth Avenue, but throughout the city. This Height of Buildings Commission was chaired by McAneny, and he chose two of the most hardworking and able minds available to serve on its technical advisory committee: the architect George B. Ford and the lawyer Edward Bassett. Taking inspiration from ideas devised by the interior designer Charles Lamb and the architect Ernest Flagg years earlier, they created a system of setbacks and towers that was designed to ensure that light and air penetrated all high buildings while treating all property owners equitably. At Bassett’s urging, McAneny then convinced the Board of Estimate to create a second committee to divide the city into a scheme of zones, each to have distinct restrictions on height, bulk, and land use. By 1916, the real estate industry was thoroughly convinced that zoning would stabilize property values, and New York City had its comprehensive zoning resolution.<sup>77</sup>

Although McAneny was not involved in the day-to-day work of the committees, Bassett always insisted that he deserved credit for their legacy. In 1919, when McAneny was no longer in office, Bassett wrote to him: “Wherever I go I always speak of you as the father of zoning in this country.” He then added: “A considerable number of us also know that you were the father of the comprehensive rapid transit system which prevented New York City from becoming hide-bound and uneconomical. Some day these things will all be seen more clearly.”<sup>78</sup> What Bassett—who himself would be awarded a medal

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<sup>76</sup> Gilmartin, *Shaping the City*, 193–94.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 194–97.

<sup>78</sup> Edward Bassett to George McAneny, December 30, 1919, Box 54, George McAneny Papers, Princeton University.

declaring him the “father of zoning” by a joint committee of the architectural and engineering associations of New York—likely meant by this praise is that not that McAneny had pioneered the ideas himself or had implemented them through the force of his own will. Rather, if McAneny deserved a title such as “father of zoning,” it was because he had astutely recognized that the concepts had become both practically necessary and politically feasible, and then, to the utmost of his ability, he utilized his position and the relationships he had cultivated to convince other powerful actors to adopt and advance them as their own. In so doing, McAneny was expertly fulfilling the role of planner-as-coordinator that he defined the planning field as it was then emerging in the United States.

With the subway contracts settled and the zoning task well underway, McAneny could return to the object of his earlier ambition: comprehensive planning. In 1914, shortly after being elected as president of the board of aldermen (a position whose responsibilities were essentially those of a vice mayor), McAneny persuaded the Board of Estimate to name a third committee, called the Standing Committee on the City Plan. Although falling short of the independent planning commission that McAneny had earlier advocated for, the committee began a long-term planning program of its own: It named an advisory board of eminent experts in planning and development, and it started to collect and map data on population growth, land use and development, property values, transportation facilities, commuting times, and employment locations.<sup>79</sup> It also took a role in the city’s day-to-day governance, reviewing proposed capital improvements such as new streets. But McAneny was clear about its emphasis: this was no mere “beauty

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<sup>79</sup> George B. Ford, “City Planning in New York City,” *Real Estate Record and Builders’ Guide* 94, no. 2438 (December 5, 1914).

board,” as a *Times* headline had labeled one of his earlier city planning proposals; its intention was not “to lay out beautiful parks and boulevards, but to help guide the physical development of the city so as to promote its general welfare.”<sup>80</sup> And yet one of the first projects of the committee, led by McAneny, would be to attempt to prevent the destruction of one of the city’s most beloved landmarks: St. John’s Chapel.

From the perspective of the 21st century, the preservation of an old building may have seemed an unlikely task for a city plan committee in 1914, considering the apparent underdevelopment of the preservation field at the time. But viewed from a historical perspective, preservation in 1914 was not merely an amateur, marginal version of an activity that has since become more professionalized and entrenched in urban policy, but actually a quite different sort of undertaking, driven not by the logic of preservation for its own sake, but instead by the same set of values that drove the broader civic reform movement. In his study of preservation in the New York City region, Randall Mason argues that the 1910s approach to preservation was fundamentally motivated and shaped by the concerns of reformers like McAneny: to make the city cleaner, more efficient, and more rational, and, where historic sites were concerned, to pass down the proper appreciation for the values of the Founding Fathers to the waves of immigrants flooding the city.<sup>81</sup> The impulse toward preservation among civic elites, therefore, was not grounded in nostalgic associations or the desire to save historic character that often motivates 21st-century preservationists. In fact, when these sorts of motivations did drive a nascent City Beautiful preservation campaign, as on Second Avenue, the would-be

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<sup>80</sup> “City Beauty Board Urged by McAneny,” *The New York Times*, January 27, 1912; “To Be City Plan Advisers,” *The New-York Tribune*, November 23, 1914.

<sup>81</sup> Mason, *The Once and Future New York*, 233–41.



preservationists were crushed. Instead, the more successful preservationists, such as McAneny and his cohort of reformers, sought to actively shape the sites of civic relics, both programmatically and physically, to promote the values of reform. As a result, preservation often went hand-in-hand with destruction; by sweeping away the refuse and detritus of the corrupt 19th century city that surrounded genuine treasures, the few relics worth saving would finally stand out and assume their proper function as what Mason calls memory infrastructure. The result was that preservationists became fixated on specific objects, and much of the actual historic context of the sites they successfully preserved were, or at least were intended to be, stripped away in the name of preservation.

In his reminiscences, recorded by Columbia University's newly formed oral history program in 1949, McAneny spoke of his involvement in the attempted preservation of two significant pieces of memory infrastructure during this time: City Hall and its namesake park in downtown Manhattan, which were saved; and St. John's Chapel, which was demolished after a hard-fought preservation campaign.<sup>82</sup> While both cases hold interest as significant early preservation battles, examination of the broader schemes of which they became a part reveals a significant divergence from what New Yorkers would later come to understand the preservation movement to be about. Unlike the preservation campaigns of the 1950s and later, which were motivated by a desire to save the city's historic fabric, the preservation of both of these sites was closely tied to projects intended to clear away old buildings and neighborhoods and usher in the

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<sup>82</sup> "The Reminiscences of George McAneny."

modernization of the city. They were intended to be saved as prized relics to be put on display in the new landscape.

City Hall and City Hall Park were intended as components of a municipal civic center with the large, modern government facilities that the newly consolidated metropolis needed. By the time McAneny was in office, the place of City Hall—which itself had seemed destined for oblivion in the 1890s—was secured. In the early part of McAneny’s term as borough president, a portion of the park was threatened by proposals by the state legislature to use the “free” land within its boundaries for a courthouse. McAneny fought against this scheme, and by 1912, the park’s open space was reasonably secure. At the same time, McAneny and others retained and even expanded their ambitions for a grandiose civic center in the vicinity. The twin vehicles for this dream would be the construction of the new courthouses needed to handle growing caseloads and a network of new traffic arteries that would cut through the labyrinth of old streets surrounding City Hall to link them to the Manhattan and Brooklyn bridges. While a vast array of plans were floated over the years, the most expansive vision McAneny promoted would have ripped out the heart of New York’s Chinatown to build a broad boulevard connecting City Hall to the Manhattan Bridge. In the end, the city lacked the capacity to execute this plan, and by the 1940s New York’s civic center consisted of a clumsy array of courthouses and office buildings hulking over an awkward plaza, Foley Square, and a bleak traffic artery, Lafayette Street.

The St. John’s case reveals the conflicting municipal impulses that McAneny had to contend with while in office. While McAneny’s attempt to save St. John’s has been praised by later preservationists, it is no small irony that the very need to preserve the

chapel arose in large part because it was directly in the path of a combined subway–avenue plan that he himself forcefully championed. By the time McAneny began to seriously consider the need to save St. John’s, the design had been completed and it was difficult to change the plans. Moreover, far from making the city more beautiful, the entire boulevard—today’s Seventh Avenue South and Varick Street—was designed and built hurriedly and clumsily without any regard to its impact on its surroundings. St. John’s, had it been saved, would have been a glaring exception to the unimaginative vision that directed the construction of the avenue.

## **7. Making a Modern Civic Center**

The land on which New York’s civic center sits is as fraught with the complexities of civic meaning and memory as any place in any city in the United States. In colonial days, what later became City Hall Park, known then as the Commons, was situated at the northern edge of the settlement. Immediately to the north, in the area that is now the civic center, were swampy lands that drained into the Collect Pond, the early municipality’s source of drinking water. As early as 1712, these lands were being used to bury African slaves, while the Commons, on high ground to the south, became the site of civic festivals and assemblies for visiting dignitaries. Well before the American Revolution, the pond was drained, and the area north of the Commons began to be filled in with streets. The Commons itself became a repository of various civic buildings, including barracks and a jail built in 1757. In the years before the American Revolution, the Commons became a site of conflict between British soldiers stationed in the barracks and American “sons of liberty,” who erected so-called liberty poles to symbolize resistance to British rule. It was here that Alexander Hamilton purportedly met George

Washington for the first time, and where Washington was present for a public reading of the Declaration of Independence. The British held the city for most of the Revolutionary War, during which time the jail housed thousands of prisoners of war, including Ethan Allen, leading to its later reputation as a so-called “martyr’s prison.”<sup>83</sup>

After the revolution, the city’s economy shifted from that of a mercantile trading port on the imperial frontier to the commercial capital of an expanding continental nation, and its population increased dramatically. The low-lying ground that had formerly been the Collect Pond became one of the rapidly growing city’s earliest slums. By the 1830s, this neighborhood, known as Five Points, was already being targeted for slum clearance in what must have been one of the earliest urban renewal efforts in the United States. Although the clearance effort targeted the removal of a small pocket of buildings, little consideration had been given to what would replace them. Civic leaders assumed that private enterprise would create a more wholesome environment on its own once the offending structures were removed.<sup>84</sup> Unsurprisingly, the slum characteristics of the neighborhood persisted. Fifty years later, in 1887, the state legislature passed an act enabling the city to demolish slums and create parks in their stead, and the following year plans were made to finally clear the area, which had become known as Mulberry Bend, for good. After nearly a decade of wrangling between politicians, municipal staff, and property owners, the buildings were demolished and the park was opened.<sup>85</sup> Nonetheless, a dense concentration of tenements remained in the area just beyond the park, which was becoming the city’s Chinatown.

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<sup>83</sup> Gale Harris, Jeane Howson, and Betsy Bradley, “African Burial Ground and the Commons Designation Report” (New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, February 1993).

<sup>84</sup> Elizabeth Blackmar, *Manhattan for Rent, 1785-1850* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), 176.

<sup>85</sup> Page, *The Creative Destruction of Manhattan, 1900-1940*, 85–87.

The Commons site continued to accumulate civic buildings. Most notably, John McComb's 1811 French Renaissance-inspired City Hall replaced an almshouse that had been erected in 1735. By the 1840s, the area to the south of City Hall was a manicured park with pathways, a fountain, and an ornamental gate. As the city's fashionable quarter drifted farther and farther uptown, however, the utility of a downtown park became less apparent. After the Civil War a portion of the land was transferred to the federal government, which erected a post office, a ponderous Victorian building.<sup>86</sup> Municipal attention shifted to new parks farther uptown, closer to the homes of the rich.

It was easy for reformers to cast the decline of City Hall Park and its surroundings as an all-too-visible reminder of the degeneracy of the industrial city, controlled by corrupt machine politicians who manipulated the working-class hordes. Fittingly, the building known as the Tweed Courthouse, which became the city's most potent symbol of machine corruption and wasteful inefficiency, had been raised behind City Hall beginning in 1861. There were also practical concerns: municipal operations had simply outgrown the available space in the old buildings, which were repeatedly reused. The Martyr's Prison, for example, had served as the municipal Hall of Records since 1830. Beginning in 1888, the city government and the state legislature began to consider a dizzying series of plans to expand or replace City Hall and renovate the park with new structures. The city's operations had become desperately overcrowded, and it was generally agreed that an expanded municipal complex was needed, especially since the city was paying commercial rates to rent office space in various buildings near the park. A lengthy battle was fought in the legislature, in the deliberations of various

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<sup>86</sup> Harris, Howson, and Bradley, "African Burial Ground and the Commons Designation Report"; Mason, *The Once and Future New York*, 169.

commissions, and in the press over whether to save City Hall and the other buildings in the park and what form the new municipal complex, which was increasingly conceived as a grand civic center, would take.<sup>87</sup>

One outcome of these deliberations was that, although its surroundings had grown seedy and the government it housed was riven with graft, City Hall itself was raised to nearly mythical status. According to New York's foremost planner of the 19th century, City Hall was more than just a building; it was the receptacle of civic memory. "Its erection was coeval with a group of enterprises that distinctly marks an era in the material progress of the City," Andrew Haswell Green wrote in 1894, protesting to a proposal to relocate the building to what is now Bryant Park in Midtown.<sup>88</sup> "Here ... was given ... the freedom of the city, in a golden box, to that Corypheus of Democracy, Andrew Jackson, and here four generations of New Yorkers have been accustomed to witness imposing displays." Green's mythmaking was in response to questions like those posed in 1893 by the *New York Times*, which, after cataloguing a number of the building's "disreputable associations," such as bribery and theft conducted by public officials, asked "whether these unpleasant associations of a great city's shame do not overshadow the dim recollections of the patriotic and remote past."<sup>89</sup> By the time McAneny took office, the answer was no, they did not; the myth was entrenched, and it had been firmly established that the historic City Hall would remain preserved on its site. The new ideal was that City Hall ought to stand alone on a pristine site, a "jewel in a jewel box," as

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<sup>87</sup> Mason, *The Once and Future New York*, 143–50, 157.

<sup>88</sup> Andrew Haswell Green, "The Preservation of the Historic City Hall of New York." (New York: New York State Society, Sons of the American Revolution, 1894).

<sup>89</sup> "Fate of the Old City Hall: Its Preservation Not Opposed by Municipal Officials," *The New York Times*, January 29, 1893.

Randall Mason has termed it.<sup>90</sup> The only other building in City Hall Park that had attracted preservation interest, the Martyrs' Prison, was a true relic of the Revolution, but it had been extensively modified for its use as the city's Hall of Records—in response to calls for its preservation, the *New York Times* scornfully labeled it a “modern sham”—and it was demolished for subway construction in 1903.<sup>91</sup>

George McAneny readily partook of the myth of City Hall's early history. Upon taking office, McAneny, with the help of the philanthropist Olivia Slocum Sage, provided for the restoration of a warren of offices, which had originally been the council chamber, as a committee room for the Board of Estimate, thereby returning it to something approaching its original use; he also arranged for the entire building to be renovated by Grosvenor Atterbury, an architect who was sympathetic to preservation. This work was actually an extension of a project that had begun in 1908, when Sage had paid for Atterbury's restoration of the reception suite known as the Governor's Room. Atterbury, who located McComb's original plans, intended his restorations to return the interior of the building as nearly as possible to its original appearance.<sup>92</sup>

The restorations sponsored by McAneny and Sage and directed by Atterbury secured City Hall's place as a piece of the city's memory infrastructure. But its park remained highly contested ground. On the one hand, the place itself was hallowed: City Hall Park was “land made sacred by venerated traditions of every period of our city's history,” in the words of Edward Hagaman Hall, president of the American Scenic and

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<sup>90</sup> Mason, *The Once and Future New York*, 157.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 166–68.

<sup>92</sup> Gilmartin, *Shaping the City*, 334–35; Mary Beth Betts, “The Governor's Room, City Hall, New York” (Art Commission of the City of New York, November 1983).

Historic Preservation Society, in 1910.<sup>93</sup> Still, restoring a landmark building was one thing, but memorializing the sacred landscape in which it sat was a different kind of project altogether. As Hall's paean to the site implied, its history was complex and multilayered. But acknowledgement of the complexity of this history ran contrary to the reformers' impulse to simplify history and consecrate monuments to an idealized past. Hence, when a coalition of civic groups, led by the City Club, published a pamphlet in 1910 urging against the construction of a large courthouse behind City Hall, they elided this history and argued merely that "the park may almost be said to be an essential part of the City Hall, which was designed to stand in an open space, removed from other buildings." To support their case, the groups presented sketches showing a City Hall Park shorn of all structures apart from City Hall itself.<sup>94</sup> Although not aimed at Hall, whose preservation society also vehemently protested the courthouse proposal, their position did imply a rejection of Hall's formulation concerning the significance of the site's layered history. In fact, the assertion that City Hall was "designed" to stand alone was part of the reformers' 20th-century mythmaking and had little to do with the circumstances surrounding its original plan or the actual history of the Commons before and after it was built. Returning the park to its appearance at the time of City Hall's construction would have required reconstructing a number of structures that had been removed over the previous few decades, including the very recently demolished Martyrs' Prison.

In 1910, George McAneny took office as borough president of Manhattan in an administration that was initially open to using land in the park for the new courthouse,

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<sup>93</sup> Mason, *The Once and Future New York*, 121.

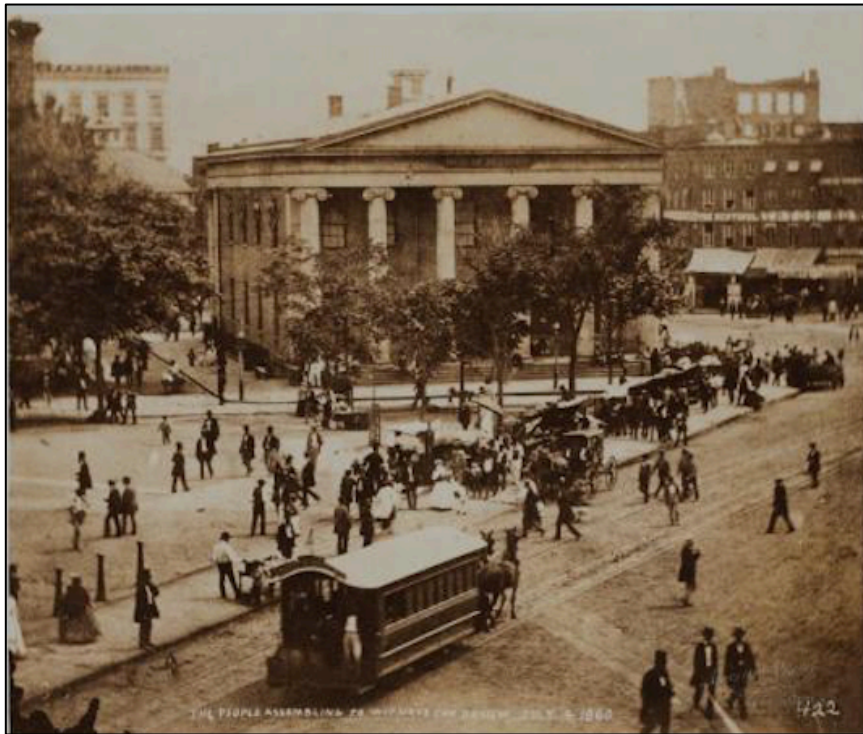
<sup>94</sup> "Save the City Hall and the City Hall Park" (The City Club, The People's Institute, and The Fine Arts Federation, 1910).





**Figure 43.** City Hall, shown here ca. 1904, was completed in 1811 on the Commons, which became known as City Hall Park. By the early 20th century, City Hall was considered to be worthy of preservation, but the future of its surroundings was in doubt. Immediately behind City Hall, and still within the grounds of the park, can be seen the so-called Tweed Courthouse and, to its right, two smaller structures: a brownstone office building and a firehouse. During McAneny's term in office, a major controversy erupted over whether to replace the Tweed Courthouse with a much larger structure. The city's civic reformers and architects generally favored clearing all structures from the park except City Hall and building a new courthouse a few blocks north.

Image source: Library of Congress



**Figure 44.** The jail that became known as the “martyrs’ prison” during the Revolutionary War was given a neoclassical façade and converted into the city’s Hall of Records in 1830. It stood within City Hall Park on the east flank of City Hall until it was demolished in 1903 for subway construction. (A new Hall of Records was built across Chambers Street to the north.) Some preservationists desired to save this building for its historical associations, but it was removed for subway construction.

Irma and Paul Milstein Division of United States History, Local History and Genealogy, The New York Public Library. (1860). *Manhattan: City Hall Park - Old Hall of Records*. Retrieved from <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47dd-345b-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>



**Figure 45.** City Hall and its park were depicted in numerous illustrations in the decades preceding the Civil War. In this ca. 1830 watercolor, the Hall of Records is visible to the right of the building, and another building is visible behind it within the park space. This and other illustrations of the era belie later claims that City Hall was meant to stand alone.

From the collections of the Museum of the City of New York. Unknown artist, ca. 1830. Retrieved from <http://collections.mcny.org/Collection/City%20Hall%20Park-2F3XC54OGSO.html>

which it was widely agreed was needed (and had been for some time) to keep up with growing caseloads. Soon after taking office, Gaynor and McAneny were presented with a state legislative bill that would have allowed the city to replace the hated Tweed Courthouse, which stood in the park immediately behind City Hall, with a much larger structure occupying more of the site. At a poorly attended hearing with scant opposition present, McAneny agreed that the new building could occupy the entire south blockfront of Chambers Street from Broadway to Centre Street.<sup>95</sup> Mayor Gaynor then appointed a courthouse board to weigh this site against other possible sites. Within a month, however, fierce opposition emerged from the city's architects, led by Grosvenor Atterbury, followed by opprobrium from other civic groups.<sup>96</sup> Nonetheless, the administration remained noncommittal, and the following year its Court House Board recommended using the land in the park, which the city already owned, for the new structure. Opposition reached a fever pitch, and the state legislature issued an ultimatum to the city: find another site within six months, or use the park site.<sup>97</sup> McAneny adopted a public role as a facilitator, never explicitly signing on to his fellow reformers' vehement opposition to the park site. Instead, he hosted meetings of the court house board in his office in which he worked to nudge the members toward a site to the northeast, well outside the park, which he hinted to a newspaper reporter was the most likely site for the building.<sup>98</sup>

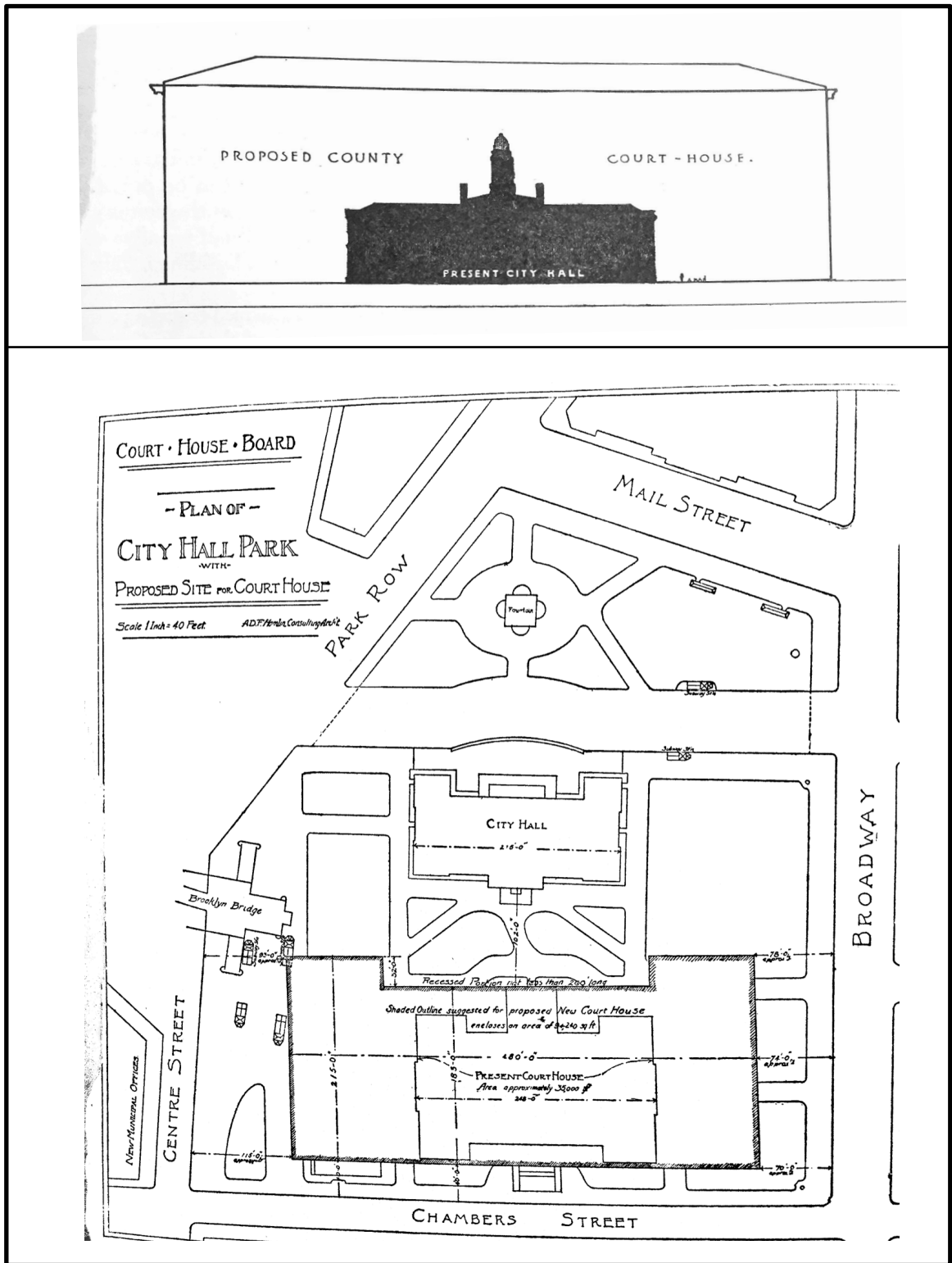
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<sup>95</sup> "Court House on Old Site: The Mayor Approves the Bill Selecting City Hall Park for New Structure," *The New York Times*, February 11, 1910.

<sup>96</sup> Mason, *The Once and Future New York*, 154–55; "Oppose City Hall Park Site for Court," *The New York Times*, March 6, 1910.

<sup>97</sup> Mason, *The Once and Future New York*, 157.

<sup>98</sup> "Civic Bodies Try to Save City Hall Park," *The New York Times*, May 6, 1911; "Conference To-Day on Court House Site," *The New York Times*, October 13, 1911.



**Figure 46.** In 1910, a coalition of civic societies battled the new municipal administration over a proposal to build a massive courthouse behind the existing city hall. This simple diagram and plan were prepared to show that the new building would overwhelm the historic structure. (In the plan, north is at the bottom.)

Image source: "Save the City Hall and the City Hall Park" (The City Club, The People's Institute, and The Fine Arts Federation, 1910).

In this instance, McAneny was acting in the planner-as-coordinator role that would serve him so successfully in the subway and city hall cases.

But McAneny was soon to reveal grander ambitions for the courthouse project, the genesis of which may have dated back to his time as City Club president. At that time, a different Court House Board was considering whether to site the new building in the vicinity of City Hall or elsewhere in Manhattan, and the City Club took an interest in the matter. In 1906, Albert Bard, an attorney associated with various civic reform groups, had prepared a memorandum for the club suggesting that a site to the north of City Hall would be appropriate, considering that it was an area that needed redevelopment. The memorandum suggested that the then-theoretical power of excess condemnation could be used in conjunction with the courthouse to acquire and redevelop a wider area—a radical proposal at that time.<sup>99</sup> As soon as the Board of Estimate finally settled on site outside the bounds of City Hall Park, McAneny resurrected the idea of large-scale clearance and redevelopment. The chosen site was four square blocks in area located just north of City Hall, but McAneny contemplated a much larger scheme of redevelopment that would have acquired additional areas to the east and driven a new boulevard from there through Mulberry Bend Park and Chinatown to the Manhattan Bridge. McAneny argued that the private redevelopment of the slums that would be spurred by this project would raise sufficient additional tax revenue to pay for a portion of the cost of the improvements.<sup>100</sup> He and his engineers continued to refine the plan, and in February 1913 he presented a more elaborate version of it in a speech to the American Institute of Architects, in which

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<sup>99</sup> Albert Bard and J. Frederic Kernochan, "Memorandum," March 16, 1906, Box 109, George McAneny Papers, Princeton University.

<sup>100</sup> "Court House Site Is Now Determined," *The New York Times*, January 19, 1912.

he called for collaboration with the state and federal governments. It would include not only the city's courthouse and the boulevard to the Manhattan Bridge, but also space for a federal courthouse, a state office building, and parking lots. The provision of so much space for public buildings, he said, would at last allow for the removal of the cumbersome post office from the southern end of City Hall Park. Echoing the City Club's 1910 call for a park shorn of encroachments, he predicted that "we shall see the City Hall stand as it stood a century ago in the centre of the historic and beautiful common of the old days, though in the midst of the crowning wonders of the new."<sup>101</sup>

The tenement neighborhoods of the Lower East Side, especially Chinatown, had long been condemned by newspapers as a zone of vice, and editors relished the idea that they might finally be done away with. Commenting on the proposal for the courthouse and the accompanying boulevard through Chinatown, the *Municipal Journal* inferred that "the slums of this neighborhood are doomed."<sup>102</sup> The *Times* approvingly remarked, "Mr. McAneny's address conveys assurance that these attractive plans are now under careful consideration, and that they will be carried out intelligently if wise counsels prevail ..."<sup>103</sup> Not to be outdone by McAneny, the Court House Board itself, seemingly anticipating the radical vision of wholesale urban redevelopment that the French architect Le Corbusier would popularize in the 1920s, prepared an even more grandiose scheme that would have replaced both the blocks north of City Hall and the entirety of Chinatown with a sequence of gigantic superblocks that would have contained five massive public building complexes, each surrounded by a moat of greenery. The *Times* commented that

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<sup>101</sup> "M'Aneny Has Bigger Civic Centre Plan," *The New York Times*, February 21, 1913.

<sup>102</sup> "Contemplated Street Improvements in New York," *Municipal Journal*, January 16, 1913.

<sup>103</sup> "The Civic Centre Plans," *The New York Times*, February 22, 1913.

the scheme “would have very great advantages. In the first place it would remove from the face of the earth Chinatown and all its neighboring tenement houses.”<sup>104</sup> In this scheme for urban renewal, like that of Mulberry Bend Park itself two decades earlier, the objective was to purify the slum districts by clearing them away and starting fresh. Moreover, although the scheme would have destroyed a residential neighborhood, scant attention was paid to the question of rehousing the inhabitants or maintaining their community.

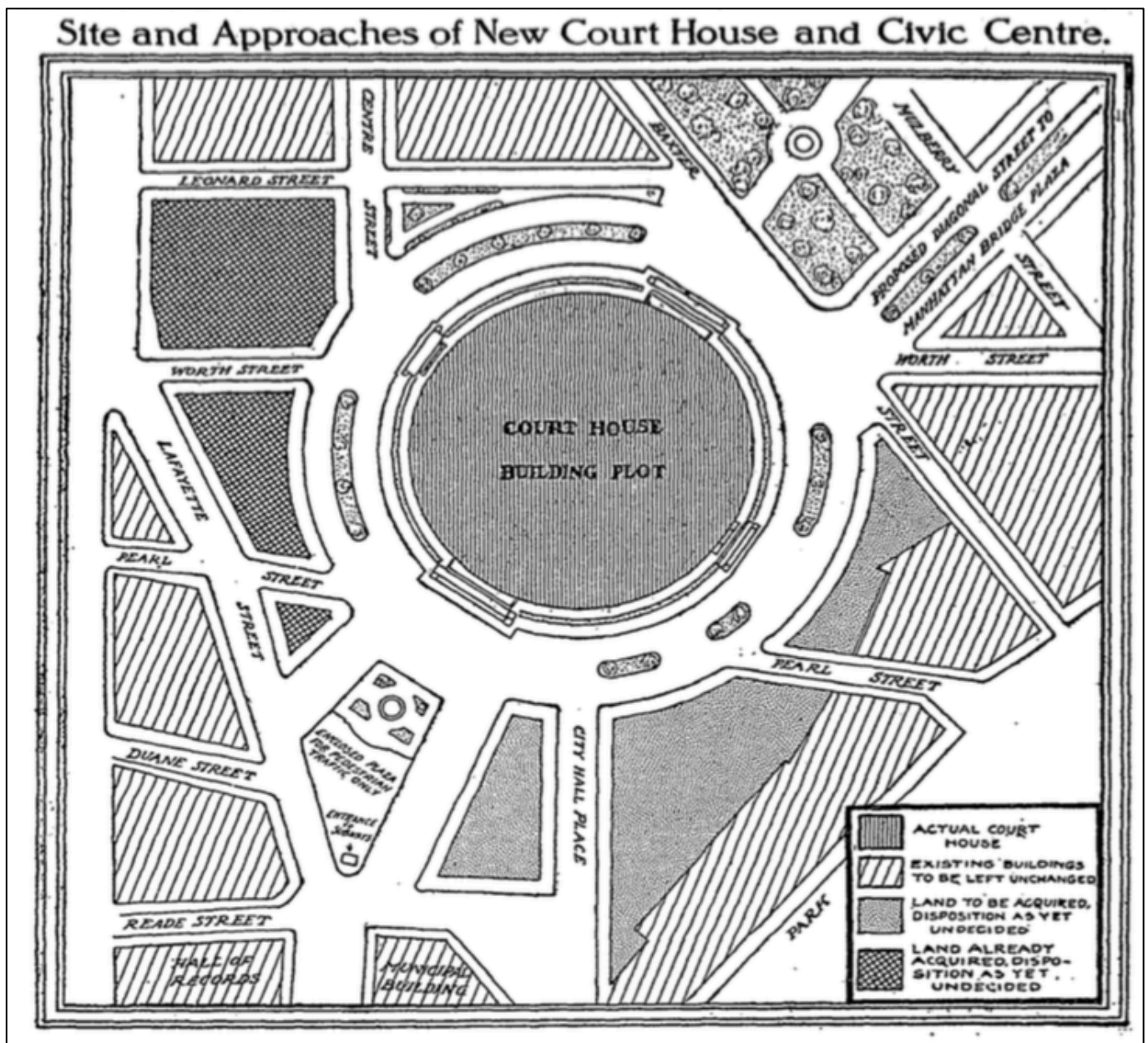
While the voices of the residents of Chinatown and the nearby tenements are absent from the record, other interested parties soon raised objections, and by 1915, it had become apparent that the ever larger schemes for the civic center exceeded what the city could realistically accomplish. As it typically did for projects of this sort, the administration proposed to use assessments on adjoining properties to pay for the plan, which drew forceful objections from the real estate community. These same objectors also raised doubts over the soil conditions on the courthouse site, the city’s fiscal capacity to build the project, and the general practicability of such an ambitious proposal. Worse, the state and federal governments, which McAneny had assumed would develop the core of the civic center, balked at the idea of working with the city. Calling for a halt to the project, the president of the Real Estate Board of New York sarcastically remarked that “the public became interested by the fine statement of Mr. McAneny [and] was led to believe in the city beautiful and the wiping out of sordid Chinatown ....”<sup>105</sup> An anonymous “real estate authority” told the *Real Estate Record and Builders’ Guide* that

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<sup>104</sup> “Briggs’s New Plan for a Civic Centre,” *The New York Times*, March 3, 1913.

<sup>105</sup> “Realty Men Doubt Court House Site,” *The New York Times*, May 24, 1914; “Calls Court House Mad Extravagance,” *The New York Times*, June 14, 1915.

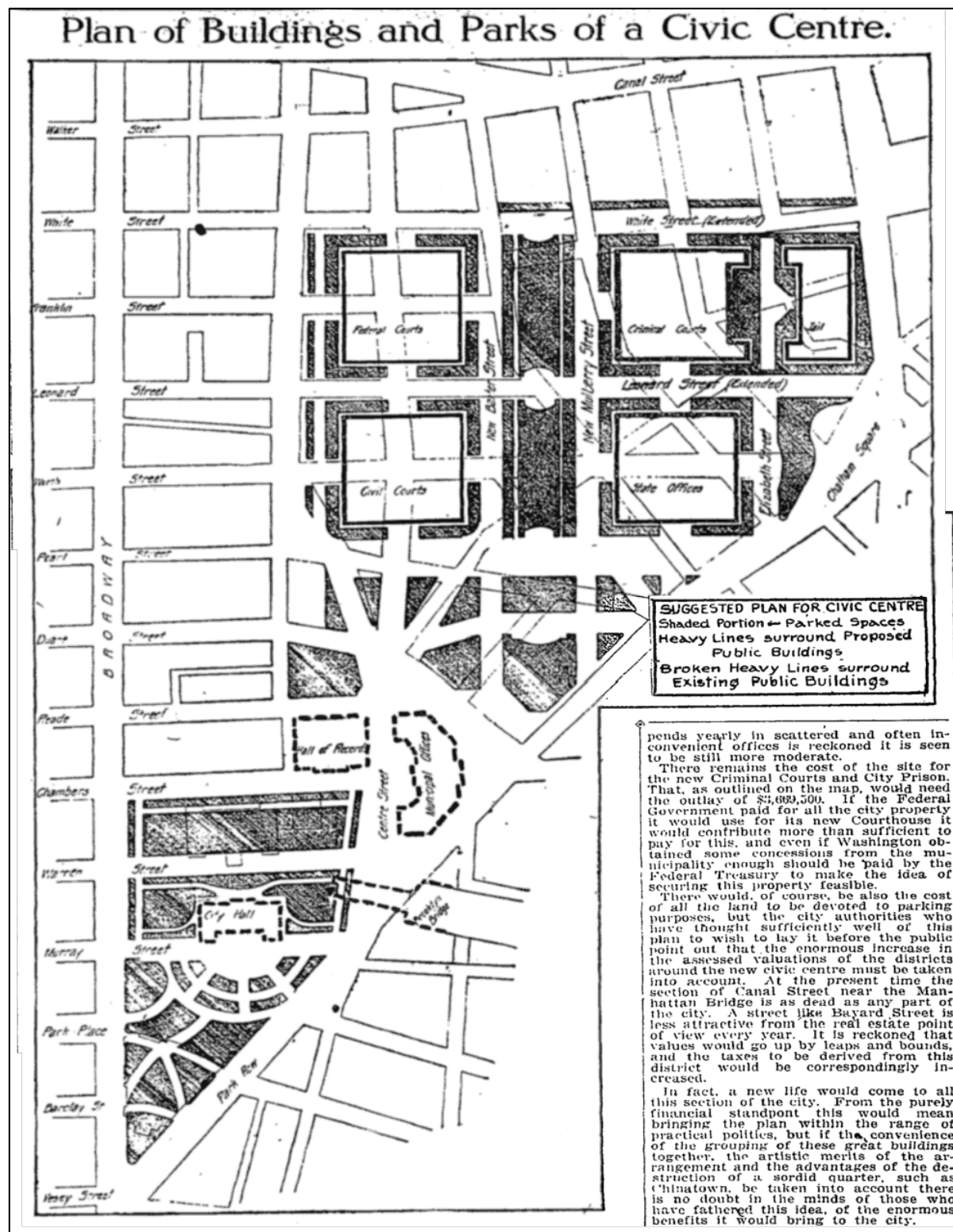




**Figure 47.** While borough president, McAneny developed an alternative plan for a new courthouse that would have placed it several blocks north of City Hall Park. He envisioned the courthouse as part of a broader scheme for the entire area between City Hall and the Manhattan Bridge in which public infrastructure investments would spur private developers to demolish and redevelop tenements. In the version of the scheme shown here, a large circular courthouse would have occupied much of the area between the existing municipal complex (lower left) and Mulberry Bend Park (upper right). A boulevard would have continued through the park and the tenements to the northeast, leading to the Manhattan Bridge.

Image source: "Changes in New Court House Plan," *The New York Times*, May 11, 1914.





**Figure 48.** This extraordinary plan was proposed by the city's Court House Board in March 1913. Contrary to the board's earlier proposal to build a new courthouse in City Hall Park, it would have cleared the park of all structures except for City Hall and wiped away both Mulberry Bend Park and Chinatown in favor of a series of superblocks containing massive government facilities surrounded by moats of green space.

Image source: "Briggs's New Plan for a Civic Centre," *The New York Times*, March 3, 1913.

the city, which “has been led on by degrees by city planners,” should sell off the land it had already acquired and that “the civic center scheme should be shelved as too extravagant.”<sup>106</sup> In subsequent years, the courthouse plan itself would be plagued by continual funding shortfalls and political controversies over its cost that would repeatedly curtail its scope and city-shaping ambitions. Although a civic center was eventually built in the area with the cooperation of the state and federal governments, it never approached the scale or scope of the ambitious scheme that McAneny had envisioned.<sup>107</sup>

There is evidence that McAneny learned a bitter lesson from the civic center debacle. In the midst of the controversy in 1915, contemplating the construction of Versailles and Napoleon III’s reconstruction of Paris, he remarked wistfully that “many of the greatest triumphs of building architecture and landscape architecture could never have been achieved except under a monarchical form of government. Consideration for the humble taxpayer would have prevented the expenditures which alone made these triumphs possible.” In New York, however, “questions of cost come first,” and city planning is “primarily a matter of ... conservation and economy.”<sup>108</sup> With the successes of the zoning law and the subway contracts under his belt, McAneny must have understood that his role in city-shaping was more coordinator than dictator.

But lurking beneath the surface of McAneny’s thinking about municipal administration was the notion that a meritocratic elite of planners could transform society, even if they had to do so in a cost-conscious way. In 1915, McAneny wrote:

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<sup>106</sup> “The City’s Court House Problem,” *Real Estate Record and Builders’ Guide* 95, no. 2465 (June 12, 1915): 997–98.

<sup>107</sup> Robert A. M. Stern, Gregory Gilmartin, and John Montague Massengale, *New York 1900: Metropolitan Architecture and Urbanism, 1890-1915* (New York: Rizzoli, 1983), 68.

<sup>108</sup> “Address of George McAneny before the Architectural League and the Fine Arts Federation,” February 9, 1915, Box 1, George McAneny Papers, Princeton University.



**Figure 49.** Although detailed plans were drawn up for the circular courthouse, they were eventually reduced in scope to this hexagonal building, which formed the nucleus of Foley Square to the north of City Hall. While federal and state facilities were eventually built in Foley Square, they did not spur the private redevelopment of nearby slums, as McAneny had hoped.

From the collections of the Museum of the City of New York. Photographed by Wurts Bros., 1927. Retrieved from <http://collections.mcny.org/Collection/Foley%20Square.%20New%20York%20County%20Courthouse,%20front%20view.-2F3XC5FSS00.html>

“Through the larger use of the powers and resources of the city, for the promotion of more sensible and practical education, for the compulsory development of better housing and living conditions, for public recreation, for more scientific sanitary and health work, and for the eradication of conditions, social and otherwise, which breed disease and immorality and fill our institutions with publicly supported dependents or delinquents, we can actually reduce the net cost of individual living and at the same time breed a better city dwelling race. Too often measures of this sort are decried, even by ‘good citizens,’ as paternalistic or wasteful of public funds. Such critics must be brought to take a saner view.”<sup>109</sup>

These beliefs about city planning incorporated two common strands of thought typical of the reform movement: first, McAneny was advocating for environmentalism, the idea that people’s attitudes and behaviors were highly malleable and could be shaped by the conditions of the place in which they lived. Second, he was expressing a reaction to the waste and inefficiency of political machines, which were standing in the way of the transformation of cities and, by extension, their people. McAneny believed that both machine corruption and the attempts to prevent it within the existing framework of city government had led to municipal paralysis, and that what was needed was not more measures to check the inherent dishonesty of elected officials, but rather rule-by-expert. He looked longingly to German cities, where “the government of a city ... is not regarded as a task for some citizen, popular among his fellows ... it is regarded as the task of an expert.” Above all, he derided the effects of machine politics on American cities, in which attempts to deal with corruption led to “a veritable chaos of checks and balances” that have “bound and fettered our officers.” Instead, American cities should strive to

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<sup>109</sup> George McAneny, “Municipal Citizenship,” in *Yale Review*, vol. IV, New Series, 1915, 74–75.

“reduce to a minimum the number of city officers to be elected by direct vote of the people” and “centralize executive responsibility.”<sup>110</sup>

Decades later, control of the development of the city would be placed in the hands of a man, Robert Moses, who, with the help of the federal government, was able to obtain “powers and resources” approaching the scope that McAneny had envisioned for the experts that he believed should be running cities. But in the fiscally constrained city of the 1910s, the reformers lacked the policy tools needed to exert centralized control, and McAneny and his fellow reformers were prevented from enacting their most brazen ideas about reshaping the city. They often had to settle for half-measures, as is evident from the one major boulevard that McAneny did build: Seventh Avenue South and its southern extension, a widened Varick Street.

## **8. A New Avenue Meets an Old Chapel**

As George McAneny negotiated with rapid transit franchisees on what would eventually become the Dual Contracts with the Interborough Rapid Transit and Brooklyn Rapid Transit companies, one of his highest priorities was to ensure that the proposed southerly extension of the west side subway line under Seventh Avenue was completed as soon as possible. The original west side subway ran north from 42nd Street, leaving the newly constructed Pennsylvania Station, eight blocks south, without a rapid transit connection. Having worked for the Pennsylvania Railroad before entering politics, McAneny was keenly aware of the need for a subway line on the lower West Side to link the new station with downtown, and the railroad and its financial backers kept up the

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 70, 72–73, 76.

pressure on City Hall after McAneny was elected.<sup>111</sup> There was no obvious path for the subway to travel on its way downtown; Seventh Avenue ended at 11th Street.

As early as 1904, the Municipal Art Society proposed extending Seventh Avenue through Greenwich Village to connect with Varick Street. Under the Tammany administration that preceded the Fusion victory in 1909, concrete proposals had surfaced to extend both Sixth and Seventh avenues south from their existing termini through the neighborhood. It was generally thought that extending these avenues would be a shot in the arm for real estate values on the lower West Side, and neighborhood groups dominated by business owners agitated for them.<sup>112</sup> Given the lethargic pace of municipal enterprise under the Tammany regime, these ambitious proposals would likely have remained pipe dreams were it not for the election of McAneny and his fellow reformers in 1909.

Soon after taking office, John Purroy Mitchel, the newly elected comptroller, and George McAneny presided over Board of Estimate hearings on the proposed extension of Seventh Avenue, which was being tied ever more closely to the extension of the subway. The City Improvement Commission and the Municipal Art Society endorsed proposals to build a new street that would slice directly through the residential Village from 11th Street to Varick Street, at an obtuse angle to the existing street grid. Varick Street and other surrounding streets would also be widened under these schemes. As with the street widenings that were roiling other neighborhoods, McAneny pressed for quick action on the new avenue. In July, the board approved the scheme, and a year later, it allocated \$2

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<sup>111</sup> Derrick, *Tunneling to the Future*, 196.

<sup>112</sup> Christine Boyer, ed., "Straight Down Christopher Street: A Tale of the Oldest Street in Greenwich Village," in *Greenwich Village: Culture and Counterculture* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 48–49.

million to undertake the work. Aside from the general notion that the new street would raise property values in the surrounding area, little heed, it seems, was given to its impact on landmarks or of the character of the neighborhood. Unlike the Second Avenue widening on the lower East Side, which roused the opposition of churches and charities, the civic societies of Greenwich Village, led by the settlement-house reformer Mary Simkhovitch, came to favor this plan, as they felt that that improved transportation connections would attract middle-class residents to the neighborhood, helping to stabilize it.<sup>113</sup>

Even after the funds were approved, wrangling over assessments for surrounding property owners held up progress on the new street. When a public improvement was made, the city typically imposed a charge on nearby property owners to recoup the cost of the city's expenditure. Many residents of the neighborhood, while favoring the project, were unenthusiastic about paying for the extension, arguing that the earlier Hudson & Manhattan tubes under Christopher Street had done nothing to improve business in the area and that the new underground line would similarly benefit only the railroad companies.<sup>114</sup> External pressures to complete the west side subway under the new street became the impetus for extending the avenue as quickly as possible.

In 1910, Penn Station opened at 32nd Street and Seventh Avenue without direct access to a rapid transit line, rendering the situation urgent. The following year, the Pennsylvania Railroad pressured city officials to make the construction of the west side

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<sup>113</sup> Gerald W. McFarland, *Inside Greenwich Village: A New York City Neighborhood, 1898-1918* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 212–215; “Night Hearing Held by Estimate Board,” *The New York Times*, April 13, 1910.

<sup>114</sup> “Night Hearing Held by Estimate Board”; “Insist on Extension of Seventh Avenue,” *The New York Times*, November 25, 1912.

subway a priority, and in 1912, the Public Service Commission sent a letter to McAneny threatening to pursue an alternate route through Washington Square Park if the Seventh Avenue extension and Varick Street widening were not completed soon. As with the earlier street widenings, McAneny's desire to achieve rapid results trumped any concerns about preservation, and construction began in 1913, before the conclusion of the reformers' initial terms of office.<sup>115</sup> During that election year, McAneny was seriously considering running for mayor, and his work to widen and plan new streets figured prominently in the publicity material that was distributed in view of a possible candidacy.<sup>116</sup>

The Board of Estimate, in a motion sponsored by McAneny, chose to build its new avenue in the most parsimonious way possible, acquiring a perfectly linear strip of property exactly 100 feet in width from 11th Street to Carmine Street—and not one morsel of adjoining land. It also authorized the acquisition of a 35-foot-wide strip along Varick Street. The straight-line method recommended by the Board's engineer, Nelson Lewis, led to some bizarre results: one property on which an apartment house had been situated was reduced to a 500-square-inch triangle which the landowner refused to voluntarily surrender to the city; the tiny holdout was defiantly immortalized by a tiled mosaic in the sidewalk asserting its owner's rights.<sup>117</sup> Where buildings were directly in the way of the extension, they were destroyed, but those merely grazed by it were instead amputated, leaving oddly shaped remnant structures up and down the avenue. In total,

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<sup>115</sup> Derrick, *Tunneling to the Future*, 195–196; “Insist on Extension of Seventh Avenue”; “Great Destruction in Old Greenwich,” *The New York Times*, November 25, 1913.

<sup>116</sup> A glowing review of McAneny's accomplishments in the field of planning, including his street and subway work, is set out in “A Biography of Our Next Mayor,” *The Boys' Paper*, May 1913, Box 1, George McAneny Papers, Princeton University.

<sup>117</sup> Terry Miller, *Greenwich Village and How It Got That Way* (New York: Crown, 1990), 37.



over 250 buildings were demolished in a process that took years to complete.<sup>118</sup> The impact might have been greater were it not for McAneny's new zoning resolution: the Greenwich Village Improvement Society successfully lobbied the city to protect the residential character of the surrounding streets in the new law, mitigating the possibility that commercial development would spill over from the new thoroughfare.<sup>119</sup> According to Lewis, the Board of Estimate was reluctant to acquire any excess land lest the city government be accused of indulging in socialism, a statement which demonstrates how far McAneny's ambitions for a powerful local government were from political reality at the time.<sup>120</sup> Work on the Varick Street widening commenced in 1913; in the first five blocks alone, 40 small houses were destroyed, and by the fall the portico of St. John's Chapel lay directly in the wreckers' path.<sup>121</sup> Yet despite the entreaties of the railroad interests to move quickly, construction would subsequently be delayed, and in the interim exhaustive attempts would be made to save the chapel.

Designed in 1807 by John McComb, who was also the architect of City Hall, St. John's Chapel had originally anchored an upscale residential square in a newly developing part of the city. While it retained an active congregation into the early 1900s, by its centennial the chapel was also treasured by the city's art and history aficionados, the ranks of whom included many leading citizens, for the stately proportions of its

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<sup>118</sup> "Greenwich Village Historic District Designation Report" (New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, 1969); Olivia Klose, "Greenwich Village Historic District Extension II Designation Report" (New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, June 22, 2010); Boyer, "Straight Down Christopher Street: A Tale of the Oldest Street in Greenwich Village"; "Landmarks Doomed for New Avenue," *The New York Times*, October 5, 1915.

<sup>119</sup> McFarland, *Inside Greenwich Village*, 215.

<sup>120</sup> "Seventh Avenue Extension Imminent," *Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide* 90, no. 2337 (December 28, 1912): 1195–96.

<sup>121</sup> "Great Destruction in Old Greenwich."



**Figure 50.** The above selection from an atlas shows the streets and building footprints of Greenwich Village in 1897. Location “A” is the existing southern terminus of Seventh Avenue at 11th Street and Greenwich Avenue; “B” designates the existing northern terminus of Varick Street at Carmine Street; and “C” is the location of St. John’s Chapel.

Image source: Lionel Pincus and Princess Firyal Map Division, The New York Public Library. (1897). *Atlas and Map of New York City*. Retrieved from <http://maps.nypl.org/warper/layers/863>



**Figure 51.** An aerial photo of Greenwich Village from 1924 shows the new course of Seventh Avenue South, which extends in a straight line from location “A” to location “B,” connecting Seventh Avenue to Varick Street. Location “C” is the former site of St. John’s Chapel, which has been replaced with a post office, on the now-widened Varick Street.

Image source: The New York Public Library. (1924). *Sectional aerial maps of the City of New York [1924]* Retrieved from <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/d9bff190-c604-012f-757f-58d385a7bc34>

portico and steeple and its architect's associations with the early days of the Republic. It was not an independent congregation, but rather formed part of the formidable real estate holdings of the Trinity Church Corporation, for whom architectural and associational significance could not compete with the compelling logic of rising real estate values.

Beginning in 1908, Trinity sought to close the chapel and dispose of the property for warehouse development. The rich having long since decamped for more spacious districts farther north, much of the adjoining residential area had been redeveloped as an industrial enclave. The only nearby housing, notoriously still owned by Trinity, consisted of tenements occupied by poor immigrants. Unwilling to relocate, the St. John's congregation sued Trinity and won an injunction against the closure in January 1909. Trinity continued to battle the congregants, and by the end of 1909 the injunction was lifted and the chapel was shuttered.<sup>122</sup> Likely awaiting the city's condemnation of its land for the projected widening of Varick Street, Trinity did not proceed immediately with demolition of the chapel, and the congregation having been dispersed, architects and antiquarians like I.N. Phelps Stokes picked up the fight. They found a champion in McAneny, who fought valiantly for a solution that would save the chapel without compromising the street widening or the subway.

On December 18, 1913, less than a month after the *New York Times* reported that the chapel was about to be pulled down, McAneny convinced the Board of Estimate to refer the matter to its Committee on the City Plan—a body that McAneny had ushered into being in the hope that it would be a precursor to a full-fledged planning commission—which spent several months studying the matter and recommended to the

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<sup>122</sup> Mason, *The Once and Future New York*, 67–87.



**Figure 52.** This photograph of St. John's Chapel was taken in 1903 from an upper story of a railroad freight depot that had replaced the residential square that formerly faced the chapel across Varick Street. Numerous commercial buildings in the vicinity can be seen in the photo. The chapel was demolished in 1918 after the failure of a preservation plan that had been initiated in the late stages of the Varick Street widening project. In the 1920s, the freight depot would become the site of the entrance of the Holland Tunnel, further transforming the area.

Image source: Library of Congress

Board of Estimate that the chapel could be saved with slight modifications to the street widening plan and the subway construction contract. McAneny supported a plan designed by Rawson Haddon, an architect, that would have retained the chapel's portico by running the sidewalk on the west side of Varick Street underneath it.<sup>123</sup> Financing for the scheme remained a problem, as did Trinity's recalcitrance. McAneny hosted a series of meetings with representatives of Trinity Church, the Municipal Art Society and other organizations concerned with public art and architecture, and the Board of Estimate's Committee on the City Plan. In July 1914 a breakthrough was reached: McAneny agreed to recommend that the Board of Estimate authorize \$15,000 to modify the subway contract to maintain the chapel's pillars during subway construction, and in return Trinity Church agreed to maintain the building for at least two years. However, Trinity's representatives steadfastly refused to commit any church funds to reconstructing the entrance, which would be modified by subway construction. According to I.N. Phelps Stokes, who was attending the meetings as the representative of the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, McAneny then turned to him and asked if his committee would raise the funds. Realizing that this commitment could be the lynchpin of a solution, Phelps agreed immediately without consulting his colleagues. The following month, a tripartite agreement was reached: the city would pay to underpin the chapel during subway construction, Trinity would agree to maintain the church for at

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 108–109; "Report of the Committee of the City Plan in Relation to the Preservation of St. John's Chapel in Varick Street," May 28, 1914, I.N. Phelps Stokes Papers, New-York Historical Society.



least two years, and a citizens' committee would raise \$6,000 to remove the stone platform and steps in front of the building.<sup>124</sup>

This remarkable agreement was itself a landmark in the city's history: public funds were to be allocated explicitly to support preservation of a landmark building that would remain in private hands. This was in a city, after all, that was reluctant even to spend money preserving landmarks it had built itself, such as City Hall. But through skilled negotiation and careful coordination, it seemed that McAneny had threaded the needle and would soon be able to boast that he had not only secured for the city the broad thoroughfare it desired, but that the new avenue would be crowned with elegant steeple of St. John's Chapel: a triumph for him and his Committee on the City Plan. Both Trinity and the Board of Estimate agreed to the proposal, and for a time, it appeared that the compromise was moving forward: In March 1915, Phelps Stokes reported to McAneny that he had met with the Public Service Commission's contractors to discuss the practical details of altering the chapel while undertaking work on the subway, and he began to document the existing conditions of the chapel entrance so that it could be reconstructed appropriately following the completion of the work. In the fall, the Fine Arts Federation began looking for a private sponsor to purchase and take over operations of the chapel, which Trinity clearly did not want on its hands for the long term.<sup>125</sup>

But the mood of the city was changing, and the agreement would never be consummated. In January 1916, McAneny, whose political timing was always exquisite,

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<sup>124</sup> "Report of the Committee on St. John's Chapel," December 15, 1914, I.N. Phelps Stokes Papers, New-York Historical Society; I.N. Phelps Stokes to Joseph H. Hunt, March 17, 1915, I.N. Phelps Stokes Papers, New-York Historical Society.

<sup>125</sup> I.N. Phelps Stokes to George McAneny, March 3, 1915, I.N. Phelps Stokes Papers, New-York Historical Society; I.N. Phelps Stokes to Francis C. Jones, September 21, 1915, I.N. Phelps Stokes Papers, New-York Historical Society.

resigned his post as president of the Board of Aldermen to become a manager at the *New York Times*. The reform administration of John Purroy Mitchel, which committed a series of mistakes, including alienating the Catholic Church by trying to audit its publicly funded child-welfare programs, would stumble on for another two years before being swept out of office by a resurgent Tammany. In his oral history reminiscences, McAneny claims that the materials inside the chapel walls were found to be too unstable to withstand the shoring-up process, rendering preservation infeasible; others have blamed World War I for diverting the attention of its would-be saviors. Whatever the reason, the St. John's agreement languished, and the chapel was demolished in 1918.<sup>126</sup>

Preservationists have lauded McAneny for his attempt to save St. John's.<sup>127</sup> The chapel was hemmed in on all sides: deprived of its congregation, surrounded by industrial development, owned by a church that had no interest in preserving its own legacy, governed by a city that viewed art as a function of the private sphere, and pressed in by railroad and real-estate interests that, while not unsympathetic to the cause of preservation, loudly demanded their thoroughfare. If McAneny's agreement had held, and the chapel had found a second life, the preserved St. John's would have been deemed a landmark in the annals of preservation. But McAneny's role in the struggle over St. John's must also be viewed in its broader context: the chapel was put in mortal danger not only by the church that did not want it, but also by the city's insensitive plans, which McAneny championed, to connect Seventh Avenue with Varick Street. While members of the Fusion administration endorsed proposals for grand boulevards elsewhere in the

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<sup>126</sup> "The Reminiscences of George McAneny," 68–69; Gilmartin, *Shaping the City*, 338.

<sup>127</sup> Anthony C. Wood, *Preserving New York: Winning the Right to Protect a City's Landmarks* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 34–35.

city, most of which remained on drawing boards, the one major boulevard it actually built was an artless strip that drove a brutal gash through the heart of Greenwich Village without even a token attempt to compensate for the aesthetic damage to the neighborhood. If the full project had been subjected to a planning process as careful as that which was belatedly applied to the chapel, it might have been designed differently from the beginning. The St. John's saga reveals the immaturity of New York's ability to develop and execute plans in the post-consolidation era, even with reformers in control of the municipal administration. In George McAneny, the city had a planner with a dogged persistence, a keen understanding of process, and the charisma needed to forge agreements. But in this case, McAneny's persistence contributed to the downfall of a civic monument that might have survived a dithering Tammany administration. Although McAneny's attempts to institutionalize planning were, in part, intended to prevent outcomes like the Seventh Avenue extension, its heavy-handedness and failure to assess the consequences to the built environment would be repeated in other, larger projects across the city in future decades, often for reasons of political and financial expediency.

There would be other chances to save the city's memory infrastructure, though, and McAneny's greatest successes as a preservationist lay more than two decades in the future. Ironically for a man concerned primarily with municipal administration, and whose civic center plan had been snubbed by the federal government, the buildings he is most remembered for preserving would be Manhattan's federal monuments—and to do so, he would have to devise institutions that would bypass the city government. The roots of McAneny's approach to saving federal buildings can be traced back to an incident involving a federal building on Wall Street in which he was marginally involved as



president of the Board of Aldermen, but that would echo through his preservation campaigns in later years.



**Figure 53.** Rather than the monumental vistas promised by the aesthetic vision of the City Beautiful, the Seventh Avenue extension produced a pockmarked streetscape that revealed the sides and backs of nearby buildings and left in its wake a series of awkwardly shaped parcels that were gradually filled in with small structures. Residential zoning prevented the automobile-oriented development that occurred on the avenue from spilling over into the side streets.

Irma and Paul Milstein Division of United States History, Local History and Genealogy, The New York Public Library. (1937 - 1939). *Manhattan: 7th Avenue - 10th Street* Retrieved from <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47dc-ebf9-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>



**Figure 54.** In the early 1920s, a modern post office, shown here, was built on the site of St. John's Chapel. While Greenwich Village remained residential after the extension of Seventh Avenue due in part to the city's new zoning law, the Varick Street widening and subsequent opening of the Holland Tunnel across the street from the chapel site encouraged further commercial and industrial development in this area.

From the collections of the Museum of the City of New York. Unknown photographer, 1931. Retrieved from [http://collections.mcny.org/Collection/\[Varick%20Street.\]-2F3XC5IX103K.html](http://collections.mcny.org/Collection/[Varick%20Street.]-2F3XC5IX103K.html).

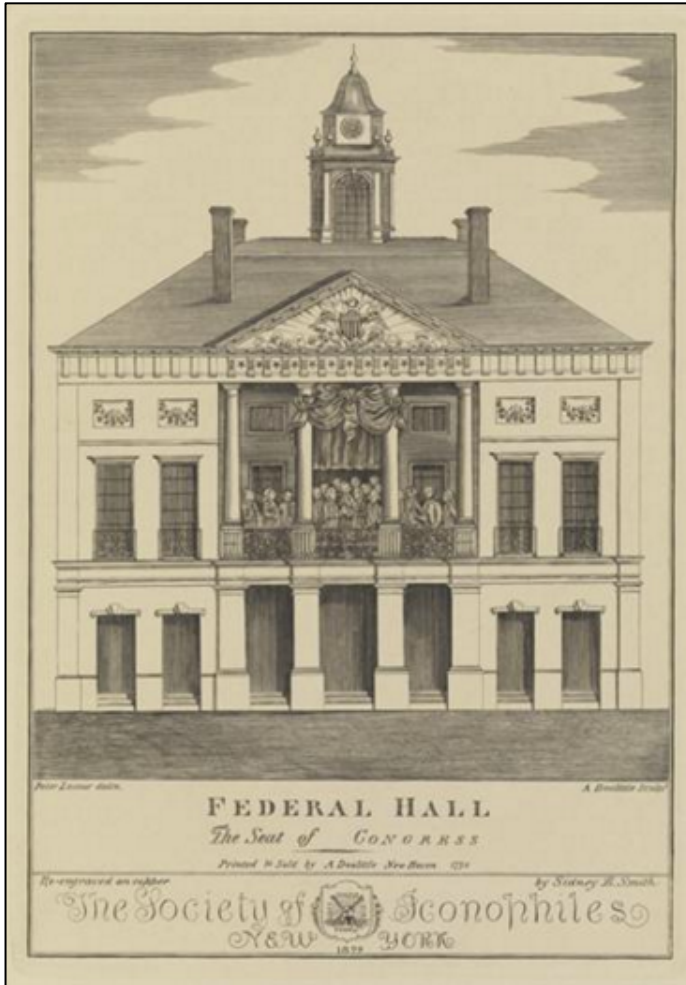
See also "Post Office for St. John's Site," *The New York Times*, Oct. 8, 1920.

## 9. The Old Assay Office

When the United States Constitution was ratified in 1788, New York City was chosen to be the temporary national capital, and its city hall, at the intersection of Wall and Nassau streets, was selected to be the initial seat of government. The existing building was renovated and expanded by the architect Pierre L'Enfant and became known as Federal Hall. This Federal Hall was the site of the inauguration of George Washington as president in 1789, but the following year the capital was removed to Philadelphia and the building reverted to the municipal authorities. When John McComb's new City Hall was completed on the Commons in 1811, L'Enfant's building was sold off and demolished.<sup>128</sup> Nonetheless, the federal government found it necessary to maintain a continued presence in what remained the nation's largest port and commercial capital. In 1811, concerned about a possible British invasion, the government built Fort Clinton, a circular stone structure, on a small island off Manhattan's southern tip. The fort never saw battle and was transferred to the city after the threat of war had passed; it later became an entertainment venue and then an immigration hall. On Wall Street, the Federal-style Branch Bank of the United States was built on a plot adjacent to the site of the demolished Federal Hall in 1822, and in the 1830s, the government re-acquired the Federal Hall site and sponsored the construction of an imposing, neoclassical customs house thereon. All three of these monumental buildings changed uses several times. By the early 1900s Fort Clinton, now connected to Manhattan by fill, was a public aquarium. Meanwhile, the customs house on the Federal Hall site had become a sub-treasury, storing gold and silver in its basement vaults, and the neighboring former Branch Bank

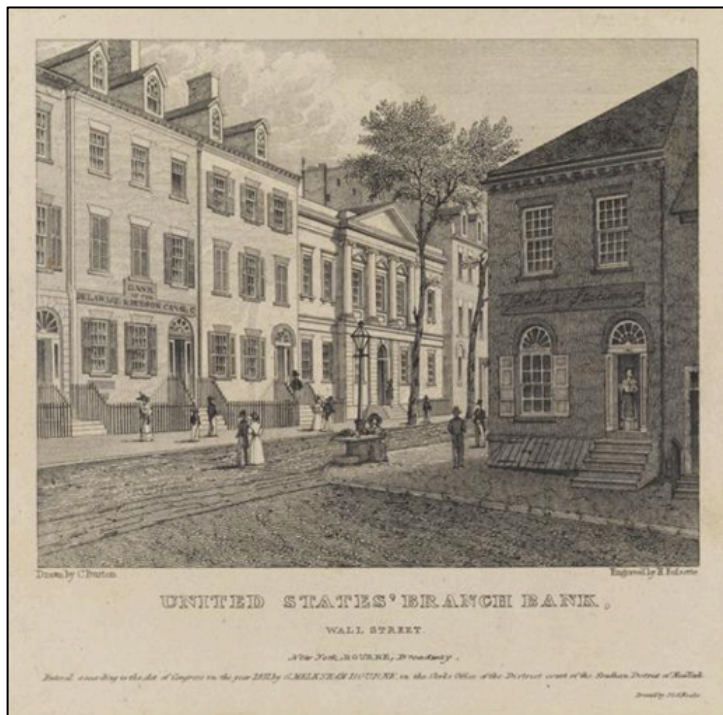
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<sup>128</sup> Louis Torres, "Federal Hall Revisited," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 29, no. 4 (December 1970): 327–38.



**Figure 55.** The original Federal Hall, depicted in this 1899 copy of a 1790 engraving, was an expansion of New York's existing City Hall. This engraving commemorates the first inauguration of George Washington as president.

From the collections of the Museum of the City of New York. Re-engraving on copper by Sidney L. Smith, 1899. Retrieved from <http://collections.mcny.org/Collection/Federal%20Hall,%20the%20Seat%20of%20Congress-2F3XC58HZHZH.html>.



**Figure 56.** The two-story Palladian structure depicted in the center of this 1830 engraving is the Branch Bank of the United States, constructed in 1822 adjacent to the old Federal Hall site. The buildings with dormers to its left are on the site of Federal Hall. The building only served its original function for a few years, as the federal bank's charter was terminated in 1836. The structure was then transferred to New York State, but was eventually reacquired by the federal government.

From the collections of the Museum of the City of New York. Drawn by C. Burton. Engraved by H. Fofsette. Printed by J. & G. Neale, 1830. Retrieved from <http://collections.mcny.org/Collection/United%20States%20Bank%20Branch-2F3XC5UN3QPA.html>.

See also I.N. Phelps Stokes, *The Iconography of Manhattan Island*, vol. 3 (New York: Robert H. Dodd, 1915), 924.

formed part of the U.S. Treasury's Assay Office—a smoke-belching industrial operation in which coins were melted down so that pure gold could be extracted.

In 1913, the Department of the Treasury desired to expand its assay operations and began planning to demolish and replace the historic Wall Street façade of the Assay Office. At the same time, the city government's Art Commission, under the leadership of the philanthropist Robert De Forest, commissioned Frank Cousins to photograph several dozen historic buildings throughout the city which were considered to be endangered, the Old Assay Office among them.<sup>129</sup> While there is no evidence that De Forest or anyone else sought to retain the old Assay Office on its site, when De Forest got wind of the Treasury's plan, he and the architect I. N. Phelps Stokes began to communicate with officials in the department about salvaging the façade for use on another building—perhaps a branch of the New York Public Library or the Grolier Club, which was seeking a new home.<sup>130</sup>

De Forest's Art Commission reached out to Oscar Wenderoth, the supervising architect at the Department of the Treasury, and in early 1913 the department proposed a bill to Congress authorizing funds for the expansion of the assay office and providing that its front be disposed of as a gift. Although it was difficult to find an institution that wanted the façade (the Grolier Club declined), Stokes wrote to De Forest suggesting that the two of them “ask for the little façade now and take it down, ourselves” in order to ensure that it was not damaged and could be properly reassembled in due time.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Mason, *The Once and Future New York*, xxix–xxx.

<sup>130</sup> William McBrien, “Assay Office Facade,” 1924, Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives; I.N. Phelps Stokes to Oscar Wenderoth, May 13, 1913, I.N. Phelps Stokes Papers, New-York Historical Society.

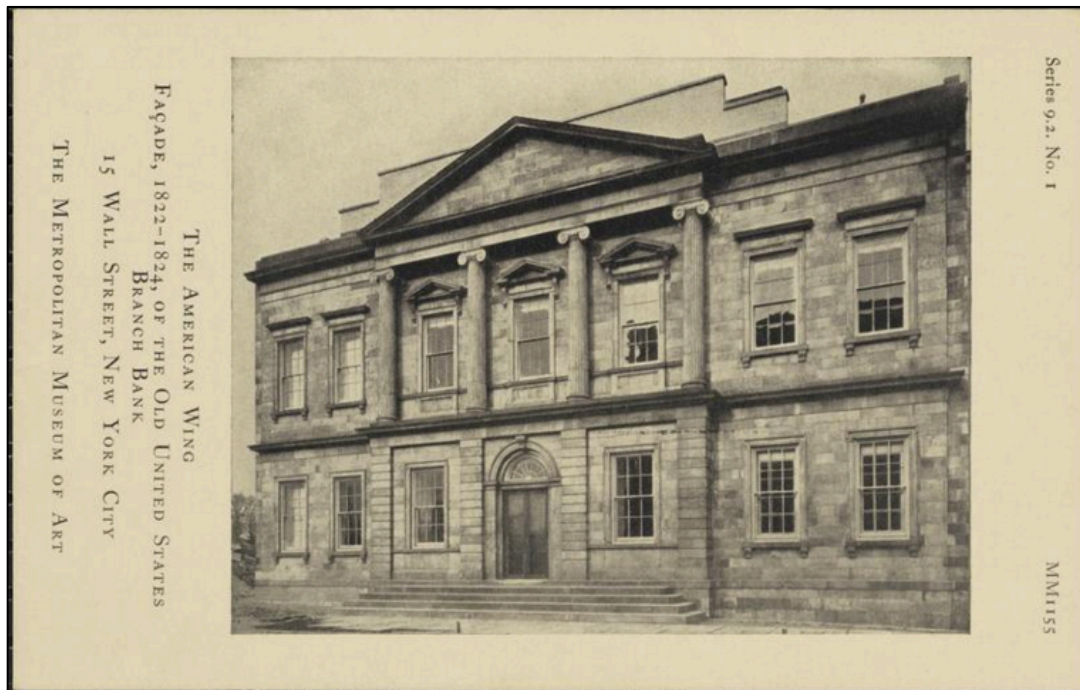
<sup>131</sup> I.N. Phelps Stokes to Robert De Forest, September 22, 1913, I.N. Phelps Stokes Papers, New-York Historical Society.





**Figure 57.** This neoclassical building was constructed on the site of the original Federal Hall in the 1830s. It served first as a customs house, then as a subtreasury, and finally as general office space for the federal government. The George Washington statue in front was added in the 1890s. The low structure to the right is the 1822 Branch Bank of the United States, which by the early 1900s had become an assay office of the U.S. Treasury.

From the collections of the Museum of the City of New York. Unknown photographer, ca. 1900. Retrieved from <http://collections.mcny.org/Collection/Federal%20Hall%20National%20Memorial.-2F3XC5ATW1E.html>.



**Figure 58.** When the assay office was demolished in 1915, its façade was disassembled, stored, and eventually incorporated into the new American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This postcard depicts the façade in its reconstructed state.

From the collections of the Museum of the City of New York. Postcard, ca. 1930. Retrieved from <http://collections.mcny.org/Collection/The%20American%20Wing.%20Facade.%201822-1824.%20of%20the%20Old%20United%20States%20Branch%20Bank.%2015%20Wall%20Street.%20New%20York%20City.%20The%20Metropolitan%20Museum%20of%20Art.-2F3HRGME15L0.html>.

Worried that the façade might still be lost, De Forest personally contacted the Secretary of the Treasury, William McAdoo, who then himself lobbied for the façade's preservation, noting in a March 1914 letter to Congress that "the present office is the oldest building on Wall Street, is of much historical and architectural interest, and is said to be one of the best examples of architecture of its period in New York City." McAdoo further proposed that the façade be saved by public or private action, "provided there be no additional expense to the Government."<sup>132</sup> By the end of 1914, De Forest had conceived the idea to incorporate the façade into the Metropolitan Museum of Art, of which he happened to be the president.<sup>133</sup>

Once the appropriation was passed, the Treasury Department notified George McAneny, who at this time was president of the Board of Aldermen. McAneny dispatched Edward Hagaman Hall, the president of New York's leading preservation league, to inspect the building. Somewhat surprisingly, Hall, who had suggested that Cousins photograph the building in 1913, pronounced it "neither beautiful in itself nor interesting as an antique," and neither "old enough" nor "famous enough" to merit saving.<sup>134</sup> Hall must have been applying his "use-value" and "time-value" criteria; the time-value standard was that a building needed to be at least 100 years old, a cut-off date the assay office missed by seven years at the time of its demolition.

De Forest, obviously not swayed by Hall's negative judgment, personally retained Stokes to salvage the façade when it came down in April 1915. Stone by stone, it was carefully marked, removed, and stored on a vacant lot on the Upper East Side for the next

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<sup>132</sup> "Assay Office, New York City" (United States Senate, 63rd Congress, 2nd Session, August 11, 1914).

<sup>133</sup> McBrien, "Assay Office Facade."

<sup>134</sup> List of sites submitted by Edward Hagaman Hall, I.N. Phelps Stokes Papers, New-York Historical Society, n.d.; "No Use for Front of Assay Office."

eight years.<sup>135</sup> When reconstructed as part of the façade of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's American Wing, it would serve as a front for period rooms reconstructed from historic mansions and be framed with lavish outdoor gardens, completely obscuring its true history at the heart of the city's financial life on Wall Street.

The Assay Office episode contains many of the elements that would characterize the preservation of federal buildings by New York's preservationist leaders in the Federal Hall memorial and Fort Clinton campaigns. They developed relationships with sympathetic public employees in the federal government. Senior political figures at the federal level worked publicly and behind the scenes to advance the cause. As neither federal nor local officials were willing to bear the costs of preservation—there is no evidence that McAneny gave anything but moral support to his friend, De Forest, who had earlier helped secure Sage funding for the restoration of City Hall—the act of preserving the federal legacy was largely initiated and funded by private individuals who had to secure the cooperation of the federal government. And the buildings themselves would be presented to the public in ways that scrubbed away much of their actual historic context to emphasize only the attributes related to the history that preservationists wanted to showcase—specifically, the early days of the Republic.

## **10. Forging a Museum at Federal Hall**

A little over two decades after the Assay Office façade was removed, its erstwhile neighbor became the subject of a momentous preservation campaign that would finally

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<sup>135</sup> I.N. Phelps Stokes, *The Iconography of Manhattan Island, 1498-1909*, vol. 1 (New York: Robert H. Dodd, 1915), 430 n1.

draw George McAneny firmly into preservation's orbit and propel him to the heights of leadership in the national movement.

In the spring of 1938, New York was preparing to host the 1939 World's Fair, which would be the city's first international exposition in decades. A Lower Manhattan organization of major real estate firms and corporate property owners called the Downtown Owners' Committee, hoping to capture a share of the millions of visitors expected to arrive in the city for the fair, began to plan a tourism campaign. Among their objectives was to establish a so-called Central Information Bureau to provide information to sightseers and coordinate activities among downtown office buildings with upper-floor observatories or public exhibits—Chase Bank, for example, planned to display a “Monies of the World” collection. It was believed that tourist demand would be large—as a National City Bank executive wrote, “there are only two things that out-of-town visitors want to see in New York: one is the Great White Way and the other is Wall Street”—and the major corporations headquartered downtown wanted to capitalize on the opportunity to promote themselves.<sup>136</sup>

From the beginning, the committee sought to locate its information bureau in a government building, and it quickly identified both the Subtreasury and the adjacent Assay Office, which by this time boasted a handsome new façade, as suitable locations. In fact, the building on the Federal Hall site was underutilized at the time, the subtreasury system having been superseded by the Federal Reserve in the early 1920s, and it was essentially acting as surplus federal office space. In December 1938, Robert Dowling, a

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<sup>136</sup> Gardner Osborn, “Resume of Preliminary Suggestions for Downtown District World's Fair Committee Activities,” May 23, 1938, Box 2, Folder 9, Federal Hall Memorial Associates Administrative Records; J.J. McNamee to Gardner Osborn, July 1, 1938, Box 1, Folder 1, Federal Hall Memorial Associates Administrative Records.



real estate executive and the secretary of the committee, wrote to Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau to see if either building could be used for this purpose. Morgenthau's office referred Dowling to the United States Travel Bureau, a tourism promotion branch of the Department of the Interior, which agreed to work with the committee. In February 1939 Dowling proposed to the Travel Bureau to establish a permanent historical museum in the subtreasury, which he described in a letter to one civil servant as "an historical project in which I have had a deep personal interest for some time," and which would "utiliz[e] and preserv[e] this distinguished building."<sup>137</sup> It would take a heftier name than Dowling's, though, to move the Department of the Interior to speedy action. This name would be that of George McAneny, whose involvement in the Federal Hall campaign would finally plunge him wholeheartedly into the preservation movement.

After leaving office in 1916, McAneny had at first retreated into the private sector, working as a manager on the business side of the *New York Times*. His return to public service began in 1921, when he became the chairman of the state transit commission. In 1926, McAneny was appointed to a new city planning committee by Mayor Jimmy Walker, where he worked to once again propose a permanent city planning commission; the effort failed.<sup>138</sup> In the 1930s, McAneny even returned briefly to high-ranking municipal office in the waning days of the administration of Mayor John O'Brien, who appointed him sanitation commissioner in April 1933 and then comptroller in September of the same year. It is possible that the mayor offered McAneny the sanitation post to

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<sup>137</sup> "Chronology of Federal Hall Memorial Associates," n.d., Box 3, Folder 19, Federal Hall Memorial Associates Administrative Records; Robert Dowling to Ruth Bryan Rohde, April 4, 1939, Box 3, Folder 19, Federal Hall Memorial Associates Administrative Records.

<sup>138</sup> "The Reminiscences of George McAneny," 41–42.

dissuade him from running against O'Brien in the 1933 mayoral election.<sup>139</sup> That election, of course, was won by Fiorello La Guardia, with whom McAneny had a frosty relationship—the two men had been personal adversaries in a lawsuit during McAneny's tenure as transit commissioner, and McAneny disdained La Guardia's fiery populism—and he would spend La Guardia's long mayoralty outside city government.<sup>140</sup>

Instead, McAneny would devote much of the 1930s to the leadership of the Regional Plan Association, a civic group dedicated to advancing the planning movement and implementing the privately developed Regional Plan of New York and Environs. In fact, the roots of the RPA and its plan can be traced to the rejection of McAneny's original Committee on the City Plan by the Tammany mayor John Hylan in 1918. That committee's chief technical advisor had been the banker Charles Norton, who had relocated to New York after spearheading the creation of Daniel Burnham's Plan of Chicago, which itself had been privately developed by a group of businessmen. In December 1918, frustrated by New York City's refusal to commit itself to planning, and also believing that the appropriate scope for city planning extended well beyond the city's political boundaries, Norton submitted a proposal for a privately developed regional planning initiative to Olivia Slocum Sage's Russell Sage Foundation, which at the time was led by Robert de Forest. After several years of lobbying, Norton and his allies, including many of the men who had worked on the city government's planning and zoning projects in the 1910s, finally secured \$300,000 in funding from the foundation in

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<sup>139</sup> "O'Brien Names McAneny to Fill Sanitation Post," *New York Herald Tribune*, April 19, 1933; "McAneny Gets Barry's Post Until Jan. 1," *New York Herald Tribune*, September 20, 1933.

<sup>140</sup> "The Reminiscences of George McAneny," 43–47.

1922.<sup>141</sup> They would spend the remainder of the decade carrying out technical studies and developing a comprehensive plan for the physical development of a multi-county region that extended into three states. The Regional Plan of New York and Environs was the most far-reaching planning initiative that had ever been undertaken in the United States, and it pioneered many of the planning techniques that would later become commonplace elsewhere.

Although McAneny was only marginally involved with Norton's group in the beginning, he became one of its directors in 1927, the same year he was named president of the Municipal Art Society, a role in which he found himself somewhat anachronistically promoting ornamentation on infrastructure projects.<sup>142</sup> For someone devoted to efficiency, who still believed that "the 'City Beautiful' must have as its foundations proper city planning," and that "sporadic and isolated attempts at beautification too often serve to accentuate the surrounding ugliness," it probably seemed that the Municipal Art Society was putting the cart before the horse.<sup>143</sup> He did not serve the society for long. In 1929, the Regional Plan Association was founded to carry on the work of the group that had prepared the Regional Plan of New York and Environs; George Ford, one of the masterminds behind the city's zoning law, was named its first president, but after he died in 1930, McAneny was named president, a role in which he would serve until 1940, when became chairman of its board of directors.<sup>144</sup> Much of his work involved the promotion of planning in New York City and the suburban areas and

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<sup>141</sup> David A. Johnson, *Planning the Great Metropolis: The 1929 Regional Plan of New York and Its Environs* (London: Routledge, 1996), 59–67.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 175; "McAneny Heads Art Society," *New York Herald Tribune*, November 30, 1927.

<sup>143</sup> McAneny, "Beauty in the Regional Plan."

<sup>144</sup> "11th Annual Report" (Regional Plan Association, December 1940).

satellite cities surrounding it, and by the end of the decade the RPA had been successful in convincing numerous jurisdictions in the region to adopt planning and zoning laws. Further, in 1936, a permanent planning commission for New York City was created, finally fulfilling McAneny's aspirations from two decades earlier.<sup>145</sup>

The presidency of the RPA gave McAneny a prominent role as a civic leader and advocate for development in the city and region. In 1935, he became interested in a proposal to reclaim a vast dumping ground on the banks of Flushing Creek in Queens as the site for the world's fair. The idea of holding a fair on the Flushing site had been suggested to McAneny by Nicholas Roosevelt, a New York journalist who was related to both Roosevelt presidents.<sup>146</sup> Having witnessed the success of a recent World's Fair in Chicago, which turned a profit even in the midst of the Great Depression, McAneny and a group of prominent citizens, including Roosevelt, formed a committee to plan a fair for New York to be held in 1939. Although the fair is often remembered for its futuristic pavilions, most notably the World of Tomorrow with its fantastic scale model of a future metropolis of skyscrapers and express highways, McAneny from the beginning saw it as an opportunity to commemorate the sesquicentennial of George Washington's inauguration. In his announcement of the fair proposal in 1935, he invoked New Yorkers' memories of the inauguration's 100th anniversary, when the administration of William Henry Harrison, both houses of Congress, and the members of the Supreme Court had

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<sup>145</sup> Johnson, *Planning the Great Metropolis*, 248–51.

<sup>146</sup> Bruce Mauro, *Twilight at the World of Tomorrow: Genius, Madness, Murder, and the 1939 World's Fair on the Brink of War* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2010), 1–16. Supposedly, the idea originated with Joseph Shadgen, an engineer who resided near the site. He brought the idea to an obscure relation of Nicholas Roosevelt, who then contacted his famous relative. In the 1940s, as editor of the *Herald Tribune*, Nicholas Roosevelt would be a major journalistic voice for preserving Fort Clinton.

gathered in New York for a re-enactment, and suggested that a similar scene would be on display in 1939, coordinated with the fair's opening.<sup>147</sup>

McAneny was subsequently named chairman of both the World's Fair Corporation and the World's Fair Committee of the Chamber of Commerce, but his role was largely ceremonial, and plans for the Washington anniversary did not advance. By spring 1939, with the World's Fair about to begin and the sesquicentennial date approaching, it must have become obvious that there would be no grand re-enactment on the scale of the 1889 celebration. At this point, McAneny was drawn into the effort to kick-start the commemoration. Events unfolded quickly, and by mid-April, Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, apparently at the prodding of McAneny's contacts in the White House, had made the decision to designate the site as a national historic monument using the authority granted to him by the 1935 Historic Sites Act.<sup>148</sup> This act had been passed as part of a dramatic expansion of the National Park Service's historic program that had been prompted by the desire to increase federal spending as part of the New Deal; before 1933, the Service was largely concerned with wilderness sites, and the nation's few historic monuments were mainly administered by the War Department.<sup>149</sup>

Ickes was probably goaded to quick action on Federal Hall in part because, unlike many other sites clamoring for designation around the country, the federal government already owned the Subtreasury, and thus it required no time-consuming and difficult negotiations over ownership or funds for acquisition. On the anniversary date of April 30,

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<sup>147</sup> "Great World Fair for City in 1939 on Site in Queens," *The New York Times*, September 23, 1935.

<sup>148</sup> Gardner Osborn to Ronald Lee, April 15, 1939, Box 3, Folder 19, Federal Hall Memorial Associates Administrative Records.

<sup>149</sup> The development of the National Park Service's administration of historic sites in the 1930s is detailed in Charles Bridgham Hosmer, *Preservation Comes of Age: From Williamsburg to the National Trust, 1926-1949*, vol. 2, 2 vols. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1981).

McAneny himself addressed a crowd from the steps of the Subtreasury to recount Washington's inauguration, promote the World's Fair, proclaim Ickes's designation, and announce that a permanent historical museum would be established on the site with government support.<sup>150</sup> Left unsaid was that no one had yet given much thought to what the museum would display or how it would be funded; apart from allowing the museum to use the space, paying for utilities, and making minimal appropriations for a curator, the federal government had made no commitments.

The downtown committee soon opened its information center, which consisted of a variety of exhibits sponsored by downtown corporate entities, but also began to collect historical materials. The day after McAneny's speech, the zealous secretary of the downtown committee, a man named Gardner Osborn, had already moved his office furniture into the basement of the Subtreasury and created letterhead for a new organization he tentatively called the "Sub-Treasury Historical Museum Committee," which McAneny was to lead, taking over Dowling's role from the earlier committee.<sup>151</sup> Over the summer McAneny, Osborn, and Ronald Lee, a National Park Service historian, met to plan the permanent museum and the group that would support it. Although the museum had not been his idea, McAneny determined to make the most of the publicity afforded by the historic designation and was probably grateful to have a major role to play as organizer.

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<sup>150</sup> "Address of George McAneny at the Celebration of the One Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of the Establishment of the Government and the Inauguration of George Washington as President," April 30, 1939, Box 2, Folder 9, Federal Hall Memorial Associates Administrative Records.

<sup>151</sup> Gardner Osborn to George McAneny, May 1, 1939, Box 3, Folder 9, Federal Hall Memorial Associates Administrative Records; Gardner Osborn to George McAneny, May 3, 1939, Box 3, Folder 19, Federal Hall Memorial Associates Administrative Records.



**Figure 59.** George McAneny gives an address commemorating the 150th anniversary of George Washington's inaugural on the steps of what had just become the Federal Hall National Historic Shrine on April 30, 1939.

Image source: Federal Hall Memorial Associates archives, Box 2, Folder 9.

By September the museum organization had been fully formed and had named itself the Federal Hall Memorial Associates. It would be chaired by McAneny, and its invited membership would consist of “representatives of the leading financial institutions of the district, and of representatives of patriotic, historic, and educational institutions interested in the traditions of the site.” Its purpose would be to raise funds and operate a history museum that would cover what was described as the full range of historic events that had occurred at the site. The Associates’ initial conception of “historic” was rather narrow, being confined to events that had occurred in 1790 and earlier—well before the now officially historic building they occupied was constructed. In fact, over the summer Osborn and McAneny had toyed with naming their group the Washington Memorial Hall Association.<sup>152</sup>

Apart from Dowling’s brief mention of his goal of “utilizing and preserving this distinguished building” in his letter to the Travel Bureau in February 1939, there is little record of any architectural interest in the building itself among the founders of the group, including McAneny—probably because it was not sufficiently colonial to convey the sense of the Washington inaugural. Unlike the old Assay Office, which was built in a Palladian style with relatively dainty second-story columns and pediment, vaguely recalling the design of the original Federal Hall, the Subtreasury’s façade was dominated by bulky columns and stairs and an oversized George Washington statue, not to mention a Roman rotunda on the inside. Stuck with a building whose style did not match the historical period they wished to commemorate, the Associates’ preservation objectives

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<sup>152</sup> Federal Hall Memorial Associates, “Minutes of Pre-Organization Meeting,” September 28, 1939, Box 1, Folder 3, Federal Hall Memorial Associates Administrative Records; Gardner Osborn to George McAneny, June 28, 1939, Box 3, Folder 19, Federal Hall Memorial Associates Administrative Records.



for the site seem to have been purely site-based rather than architectural. Accordingly, they quickly moved to fill their museum with 450 George Washington relics supplied by Messmore Kendall, the president general of the Sons of the American Revolution.<sup>153</sup>

George McAneny embraced his role as chairman of the Associates, and the museum quickly took on additional importance as a patriotic outpost of the federal government during wartime. Throughout World War II, the museum was consigned to the basement, despite entreaties to the federal government that moving it to the grand main level, which was used for other federal purposes, would spark further patriotic interest. Nonetheless, the Associates made the most of the space, frequently hosting patriotic societies and attracting high-profile celebrities to promote the sale of war bonds.<sup>154</sup> After the war, a long period of decline for the Associates set in. The building was in need of restoration, but the Associates could only afford to pay for architectural and stonework consultants, despite the presence of high-ranking executives of leading downtown corporations among their membership. Eventually, it would take federal appropriations to expel the non-museum uses and renovate the building's main space for memorial purposes.

## **11. Losing the Aquarium, Preserving Fort Clinton**

Down at the Battery, another preservation campaign was unfolding that would similarly rely on federal authority to achieve the objectives of local preservationists. In 1938 Robert Moses, in his capacity as chairman of the Triborough Bridge Authority, had

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<sup>153</sup> "Federal Museum Holds a Preview," *The New York Times*, January 14, 1940.

<sup>154</sup> Lists of these activities are available in the archives of the Federal Hall Memorial Associates held by the National Park Service. For celebrities hosting publicity events at Federal Hall, see, for example, "Hollywood Goes to Wall Street to Sell Bonds," *New York Journal-American*, September 2, 1942.

proposed to build an enormous suspension bridge from Battery Park to Brooklyn, with massive approaches that would have blocked views of the harbor and diminished the park. Moses, who was also the city's park commissioner and planning commissioner, had never been elected to office, yet wielded great power and commanded the trust of the city's mayor at the time, Fiorello La Guardia, for what has been described as his "indispensible" ability to "get things done."<sup>155</sup> Although Moses was, in some ways, an exemplar of the sort of nonpartisan "expert" leader that McAneny had championed in the 1910s, beginning in 1939 McAneny would repeatedly find himself scrambling for a way to defeat Moses, who could not be removed at the ballot box and continued to enjoy the strong support of the Board of Estimate even as mayors and borough presidents changed. As president of the Regional Plan Association at the time, McAneny coordinated a group of opponents to Moses's bridge proposal. Notably, McAneny's initial alternative scheme, which would have widened the Brooklyn Bridge and constructed a new highway through Chinatown and SoHo, would have merely shifted the harm to politically powerless neighborhoods, echoing his earlier civic center proposal to destroy Chinatown for a boulevard connecting the civic center to the Manhattan Bridge.<sup>156</sup>

In March 1939, even as preparations were getting underway for the commemoration of the Washington inaugural, McAneny and other veteran reform leaders grimly faced down Moses—and lost—in a City Council hearing in which Moses, in his bullying way, publicly derided McAneny as "an extinct volcano who can never run for public office again" and "an exhumed mummy." Nonetheless, McAneny's friends had connections in the White House, and through Eleanor Roosevelt's intercession, not only

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<sup>155</sup> Owen Gutfreund, "Moses, Robert," *American National Biography Online*, 2007.

<sup>156</sup> "Council Due to Back Bridge; Moses in Seven-Hour Clash," *The New York Times*, March 28, 1939.

was the bridge stopped, ostensibly for military reasons, but a low-interest loan was extended to a city agency not controlled by Moses to build a tunnel in the same location.<sup>157</sup> The Battery was saved.

The bridge fight seems to have had a transformational effect on George McAneny's attitude toward planning and preservation. The RPA, like Moses, was fundamentally in favor of building highways in the city, a position that was a key component of its regional plan—and one which did not generally arouse the interest of the city's organized preservationists in spite of scattered neighborhood opposition to highway projects.<sup>158</sup> But its response to the Battery Bridge proposal was colored by the interests of downtown property owners, who feared that a large bridge that would block views from downtown skyscrapers and cast shadows over Battery Park would diminish the value of their landholdings. To save the Battery, McAneny was perfectly willing to espouse an alternative proposal that would have marred another city landmark, the Brooklyn Bridge, and damaged a swath of neighborhoods across lower Manhattan in order to speed traffic from Brooklyn to the Holland Tunnel. But the fight did not end when the plans for the bridge were dropped. As Park Commissioner, Moses controlled what happened in Battery Park, which included the Aquarium, and he abruptly announced in February 1941 that due to the construction of the very tunnel that had obviated the need for both Moses's bridge and the RPA's alternative, Fort Clinton would need to be razed to the ground. According to engineers who studied the plans for the tunnel, Moses's purported rationale for the demolition—that the tunnel would undermine

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<sup>157</sup> Caro, *The Power Broker*, 664–76.

<sup>158</sup> One of the first instances of organized neighborhood opposition to a Moses project occurred in 1940, a year after the bridge fight, in response to a proposed highway in Brooklyn. *Ibid.*, 520.

the Aquarium's foundation—was baseless, and commentators have speculated that his position was instead driven merely by pique at the aging reform leaders who had prevented him from building his signature bridge.<sup>159</sup> McAneny, stung by Moses's personal attacks in the bridge battle, was more than willing to engage in a new fight that would launch him out of the orbit of planning and into the final stage of his career as a full-time preservationist. If Moses sought his revenge, so did George McAneny, who in his final decade would prove that he was far from extinct.

Fort Clinton by this time had passed through a dizzying array of uses. Although constructed as a defensive structure, it never saw battle, and shortly after the War of 1812, it was transferred to the city government and became an entertainment and social hall known as Castle Garden, a name by which it would continue to be referred well into the 20th century. Capped with a circular roof, it served this function for several decades, hosting numerous important political figures and entertainers. In the 1850s it was transformed into a complex for the processing of immigrants. When new immigration facilities were opened at Ellis Island in the 1890s, the state government appropriated funding to convert Castle Garden to an aquarium, which opened in 1896. Highly popular with the public, the Aquarium was renovated and expanded in the 1920s with a third-story addition and a new façade designed by McKim, Meade, and White.<sup>160</sup>

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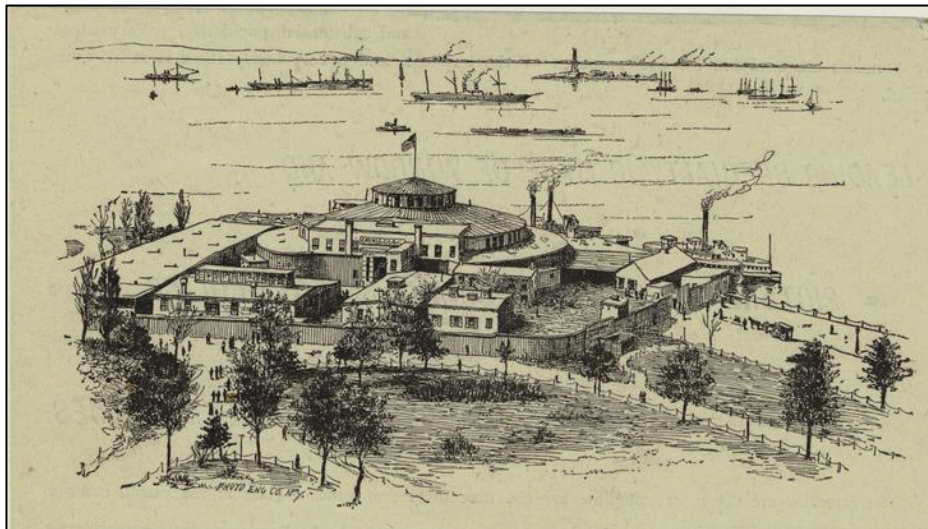
<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 679; Gilmartin, *Shaping the City*, 325–26; Wood, *Preserving New York*, 54–55.

<sup>160</sup> Many commentators have suggested that the McKim, Meade, and White architectural firm was responsible for designing the aquarium conversion in 1896. Actually, the plans for the aquarium were drawn up internally by the Parks Department with the assistance of an architect named Harvey T. Woodman. The prominent firm was retained to design the 1920s renovation and expansion. “In and About the City,” *Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide* 49, no. 1263 (May 28, 1892): 850; “Minutes and Documents of the Board of Commissioners of the Department of Public Parks” (New York, 1893), 67; “Plans Filed for Alterations: Manhattan,” *Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide* 110, no. 10 (September 2, 1922): 316; “Changes at the Aquarium to Make It World Model,” *The New York Times*, August 12, 1923; “Aquarium Changes to Cost \$225,000,” *The New York Times*, July 11, 1926.



**Figure 60.** Fort Clinton (the round structure at center left) was a small stone fort constructed just before the War of 1812 on a small peninsula adjacent to the Battery. After it was no longer needed for defense, the structure became an entertainment hall known as Castle Garden, which served for a time as the city's main social gathering place. This engraving commemorates the 1824 reception at Castle Garden of the Revolutionary War general Marquis de Lafayette.

From the collections of the Museum of the City of New York. Engraving by Anthony Imbert and Samuel Maverick, 1824. Retrieved from <http://collections.mcny.org/Collection/Landing%20of%20Gen.%20Lafayette,%20at%20Castle%20Garden,%20New%20York,%2016th%20August%201824-2F3XC5JA6T0.html>.



**Figure 61.** In the 1850s, Castle Garden became a New York State-run immigration processing center, and a number of smaller buildings were constructed surrounding the fort, which had long been capped by a circular superstructure. This 1891 postcard shows the center in its final period of operation.

Art and Picture Collection, The New York Public Library. (1891). *Battery Park and Castle Garden*. Retrieved from <http://digitalcollections.nyp.org/items/510d47e1-0f43-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>





**Figure 62.** In the 1890s, the Fort Clinton structure was converted to a public aquarium by the Parks Department, and the sheds that surrounded it in its years as an immigration station were cleared away. The statue facing the building is a monument to the Italian explorer Giovanni da Verrazano.

Image source: Library of Congress



**Figure 63.** The appearance of Fort Clinton changed again in the late 1920s, when the Parks Department added an additional story on the front of the building and reclad it in gray cement. This was the appearance of the structure at the beginning of the aquarium fight in 1940.

Art and Picture Collection, The New York Public Library. (1920 - 1930). *Aquarium and Battery Park, New York City* Retrieved from <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e2-8aef-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

Moses's announcement 15 years later of the imminent demolition of the Aquarium set off a flurry of activism. By May 1941, bypassing the unsympathetic municipal government, McAneny had contacted his allies in the National Park Service, including A. E. Demaray, a longtime NPS associate director who had addressed the Federal Hall Memorial Associates at its organizational meeting in 1939. While political appointees at NPS might come and go, even during the lean war years the most senior staff tended to stay on, enabling lobbyists like McAneny the chance to build long-term associations with the people who most had the ear of the political leadership. Demaray promptly wrote to Moses informing him that the Park Service considered the fort "a significant landmark worthy of preservation." Demaray then asked Moses to remove the outer shell of the structure—that is, the Aquarium—so that the original walls could be examined.<sup>161</sup> Demaray had demonstrated the federal government's interest in saving the structure. But by requesting an action that would strip away all of the accretions that had been added over the decades and necessitate the closure of the Aquarium, the NPS had already conceived the fort as having value primarily as a relic, and not as a living part of the Battery Park landscape or as a place with a complex history that could be made visible through the act of preservation.

The early part of the battle over Fort Clinton was colored by a disagreement that emerged among preservationists even as they had to move swiftly to prevent Moses from proceeding. Like the NPS, McAneny was mainly interested in saving the fort as a relic of the War of 1812. In September 1941, after talking to Fairfield Osborn, the director of the

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<sup>161</sup> George McAneny to A. E. Demaray, May 26, 1941, Box 1, Castle Clinton National Monument Administrative Records; A. E. Demaray to Robert Moses, July 26, 1941, Box 1, Castle Clinton National Monument Administrative Records.

New York Zoological Society, which operated the Aquarium and had no appetite for a fight with Moses over what it considered an obsolete structure, McAneny wrote: “I think the arguments for building a new, modern, and greatly expanded Aquarium when the money is available are very strong, and if ... the structure should go elsewhere, I should not be greatly grieved.”<sup>162</sup> The architect Eric Gugler, who had redesigned the Oval Office in the 1930s and had close ties with Eleanor Roosevelt, saw the impending closure of the Aquarium as, if anything, an opportunity for the Park Service to renovate the building as a historic fort, and he chided the NPS for what he saw as its inadequate endorsement of the cause. “I shouldn’t think that we had enough old forts left in this country to toss them about,” he wrote to Demaray in May 1941.<sup>163</sup>

But other preservationists rooted their interest in the nostalgic, associational values that the Aquarium bore for generations of New Yorkers. The *New York Herald-Tribune*, sympathetic to preservation, waxed nostalgic over the combination of the “tang of the sea and ships” and “a visit to the sea’s denizens” that the Battery and the Aquarium jointly offered and suggested the exact inverse of the values of architectural preservation that had driven the salvaging of the Assay Office façade—that while the building might be disposable, the location was not.<sup>164</sup> “New York’s first citizen,” Charles Culp Burlingham, a prominent lawyer who had played a pivotal role in blocking Moses’ bridge, was mainly concerned that the aquarium would be made inaccessible during construction. “Why should the people be deprived of ... seeing the finny monsters and minnies of the

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<sup>162</sup> George McAneny to Albert Bard, September 2, 1941, Box 1, Folder 1, Castle Clinton National Monument Administrative Records.

<sup>163</sup> Eric Gugler to A. E. Demaray, May 21, 1941, Box 1, Castle Clinton National Monument Administrative Records.

<sup>164</sup> “Something Will Be Missed,” *The New York Herald Tribune*, February 8, 1941.



deep in this old building until they find a better home?” he wrote to Fairfield Osborn.<sup>165</sup> After the Aquarium closed, it took months for McAneny and other preservationists to convince Burlingham that the fort itself was worth saving. A committee of the Merchants’ Association of New York, led by Municipal Art Society member Harvey Wiley Corbett, expressed that “the present use of the building [as an aquarium] is most appropriate.”<sup>166</sup> The director of the New-York Historical Society, Alexander Wall, was more emphatic. “Save the Aquarium!” he roared in a radio address, in which he gave equal time to all periods of the structure’s history, not just its beginnings, and compared America’s destruction of historic buildings with the ongoing Nazi blitz on Britain.<sup>167</sup> But pleas alone had no effect on Moses, and with the Zoological Society unwilling to speak out on behalf of the Aquarium, only Pierce Trowbridge Wetter, the treasurer of the Greenwich Village Historical Society, mounted a legal challenge to its closure in October 1941. Not only did he lose his lawsuit, but he was also attacked personally in the press by Robert Moses.<sup>168</sup>

Moses’s aesthetic vision, supported by *The New York Times* and certain members of the architectural profession, had been to dismantle the structure entirely to obtain a clear vista from the foot of Broadway to the Statue of Liberty.<sup>169</sup> Aside from the personal grievance that may have been driving Moses’s fierce opposition to saving the fort, when the controversy is viewed in terms of competing preservation principles, what Moses

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<sup>165</sup> C.C. Burlingham to Fairfield Osborn, August 11, 1941, Box 1, Castle Clinton National Monument Administrative Records.

<sup>166</sup> Harvey Wiley Corbett, “Report Concerning the Preservation of the Aquarium Building in Battery Park,” July 1, 1941, Box 1, Castle Clinton National Monument Administrative Records.

<sup>167</sup> A. J. Wall, “Saving the Aquarium,” June 26, 1941, Box 1, Castle Clinton National Monument Administrative Records.

<sup>168</sup> Wood, *Preserving New York*, 59.

<sup>169</sup> “Moses Plans a New Battery Park, Minus the Old Aquarium Building,” *The New York Times*, March 23, 1942.

wanted aesthetically was actually not significantly different from what the preservationists who favored closing the aquarium wanted: to simplify the site in order to highlight a piece of memory infrastructure. The difference was that to Moses, the fort was meaningless and it was the Statue of Liberty that needed to be put into sharper focus. During the war, though, the funds needed for demolition were not forthcoming from the city. Those with the most energy, organizational wherewithal, and, most importantly, ties to the National Park Service—that is, McAneny’s camp—were to guide the fort’s ultimate preservation as a historic site. In October 1942, McAneny was named president of the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society when its previous leader, Alexander Hamilton, departed to become a military officer.<sup>170</sup> This was to be his final role in public life, and it placed him front and center in the city’s historic preservation movement. During the war, McAneny took advantage of his leadership of the preservation society and the Federal Hall Memorial Associates to build and maintain support for saving the fort. The Fine Arts Federation in 1942 sponsored a competition for an alternative design for the park that would save the fort “in its original form as Fort Clinton.” The competition had no influence on Moses, but it did enlist a number of architects in the cause of preservation, and, perhaps most importantly, provided an image of a restored fort-as-historic-site that would sit alone in the landscape, surrounded by greenery, at a time when Moses had cordoned it off behind a high fence.<sup>171</sup> The aquarium was not coming back, but the competition showed that there was a ready alternative to demolition.

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<sup>170</sup> “McAneny Heads Scenic Society,” *The New York Times*, October 20, 1942.

<sup>171</sup> “Program of Competition for the Selection of an Alternative Design for the Development of Battery Park, New York City” (Fine Arts Federation, May 18, 1942), Box 1, Castle Clinton National Monument Administrative Records.

Even before the war draw to a close in 1945, several McAneny allies began to plan a “Fort Clinton Society” that would raise funds to support its preservation and also plan for a use for the building after it was saved. As with Federal Hall, the preservationists had given little thought to what the site would become after it was saved; the antiquarian Charles Messer Stow, presumably jokingly, suggested that it be turned into a beer hall if it could not be a museum or auditorium.<sup>172</sup> But it was probably unrealistic to expect that a private association could shape the fort’s subsequent function. The Federal Hall Memorial Associates were struggling to raise funds themselves, and the two sites, so close to each other, would undoubtedly need to draw on the same sources of philanthropy. Instead, the future Castle Clinton, as it was becoming to be known, would be defined by the emerging vision and values of the staff of the National Park Service, who shared the advocates’ perspective of fort-as-relic.

The postwar years saw McAneny’s lobbying move into high gear.<sup>173</sup> In 1946, the fort’s allies managed to persuade the federal government to pass legislation permitting the city to cede the fort to the federal government, but the state legislature, likely influenced by Moses, refused to allow the transfer. It was also at this time that McAneny began speaking with Ronald Lee, his ally at the National Park Service, about both Fort Clinton and the possibility of a national preservation organization.<sup>174</sup> When the city finally allocated funds to destroy the structure the following year, McAneny’s group

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<sup>172</sup> Eric Gugler to Walter D. Binger, April 24, 1945, Box 1, Castle Clinton National Monument Administrative Records; Charles Messer Stow to Eric Gugler, October 4, 1945, Box 1, Castle Clinton National Monument Administrative Records.

<sup>173</sup> For a full accounting of this saga, which saw McAneny endlessly racing between New York, Albany and Washington to lobby on the fort’s behalf, see Hosmer, *Preservation Comes of Age*, 2:783–91; Wood, *Preserving New York*, 76–82.

<sup>174</sup> Hosmer, *Preservation Comes of Age*, 2:816.

launched a lawsuit that thwarted Moses until the state government reversed its decision and the transfer could proceed. This lawsuit resulted in a ruling from state supreme court justice Samuel Null in December 1948 that warned: “A people indifferent to the landmarks and monuments of the past will not long retain its capacity to achieve an honored future.”<sup>175</sup>

Another state bill to approve the transfer was passed in 1949, and McAneny called on the supporters of the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society to flood the governor’s office with calls and letters urging him to sign it. McAneny’s NPS allies also lobbied hard on the preservationists’ behalf so that federal funds would be immediately available to restore the fort after the transfer took place, and Congress appropriated \$165,000 in October 1949. When the fort was finally designated a national monument by the National Park Service in May 1950, the federal government was ready with funding to commence restoration, although it would take another two decades to complete.<sup>176</sup>

Two decades later, this restoration would be derided by Robert Caro as “dead history,” a “circle of walls” that “one could never love.”<sup>177</sup> Caro blamed Moses’s destruction of the Aquarium for leaving preservationists only a hollow shell, but what he perceived as a lifeless fort was actually the logical embodiment of the vision of those in the civic and architectural communities who fought hardest for its preservation. By valuing Castle Clinton as, first and foremost, a relic of the early republic, the coalition of

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<sup>175</sup> Charles Messer Stow, “Indifference to the Past Impairs Future Achievements,” *The Sun*, January 7, 1949.

<sup>176</sup> Hosmer, *Preservation Comes of Age*, 2:793–95; Richard F. Shepard, “Castle Clinton Opening Again, to Beethoven 9th,” *The New York Times*, May 24, 1975.

<sup>177</sup> Caro, *The Power Broker*, 687.

architects, civic leaders and federal officials who saved it privileged primarily its earliest use, as a fortification that had never seen battle—from the perspective of ordinary city residents, perhaps the least significant part of its history, and from the perspective of visitors, perhaps the least interesting. But this was the logical outcome of decisions that were made as early as 1941 by both federal officials and Robert Moses to strip the structure down to its original walls. The aquarium advocates, who emphasized a more complex, if also nostalgic, version of preservation, were not simply out-organized and outgunned; they, like the Second Avenue advocates decades before, lacked both legitimacy and a mechanism by which they could translate their feelings into action.

## **12. A National Force for Saving the Old Places**

In January 1949, soon after Justice Null's decision was released, a group of New York preservationists gathered at Gugler's Upper West Side home with national preservation leaders, including Ronald Lee; Kenneth Chorley, the chief executive of Historic Williamsburg, Virginia; and Edwin Lewis, the mastermind behind the Independence Hall National Memorial in Philadelphia, for a dinner celebrating McAneny's 79th birthday.<sup>178</sup> McAneny, of course, had known Ronald Lee for years and was working closely with him on the Castle Clinton fight at the time. But a broader tie bound all of these men together, as they been working closely for several years to establish the organization that would become the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which would dramatically expand the scale of historic preservation efforts throughout the nation over the coming decade. While Justice Null's recently released decision was an

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<sup>178</sup> Charles Messer Stow, "George McAneny First Citizen in Historic Preservation Work," *The Sun*, January 1949, George McAneny Papers, New-York Historical Society.



**Figure 64:** Before World War II, with the support of the National Park Service, Parks Commissioner Robert Moses began to strip away from Fort Clinton the stucco and aquarium superstructure that had been installed two decades earlier. Moses desired to destroy the structure entirely, but was prevented from doing so by wartime shortages and legal actions filed by preservationists. After being transferred to the National Park Service, the denuded fort underwent a lengthy restoration and was reopened to the public as Castle Clinton National Monument. This photograph of the main gate was taken for the National Historic Buildings Survey before restoration was complete.

Image source: Library of Congress

obvious cause for celebration at the party, the attendees could also mark another significant milestone: the bill chartering the National Trust had just been signed by President Truman.<sup>179</sup>

The National Trust and its predecessor, the National Council for Historic Sites and Buildings, represented the coming together of the regional movements in preservation into a national force. Since 1942, McAneny had been the president of the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society and the *de facto* leader of the preservation movement in New York, so it was natural that he would be included in the group. But McAneny was in a unique position compared with the leaders of local preservation groups in many other regions: The two places he had been most intimately involved in preserving, Federal Hall and Castle Clinton, were both federal historic sites. Federal Hall had always been federal property and was the second federal historic site to be designated in a major city under the Historic Sites Act after the troubled Jefferson Expansion National Memorial in St. Louis.<sup>180</sup> Castle Clinton was the center of a federal–local quarrel that attracted high-level attention for nearly a decade. By means of both of these preservation campaigns, McAneny had forged an especially close working relationship with the hardworking employee of the National Park Service, Ronald Lee, who conceived of the idea for a new national organization that would unite the local societies. And so it was that in October 1946, the first local leaders that Lee and his colleague, Francis Ronalds, turned to with his idea were McAneny and Gugler.

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<sup>179</sup> David A. Doheny, *David Finley: Quiet Force for America's Arts* (Washington, D.C.: National Trust for Historic Preservation, 2006), 359–60.

<sup>180</sup> The St. Louis memorial, which was really a vast urban renewal project, did not involve historic preservation, but rather the destruction of many historic buildings to make way for a modern monument. Mackintosh, *The National Parks: Shaping the System*, 52.

According to Charles Hosmer, who interviewed Ronald Lee, the four of them met in a restaurant in New York to map out alternatives, including the possibility that the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society itself be converted into a national organization. From that conversation, Lee sketched out a proposal to McAneny that called for a tripartite working group to be formed, consisting of representatives of preservation organizations, municipal and state governments, and the federal government.<sup>181</sup> Hosmer relates that another pivotal moment occurred that fall when McAneny was in Washington, D.C. on a lobbying trip, presumably on behalf of Castle Clinton. While McAneny was in his office, Lee arranged an impromptu meeting with David Finley, the director of the National Gallery of Art, and Chris Crittenden, a founder of the American Association for State and Local History. Finley agreed to lend his support to the project and began to plan a pre-organization meeting and a conference that would meet at the National Gallery in April 1947.<sup>182</sup> George McAneny became the chairman of the board of the new council; its president was Ulysses Grant III, a prominent parks administrator and planner in Washington, D.C., and its vice president was Kenneth Chorley of Historic Williamsburg. Ronald Lee was its secretary.<sup>183</sup>

In his opening remarks to the first meeting of the National Council for Historic Sites and Buildings in April 1947, McAneny set forth what he believed was the cause of the postwar crisis in preservation: he saw an increase in interest in preservation among the public at large, but a “falling off of both interest and understanding of many of those

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<sup>181</sup> Ronald Lee to George McAneny, November 8, 1946, Box 1, Folder 1, George McAneny Papers, New-York Historical Society.

<sup>182</sup> Hosmer, *Preservation Comes of Age*, 2:819–21.

<sup>183</sup> Doheny, *David Finley*, 249.



entrusted with political power.”<sup>184</sup> His experience with Robert Moses had shown him the danger of an unsympathetic actor obtaining the kind of power he himself had yearned for as a public official. Indeed, without the checks and balances of local and state government that he had scorned 30 years earlier as unnecessarily hobbling wise men, he would not have been able to defeat Moses in either the bridge fight or the Castle Clinton fight.

That said, it would be easy to make too much of the apparent irony of McAneny’s opposition to Robert Moses. McAneny had entered politics at a time when municipal government was sclerotic, graft-ridden, and barely even able to widen a street. Moses, on the other hand, had the vastly greater resources of the state and federal governments at his disposal, which enabled him to make his name as a nimble and efficient administrator who successfully transformed the city with massive projects that got built quickly. While being out of power clearly did change McAneny’s attitude toward the desirability of using whatever means were available to stop an expert like Moses from “getting things done,” Moses was not exactly the kind of figure that McAneny had aspired to become even in his younger years. Moses was able to retain power for as long as he did in large part because he held positions both at the state and local levels; he could hold mayors hostage because he controlled toll revenue collected by unaccountable state authorities that he had helped create beginning in the 1920s. Although suspicious of electoral politics, McAneny had favored consolidation of power in a local government run by a few well-qualified men, not its usurpation by agencies of higher levels of government.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Hosmer, *Preservation Comes of Age*, 2:822.

<sup>185</sup> Gutfreund, “Moses, Robert”; McAneny, “Municipal Citizenship,” 77.

Goaded by Moses's stridency, McAneny also appears to have had a change of heart about the value and goals of preservation itself. In the earlier part of his career, McAneny had selectively supported the preservation of objects that made up the city's memory infrastructure, but he was willing to sacrifice even this form of preservation to achieve other goals, and he did not evince much sympathy for the nostalgic, associational pose taken by the neighborhood-level preservationists. His public turnabout in the 1940s was dramatic: While McAneny spent the 1930s as the head of a group that eagerly promoted a futuristic vision of the New York region, within three years of his success in the bridge fight he had become the head of the state's most visible preservation organization, in which role he was campaigning against the forces of modernity encapsulated in the figure of Robert Moses.

Moreover, he was becoming more sympathetic, even encouraging, toward the complexity that drove the associational mode of preservation. Significantly, this type of preservation would involve different kinds of historic buildings than had typically been the subject of preservation campaigns in the past. In the late 1940s, McAneny signed on to efforts to prevent demolition of the rows of privately owned hundred-year-old Federal-style houses fronting the north side of Washington Square Park.<sup>186</sup> While this type of fight would be *de rigueur* for New York preservationists only 10 years later, it is remarkable that this was the only time in his life that McAneny lent his name to a preservation campaign involving private residences that were not expected to pass into public or quasi-public use. Because the two rows had separate owners, and one of them underwent a change in ownership in 1950, they were threatened on at least three separate

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<sup>186</sup> Wood, *Preserving New York*, 86–87.

occasions over a five-year period. Although preservationists were only partially successful in saving the buildings, the Washington Square North battles presaged a dramatic shift in the focus that preservation efforts would take in future years. While individual structures like Fort Clinton would continue to attract attention, much greater emphasis would be placed on saving the historic fabric of neighborhoods. This shift implied that the preservation movement would have to seek out new strategies and even new guiding purposes, as privately owned buildings and streetscapes could hardly be frozen in time or put on a pedestal as idealized monuments.

In 1950, at the fourth annual meeting of the National Council for Historic Sites and Buildings, McAneny gave an address in which he proudly recounted the long series of political and legal challenges he had undertaken in the Castle Clinton fight. He spoke of the influential people in the National Park Service who had helped to save the fort, of the legal challenges that were filed in the fort's behalf, of the strenuous efforts that were made in Congress to obtain funding for it and in Albany to facilitate its transfer to the federal government, and of the five times that the Board of Estimate had voted to demolish the fort. Although he needed to outmaneuver the municipal government to save the fort, McAneny did not focus in this talk on the need for more municipal reform. Instead, he said, the fort fight represented "victory in a local contest" and "an example and encouragement to others ... that the way in which to gain the acquisition of a property destined for destruction was to keep everlastingly at it and not be discouraged by any events whatsoever." Nor was he giving specific advice about what kind of objects were worth saving. "It's becoming almost a cry: 'Save the old places!'" he said. "... [W]herever you are yourselves interested and in whatever ventures of salvation you have



**Figure 65:** This photograph taken ca. 1920 shows the rows of federal-style houses on the north side of Washington Square Park that preservationists would leap into action to try to preserve in the late 1940s. The set of buildings just to the left of the arch, undergoing renovation and expansion at the time of this photo, were destroyed, but those to the right were preserved by New York University. McAneny's vocal support of this preservation campaign, which sought to preserve private residences as landmarks in the city's urban fabric, represented a significant shift from the preservation ideology that he had adopted before World War II.

Image source: Library of Congress

your hand, ... consider the wisdom of waiting everlastingly if necessary to get what you want as we did.”<sup>187</sup> McAneny’s characteristic persistence, in evidence throughout his career, had proven well-suited to preservation activism, and he was encouraging others to adopt the same tactic, regardless of their purposes.

But it was not enough simply to want to “save the old places.” To muster the support of the public for activism on behalf of historic places in the landscape, the purpose of preservation would need to be refocused away from the creation of patriotic memory infrastructure and toward goals that spoke to the needs of postwar society, which was rapidly suburbanizing and experiencing an unprecedented degree of loss of the fabric of historic cities. McAneny seems to have recognized the significance of the destruction of historical fabric, but the preservation strategies he articulated were inadequate to the scale and scope of the loss. In recalling Castle Clinton’s long history, he said: “There is no part of New York City that is held so sacredly by those who understand ... it was the center of so much that relates to the history of New York that it may well be taken as an epitomy [*sic*] of it all.” He then gave a detailed summary of the fort’s various uses over the years, making a case that its layered history, with all of its varied associations, was what gave it significance. And yet, describing the act of restoration that the federal government was about to embark on, he chose to concentrate on the removal of those layers: “The first thing to be done there ... has been to denude the building of the [material] placed upon it at the time it was changed into the aquarium in 1890,” he said approvingly.<sup>188</sup> Of course, that was exactly what Demaray had asked Moses to do in 1941, and Moses had only been too happy to comply. It is telling that even after the heroic

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<sup>187</sup> George McAneny, “The Fight for Castle Clinton,” 1950.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

struggle to save it, the stripped-down monument never found favor among either city residents or visitors and was eventually relegated to the ignominy of serving as a ticket office for the Statue of Liberty ferries.<sup>189</sup>

But if the monuments he left behind were disappointing, McAneny's intangible contribution to their cause has been justly celebrated by preservationists who followed in his footsteps of passionate activism. Just as McAneny's accomplishments were being celebrated in his final years, a new kind of preservation was emerging out of New York City's neighborhoods—one which married McAneny's resourcefulness and persistence as an advocate to a new generation's ardent devotion to New York City's distinctly urban values of vibrant, mixed uses and layered history.

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<sup>189</sup> David W. Dunlap, "A Quiet Old Fort Facing a Bustle of Ferry Crowds," *The New York Times*, March 18, 1986. Robert Moses, who wanted the fort destroyed to open up sight lines to the Statue of Liberty, may have appreciated this turn of fate.

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