

# Village Views

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## CONTENTS

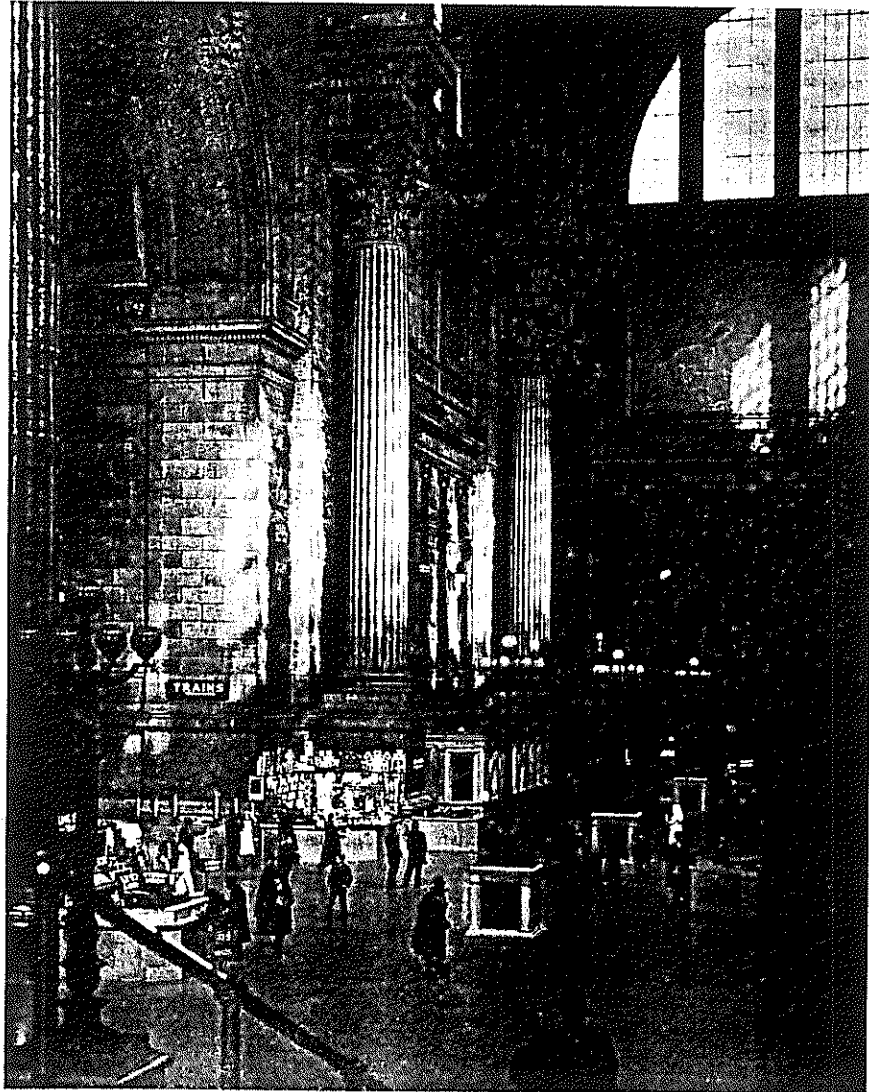
Pioneers of Preservation, by Anthony C. Wood	
Introduction	3
An interview with the late Geoffrey Platt, the first Chairman of the Landmarks Commission	7
Is Landmark Designation Finished?	39
What Was Designated When: A Chronological List of Designations, 1965-1986	45
Briefly Noted: A New Edition of the AIA Guide Planned	69
A Sailor's Elysium: Turn of the Century Photographs of the Grounds of Sailors' Snug Harbor	71
Editorial: Exiling the Philosopher	83

*On the cover: A Greek Revival colonnade among old trees at Sailors' Snug Harbor.*

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## PIONEERS OF PRESERVATION

A series of interviews with founders  
of the historic preservation movement in New York  
by Anthony C. Wood

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### An Introduction

Contrary to popular belief, historic preservation in New York City did not spring fully formed from the ruins of Pennsylvania Station. Over a decade before the demolition of that incredible structure, the groundwork for a preservation movement was being laid. But today, many who play an important part in the historic preservation movement have little or no knowledge of its origins.

The history of preservation in New York City is a story with heroes and villains, miracles and disappointments, midnight demolitions and last minute reprieves. It is full of great public acts, and equally important private, behind-the-scenes maneuvers. It involves both civic leaders and celebrities. This history is a mine of information but also a source of inspiration: it offers us advice on tactics, explanations for policies, understanding of attitudes, and philosophical guidance.

New Yorkers have been working to preserve the architectural and historical treasures of this city for decades. Yet those involved with these efforts have been so busy trying to save the city's past, that they have had little time to record and save their own. If the insider's knowledge, the observations, and the insights of the pioneers of preservation are not recorded, the full story of the preservation movement will be lost, and with it, the opportunity to benefit from the collective wisdom and experience it represents.

In 1984 I began to try to preserve some of this history through a series of interviews with individuals involved in early preservation activities in New York City. One of the people I most wanted to interview was the first Chairman of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, Geoffrey Platt, since his role in the events leading up to the creation of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, and his leadership as first Chairman, made him a

Left: An interior view of McKim, Mead & White's Pennsylvania Station, before its demolition.



In the hearing room at the Landmarks Preservation Commission, Anthony C. Wood with a portrait of the late Geoffrey Platt.

key figure. He generously granted me two interviews, provided me with additional information, and reviewed the transcript of the interview from which the following excerpts are taken. On Friday, July 12, 1985, at the age of 79, Geoffrey Platt died.

Focusing attention on the history of the preservation movement is particularly timely now, when preservation in New York City faces a number of challenges. Our ability to respond to these challenges and shape preservation's future will be greatly enhanced by an appreciation and understanding of preservation's past. If nothing else, a realization of the great obstacles that have been overcome and a fuller knowledge of the movement's hard-won victories will put our present challenges in perspective, and inspire us to redouble our efforts and energies to preserve the best of our architecture and history.

*Anthony C. Wood is President of the Historic Districts Council and a program officer at The J. M. Kaplan Fund. He was formerly Director of Public Affairs at the Municipal Art Society, and Confidential Assistant to the Chairman of the Landmarks Preservation Commission. Mr. Wood graduated cum laude from Kenyon College in 1976 with departmental honors in history, and received a master's degree in urban planning from the University of Illinois in 1978. His background in history led to this study, "Preserving Preservation's Past," which was made possible in part through The Architectural Fellowships Program of the Academy for Educational Development, and funded by the Architecture, Planning and Design Program of the New York State Council on the Arts.*



Normally, Mayor Wagner's signing of a proclamation making September 28 through October 4, 1964 American Landmarks Preservation Week would not have drawn much comment. However, only days earlier the news had broken that the Brokaw Mansion was about to be demolished. The legislation that would have given the city the ability to save it had been sitting on the Mayor's desk since May. The irony of the Mayor's preservation proclamation, in the face of the demolition of the Brokaw Mansion—and with no planned action to bring the long awaited landmarks law closer to reality—was lost on no one, and received much public attention. Above, left to right, Mayor Wagner with Whitney North Seymour and Geoffrey Platt.

## AN INTERVIEW WITH THE FIRST CHAIRMAN OF THE LANDMARKS PRESERVATION COMMISSION, THE LATE GEOFFREY PLATT

*This interview (which consists of excerpts from a longer session) was taped by Anthony C. Wood, on May 15, 1984, in the office of Wyckoff, Platt and Coles. It is part of a series of interviews undertaken by Mr. Wood to document the early history of the historic preservation movement in New York.*

MR. WOOD

I'm so glad I have a chance to talk to you, because you can't read anything about landmarks preservation without finding your name over and over again, as being there from the very beginning of everything.

MR. PLATT

Well, I was indeed. I'm very glad to get the beginnings of this thing on the record somehow.

MR. WOOD

Well, there's not much written about it. And I've been reading what little I've found in the newspaper clippings, and when you look at all the events that happened that led up to the law, it looks as though somebody had a wonderful master plan that was slowly unveiled. It was probably anything but that, but who knows, except you, probably?

MR. PLATT

There was no master plan, just a lot of activity, and then circumstances that finally brought progress. 1961 was the pivotal year. There were many things that had gone on before which laid the groundwork for what happened in 1961 and thereafter.

The Municipal Art Society started the ball rolling in 1954 when a forty-page mimeographed list of noteworthy buildings in New York City, prepared by Edward Steese, Architect, was first published. It was republished many times afterward. In 1952, 1953 and 1954, the Municipal Art Society held photographic exhibits of the noteworthy buildings. In 1956, the MAS sponsored the first of the now famous walking tours conducted by Henry Hope Reed.

In that same year, 1956, the New York State Legislature enacted what became known as the Bard Law. The legislation, created by Albert Bard, a lawyer and MAS board member, was an enabling act which empowered municipalities to provide special regulations for the protection of buildings and objects of historical and/or aesthetic value. This Act was essential for the subsequent enactment of the Landmarks Preservation Law.

In 1957, the New York Community Trust began placing plaques on notable buildings. All this activity plus the loss of the Pennsylvania Station and the threatening of other fine buildings made the public realize that some official measures must be devised to get this situation under control: to save buildings from destruction, and to provide an orderly system for deciding what should be saved. The need was paramount, but nobody knew what to do!

Harmon Goldstone was the President of the Municipal Art Society and I was the Chairman of their Zoning Committee. In the latter part of 1960, I had been appearing before the City Planning Commission saying that there ought to be some kind of aesthetic zoning, and this was when they were considering the new zoning proposal.

MR. WOOD

Oh, yes, the 1961 zoning.

MR. PLATT

And finally Mr. Felt, James Felt, Chairman of the City Planning Commission, Jack Felt, said to me, "If you will stop talking about aesthetic zoning, I will do something to help you people with your--the question of preservation of older buildings," because, he said, "We can't get aesthetic zoning into the new zoning law, and if we keep trying, we're going to scuttle the whole thing." So I didn't say another word.

Then Harmon asked Mr. Felt to speak at the Annual Meeting of the Municipal Art Society in the spring, and he did, and in that speech, he said, "It is time that we did something about the preservation of our old buildings." So, by coincidence, Harmon and I had invited him to the Century for lunch the next day, to ask him what we could do about all this. He said at this lunch, "If you're willing to give the Mayor the credit for this activity, we can do something." So we said, "We're willing to give him all the credit he wants." So, he said to Harmon, "You write me a letter suggesting that the Mayor appoint a committee to look into this whole question and to report to him." So Harmon wrote him the letter. He said, incidentally, "I will see that

he gets the letter, and I will see that he does something about it." So Harmon wrote him the letter, and then out of that came the appointment of the Committee--

MR. WOOD

I think I've got it here: it's "The Mayor's Committee for the Preservation of Structures of Historic and Esthetic Importance." June, 1961.

MR. PLATT

That's it. So the Mayor, with Jack Felt, made up the list of this Committee and on the Committee was Harmon Goldstone, myself, and a number of distinguished citizens, you probably have got it somewhere--

MR. WOOD

Yes, I have a list of those. [Robert S. Curtiss, Robert W. Dowling, Harmon H. Goldstone, Luther Gulick, Arthur C. Holden, Stanley H. Lowell, Clarence G. Michalis, McKim Norton, Geoffrey Platt, Whitney North Seymour, Sr., Bethuel M. Webster, Morgan Dix Wheelock, and Frederick J. Woodbridge.]

MR. PLATT

So, the Mayor appointed this Committee and asked me to be the Chairman. I think that was a bit of a conspiracy on the part of Harmon Goldstone and Mr. Felt. So, the Mayor got a lot of credit, you see, for appointing this Committee. Incidentally, The New York Times was very strongly in favor of preservation and gave it a lot of publicity.

MR. WOOD

Was that Ada Louise Huxtable, or was that somebody else at The Times who was so sympathetic?

MR. PLATT

I don't really know. I'm not sure it was entirely her. I know she was part of it. But anyway, it couldn't have been her alone. It would have to be somebody way up there.

So this Committee started working. The first meeting was July 25. [1961.] We had meetings at the Seaman's Bank for Savings on 45th Street and Fifth Avenue. Anyway, we started having meetings, and the Committee turned out to be an extremely good one. I mean, everyone listened to what everyone had to say, and nobody made speeches.

MR. WOOD

I wish they had committees like that today.

MR. PLATT

And it was a marvelous committee. It was Luther Gulick who said, "Why don't we call this the Landmarks Preservation Commission?"

So, I can't remember the dates now, but it was within a year. [November 27, 1961.] In other words, we moved very rapidly: we produced a report with recommendations to the Mayor which was on one page, double spaced. Something that he could read very rapidly. And it recommended that he appoint an Advisory Landmarks Preservation Commission, that it be charged with making a survey of the city to see what were potential landmarks, and to prepare a draft of the legislation.

Mind you, the Municipal Art Society was deeply involved in the whole thing through Harmon and myself. I was the Chairman of this Committee, but he was my Secretary. (Laughter.) Following the scheme the Fine Arts Federation had, we got the Fine Arts Federation together, and they suggested a list of names to the Mayor, of people who could be on this Commission, and then he was to select them from that list. Actually he didn't like this idea. I don't think politicians like to be directed. They want the full credit for it. So that [Advisory] Commission was appointed. I think you've got a list of it somewhere.

MR. WOOD

I do. [The 1962 Advisory Commission: Robert S. Curtiss, Geoffrey Platt, Frederick J. Woodbridge, Juliet Bartlett, James N. Fosberg, Allen E. Foster, Russell Lynes, Loring McMillan, Leopold Rothschild, Bayrd Still, Stanley B. Tankel, William Zinsser, and William R. Fisher, who filled the position vacated by Robert S. Curtiss on October 30, 1962.]

MR. PLATT

Again, I was appointed Chairman. A lot of these people were suggested by Mr. Felt, people that he thought would be useful. Then this Commission was set up, February, 1962, in the Mayor's office, and was given an appropriation of \$50,000. And we were astonished because we only asked for \$35,000.

MR. WOOD

Was it the Mayor's interest that got the money?



Demonstrators protest the demolition of Pennsylvania Station.

MR. PLATT

Well, I think they thought \$35,000 was not enough. And at that time we were able to get Jim Van Derpool, who was the librarian at Columbia, to be the Executive Director. He did an absolutely extraordinary job of organizing the work that we were doing and making himself known to the other members of city government who were all very interested in this activity: surprisingly interested. In other words they thought it was a great thing. They thought it should have been done long ago, and things like that.

Well, the new Commission got started and we got very good advice from Jack Felt, which--he said, "You take this time that you've got," which is three years--

MR. WOOD

You were appointed for a specific period of time?

MR. PLATT

To come up with something within three years. "Make yourself known. Don't surprise anybody by what you're doing." At one point we thought we should say something about the Pennsylvania Station, and we did. It didn't do any good, and it surprised people in other agencies. So we learned something: don't surprise anybody in government. If you're going to do something tell all the people that are going to be affected that you're going to do something. Give 'em a chance to say something about it.

So, we got to work on the legislation, and this was a very interesting exercise. The Corporation Counsel's office assigned a very good man, Morris Handel, to be in charge, with Bernard Friedlander assisting. One of the things that he suggested in one of his first drafts was that there be a Commission of eleven members, nine of whom should be architects, and we said, "Never." You never will get any agreement among nine architects. So that was reduced to three architects.

Gradually we evolved the set-up that ultimately came into being, which was that there should be a certain number of professionals, three architects, a landscape architect or a city planner, an architectural historian, and a real estate man. And then--I think it was within a couple of years, [May 7, 1964,] we put on the Mayor's desk a draft of this legislation which was about three inches thick, and the Mayor didn't do anything about it.



The demolition of Pennsylvania Station.

MR. WOOD

Why didn't he?

MR. PLATT

Well, now wait--it was just inertia. In October of that year, (this was now 1964,) the Mayor's Office declared something called Preservation Week. [September 28 - October 4, 1964.] And it was pointed out forcibly to the Mayor that he had a draft of the legislation on his desk. So he immediately handed it to the City Council. And the City Council then started working. Let me see now, we had a series of meetings with the Council Committee on Codification. Mr. Sadowsky was the Chairman. That was very interesting.

MR. WOOD

Were they receptive?

MR. PLATT

Oh, yes! Oh, yes! They were. You see, the thing that had happened was that it all began with Robert Moses. His handling of urban renewal was so arrogant, and so destructive, that we immediately had a constituency of people who had seen their neighborhoods vanish. So this was our strength--the importance of this was to get numbers in the constituency, to interest the politicians. And then we had the people in Greenwich Village and Brooklyn Heights who produced a lot of people, a lot of numbers, vociferous numbers. So we had a big and wide constituency and the legislators felt this tremor. (Laughter.)

So we had a series of meetings with them where this legislation was discussed, and I'll tell you that in the mean time, I had been meeting with all kinds of civic organizations: Citizens' Housing and Planning Council, the labor unions, the real estate investors, really a very wide spectrum of citizens' organizations discussing the proposals and the law. We had a wonderful bone to throw the "dogs," which was that in one of the original drafts it said that an area four hundred feet from each landmark should be under the jurisdiction of the Landmarks Preservation Commission. Nobody thought this was a good idea. They reacted very strongly against this. And so we were able to say, "Well, we'll give that up."

MR. WOOD

So that was kind of put in as a--

MR. PLATT

Well no, it was put in sort of seriously at first, then, we realized it would never work. That made a lot of people happy. Then I had two or three meetings with an association of real estate investors, it was the real investment group, and out of my conversation with them came the moratorium, you remember that?

MR. WOOD

Yes.

MR. PLATT

Well, we were to designate for one year, and then there would be a wait of three years. So that we wouldn't keep them in a continual state of suspense. That brought them into line. It was criticized quite strongly, and was finally given up some time later, but that's all right, it was really very helpful to the Statutory Commission, because it was absorbing an awful lot of material, so to speak. Hearing all kinds of buildings, wondering what to do about them. People were making threatening noises of one kind or another. That gave the Commission a chance to pull itself together.

So finally, a draft of the legislation was presented for a public hearing on December 3, 1964, which was quite an event. It started at eleven o'clock in the morning, and went on until six o'clock at night. And they--I remember one legislator saying to me, "We haven't had as much interest in any subject since the Sales Tax." So, we had the public hearing.

There were a lot more meetings with the Committee and with the lawyers for the Corporation Counsel, William Fisher of the Advisory Commission was a lawyer from Brooklyn, and he was extremely helpful in all this. So finally, a final draft of the legislation was prepared for action by the City Council. And there had been a lot of talk behind the scenes, and so forth, and they passed this legislation, April 6, 1965, unanimously. There were only two people who weren't there, who didn't vote, but it was unanimous for all those present.

I thought this was absolutely astonishing until I suddenly realized we had been handed the ball. They all agreed this was a good thing, and then Mr. Ross, President of the City Council--who is now a judge--said to me after this thing had been passed--his idea wasn't too well expressed, but he said, "We've given you this power, now you administer it." What he meant by that was, "Use good judgment in administering this."



So there we were. The Mayor then signed the Bill on the 19th of April. He signed the Bill, and the Commission was later appointed. I had a fascinating series of discussions under the stairs at City Hall. His name was Bill Lutsky--I think he subsequently became a judge of the Family Court, or something like that. He was the Mayor's get-it-all-set-up boy, that kind of thing, and he and I worked out the membership of the Commission with suggestions of ours, and then suggestions of his and the Mayor's. This is the first Commission. [Mr. Platt showed an old calendar naming the members of the first statutory Landmarks Preservation Commission of 1965: Geoffrey Platt, Chairman; J. Woodbridge; Juliet Bartlett; Russell Lynes; Loring McMillan; Stanley B. Tankel, Vice Chairman, William R. Fisher; Helen W. Swenson; J. Clarence Davies, Jr.; L. Bancei LaFarge, Samuel J. Lefrak.]

Then we had to have these various professions, and we had to have one member from each borough. This was put in by the City Council. That made appointments very complex, because there developed a series of slots, you see.

MR. WOOD

That was put in by the City Council when it was--

MR. PLATT

Yes.

MR. WOOD

Was there ever any doubt that the legislation would pass the City Council? Was it ever up in the air--or was it pretty much of a sure thing?

MR. PLATT

I couldn't tell. Except that the fellows in the Committee were so interested in it, it must have reflected what the rest of the City Council thought.

MR. WOOD

Well, if the Mayor put it in, I guess with his force behind it that would--

MR. PLATT

I want to interject here something that happened chronologically before the point where we're at now. All during the time that the Advisory Commission was working, and we were working on the legislation, Harmon

Goldstone and I would go and have a meeting with Jack Felt, periodically, about once a month, and say what was going on. And during the course of this time, Mr. Lindenbaum, the real estate man, misbehaved--and at a meeting in Brooklyn he solicited contributions for the Mayor's campaign--so he was fired from the City Planning Commission. This was in October or November of that year, and so Jack Felt said to Harmon Goldstone and myself, "Either one of you--or both of you-- interested in being on the City Planning Commission? Because I think that the City Planning Commission ought to have an architect on it." So we said yes, we would be interested. Harmon Goldstone was appointed.

MR. WOOD

So that's how that happened.

MR. PLATT

That's how he got there. That was a wonderful scheme there, you see, because the City Planning Commission could do a lot for the Landmarks Preservation Commission. All kinds of zoning things were done during this time which were very beneficial to the Landmarks Commission--limited building heights in historic districts, transfer of development rights.

MR. WOOD

It sounds like James Felt was really a real ally all the way through.

MR. PLATT

He was a wonderful man. We couldn't have done it without him.

MR. WOOD

It is interesting that he was really that--

MR. PLATT

Oh, yes, he was a very very fine, very very forward-looking man, as they say.

MR. WOOD

He was genuinely concerned about preservation?

MR. PLATT

Oh, yes! Oh, yes!

MR. WOOD

Do you think the Mayor was really interested in it? Or just--

MR. PLATT

Yes, he was. The Mayor was. Particularly, because he got a very good public reaction from his activities in preservation.

MR. WOOD

He became more and more of a convert?

MR. PLATT

Yes, and, well--with the general atmosphere of the time so favorable, so many people, and The Times, beating the drum all the time, it got to be something everybody was for.

MR. WOOD

Once again, when I go back and read the papers and try to understand what was really going on, it seems that the loss of some of the buildings, and some of the threats, the Carnegie Hall threat, and the bowling alleys in Grand Central, --

MR. PLATT

No, that came later.

MR. WOOD

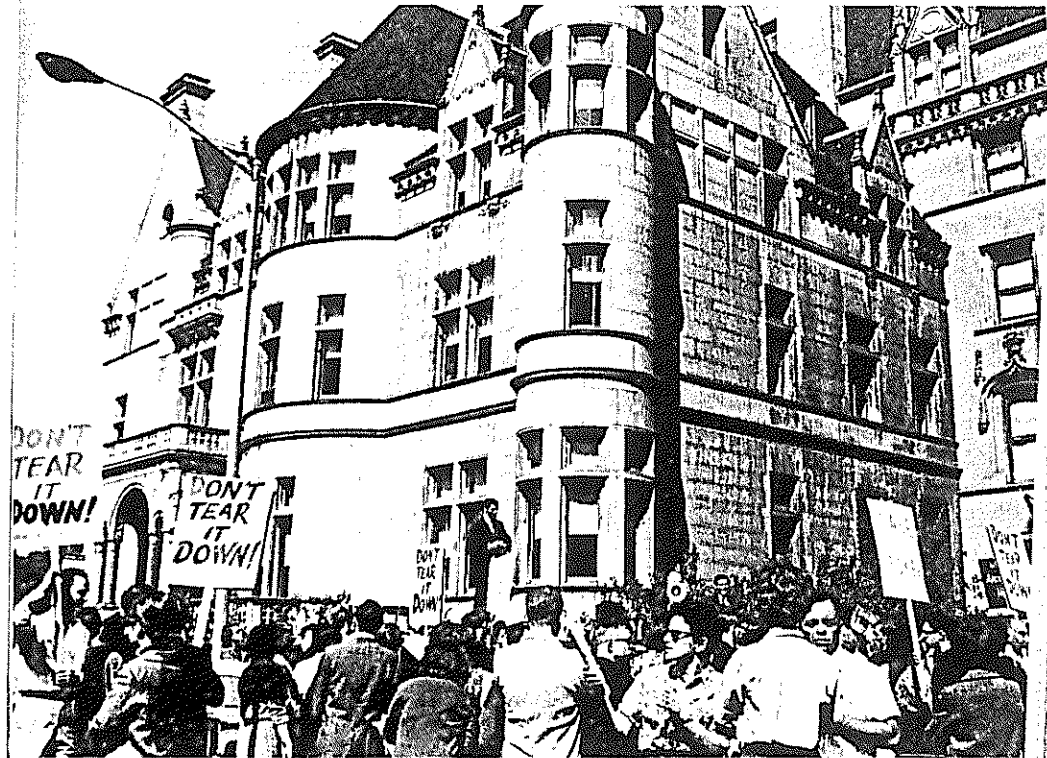
Much later?

MR. PLATT

One of the things, of course--Pennsylvania Station had a big effect, and we couldn't do anything about that, you see--

MR. WOOD

That must have been frustrating?



On September 17, 1964, The New York Times announced the intended demolition of the Brokaw Mansion at Fifth Avenue and 79th Street. The building had been identified as worthy of preservation by the Mayor's Landmarks Preservation Commission, but the city still lacked the legal authority to protect buildings. After the announcement about the Brokaw House, the proposed landmarks legislation moved from the Mayor's desk, (where it had been sitting since May,) and was introduced in the City Council on October 6, 1964. But to the shock and outrage of the city, the demolition of the Brokaw House began over the weekend of February 6, 1965. This loss helped move the proposed law forward: just two months later it was passed by the City Council, and on April 19, 1965, Mayor Wagner signed the bill into law.

MR. PLATT

It was too late, much too late. And we just had to swallow it. One of the buildings that was a trigger was the Brokaw House, a big old granite house on the corner of 79th Street and Fifth Avenue--

MR. WOOD

That really helped light the fire?

MR. PLATT

The wreckers came and went bang bang--and that was it. The Mayor's office tried to do something about that. One of the secretaries called me and said that we can hold things up until Monday, if you can think of what to do, you know, but nobody could think of anything to do. There was no mechanism. The mechanism wasn't there. So that had a big effect.

MR. WOOD

Really getting the Mayor's attention?

MR. PLATT

No, everybody's. It helped to strengthen the atmosphere.

MR. WOOD

Was there any other event similar to the Brokaw that helped fuel the interest?

MR. PLATT

I don't think so. It was pretty strong by then.

MR. WOOD

In reading, I see that the Bard Law in Albany went through back in 1956. Was it thought that New York City would immediately follow with a law?

MR. PLATT

No. It didn't.

MR. WOOD

No, it didn't, and that's why I wondered.

MR. PLATT

It was the thing: it was the enabling act that permitted the city to write the preservation law.

MR. WOOD

When Bard was pushing it through, in his mind he must have figured that eventually the city would use it? Or did he think--

MR. PLATT

I don't know. I used to see a lot of him at that time. He never said anything about that. He was a very vociferous man-- (Laughter.)

MR. WOOD

Up until the end.

MR. PLATT

Yes.

MR. WOOD

So that just happened in Albany without a lot of hoopla.

MR. PLATT

It's probably just as well. I don't think anybody knew what they were doing. (Laughter.) It seemed a perfectly innocuous thing to do.

MR. WOOD

He had great foresight, I guess.

MR. PLATT

Yes. No, he did, because we couldn't have done anything without him. A lot of other states, later, wanted to do this, realized that they had to go to their legislatures to get some kind of--

MR. WOOD

When you were working on drafting the city law, did the Committee look at legislation from other cities?

MR. PLATT

Oh, yes! We scoured all the available laws that there were. There had been New Orleans, Boston--they had historic districts in both those places. All of those things were very carefully studied.

MR. WOOD

Did any particular one seem a model?

MR. PLATT

No, I think that the New York law is an original. I think that the drafters did a terrific job.

MR. WOOD

It's done very well.

MR. PLATT

Well--you know this--people were against, could be against preservation, but the law, no word of the law was ever revised. You would have thought that if you had a piece of legislation that was in a sense as revolutionary as this, there'd be all kind of phrases and sentences and so forth that people would want to change. But no, the only changes to the law were made after my time--were made to broaden it.

MR. WOOD

They didn't undo anything.

MR. PLATT

Not a thing. And we spent more time discussing and arguing about the six per cent return business than anything, and it's hardly ever been used.

I think that's a great tribute to the drafters of this thing, that they--that it was sufficiently broad, really. People have said that the criteria, the standards, are ridiculous: they're so broad. Well, that's a good thing.

MR. WOOD

It is. I remember seeing that there was some talk that Brooklyn Heights was trying to push for its own legislation at the same time, and--

MR. PLATT

Well, yes they were.

MR. WOOD

Did somebody actually have to go and ask them to hold back so they didn't mess things up?

MR. PLATT

Well. Boy. They had some rather difficult characters over there. Which we had to deal with. But they--I think they realized it would have to be part of the whole thing. You see, they had started before we did, really, to try. See, that was what was done in Boston, and New Orleans. That was a single thing which had nothing to do with the rest of the city.

MR. WOOD

I've got some questions here I'm going to hit you with.

MR. PLATT

Let me tell you about the Real Estate Board.

MR. WOOD

Do. Do.

MR. PLATT

We almost got them to not say anything or to endorse the law in the weakest possible way. This was Jack Felt's doing. And we had some friends then who were Morgan partners, so we had a lunch at Morgan's, and we invited the then head of the Real Estate Board, I don't know the name, and tried to persuade them of the value of the law. They weren't moving. But their opposition was very matter of fact. They didn't come down there with a whole bunch of people. They sent one minor executive of the Real Estate Board to voice disapproval, which was--that was all Jack Felt's doing. There were a lot of them that I think felt it was a good thing. They just couldn't bear--(Laughter.)

MR. WOOD

They just couldn't let it pass--

MR. PLATT

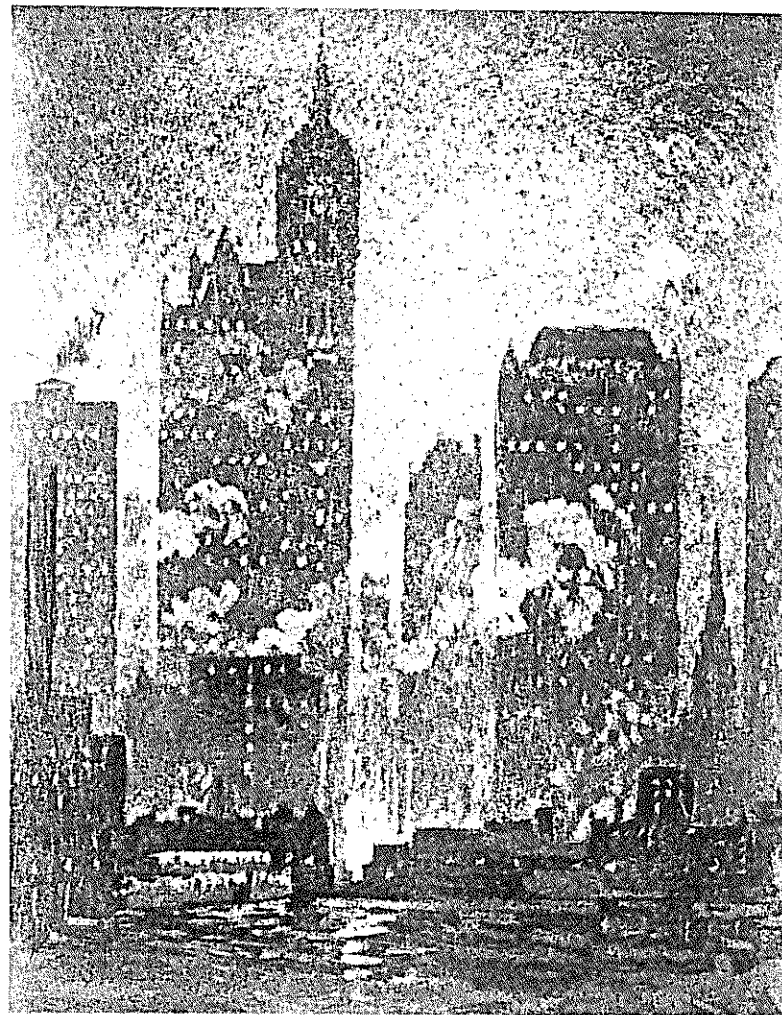
No. Another one of the wonderful, sensible things that Jack Felt said was, "You're going to lose some buildings during this period and don't let it bother you. You just--you're going to lose 'em." One of the buildings I regret very much was the Singer Building. You see, we had to watch our step, because there were a lot of big boys around there with big sticks. The U. S. Steel, I think, had bought the property and was going to build a building. And again, we weren't--it wasn't the time. We could have done something. We were the Landmarks Commission. We could have done something, but it was too soon, you know, in our career, to get entangled in such a fight as that would have been. My objective during those--all the years that I was Chairman, was to--that the most important thing was to preserve the Landmarks Preservation Commission. And not to endanger its life by undertaking dangerous engagements, from a military point of view. Don't undertake something that you're going to--that you have a chance of losing it, really, you had to be--

MR. WOOD

It was a whole different time, back then. You were really building credibility up--

MR. PLATT

Oh, sure. Absolutely. More than anything. And here's another thing, when we had our first hearing in September of 1965. On it we had every major threatened building: the old Metropolitan Opera House, Sailor's Snug Harbor--no, Trinity Church came next hearing. But we took on some really tough ones. That hearing went on from ten o'clock until nine o'clock at night.



The Singer Building, an etching by Joseph Pennell.

MR. WOOD

That's what started the tradition of these long meetings?

MR. PLATT

Yes. After that we never had such a long meeting because it was all new, and we instituted a rule that people couldn't speak for more than five minutes. Well, we weren't able to enforce it, but other agencies said, "How the hell did you do that?" (Laughter.) Anyway, we did use it, we said, "Sorry, you have to sit down." Oh, my.

MR. WOOD

That was a full agenda if you had the Metropolitan Opera House. That was quite a--

MR. PLATT

Yes, you see, we didn't designate that.

MR. WOOD

You must have felt in a very uncomfortable position sometimes.

MR. PLATT

Well, I think the vote of the Commission was six to five or something very close. I voted against giving it a designation because I thought--we were always concerned with the exterior of buildings. And the exterior of that building was just terrible. Also, I wanted to avoid that--I'll tell you, I just wanted to avoid that controversy.

MR. WOOD

I understand that you really had to steer a careful course in the early times.

MR. PLATT

Oh, yes! And I was accused of being--see, we had to weave our way between the developers and the other people who opposed us, and the violent preservationists on the other hand.

MR. WOOD

You ran into a nest of them in Greenwich Village.



The old Metropolitan Opera.

MR. PLATT

Oh, yes!

MR. WOOD

Tell me about that whole Greenwich Village thing--

MR. PLATT

I was very troubled about Greenwich Village because in the first place we were threatened by some fellow down there, I've now forgotten his name, with a law suit if we did anything. And I didn't want to have a law suit about Greenwich Village. So, the thing that troubled me about Greenwich Village was so many bad buildings. There were, you know, a lot of them. So after awhile, Harmon Goldstone, and Stanley Tankel and I evolved a scheme of dividing the Village up into a whole bunch of little districts. Collections of the good things. And we tried that out on the Greenwich Village people and they were smart. We had a hearing on it. And they were very polite and very definite about their feelings about it. They hated the idea. What they said to me in private was one thing, but they were smart, you see. Instead of making a big stink, they just made a very good case for not doing it.

The Corporation Counsel at the time, Lee Rankin--he was a wonderful man. He was the one that said, "I think that you should designate the whole district. But you've got to write the most detailed report on the whole Greenwich Village District that you can possibly imagine. You've got to overwhelm them with detail." So Alan Burnham spent the next two years writing this report, which came out as two big things like that, and then we voted it. And nobody sued us. This thing was overwhelming even though all those bum buildings were still there. That was a terrible problem.

MR. WOOD

Was the Brooklyn Heights fight a little easier?

MR. PLATT

There never was a fight. There was no question about that one. That was easy.

MR. WOOD

How do you feel things have gone with the Commission. You steered it on a very, very strong course. How do you feel it's gone since that?

### LANDMARK PANEL AROUSES 'VILLAGE'

Hearing on Controversial Separate Districts Set

4-12-60

By THOMAS W. ENNIS

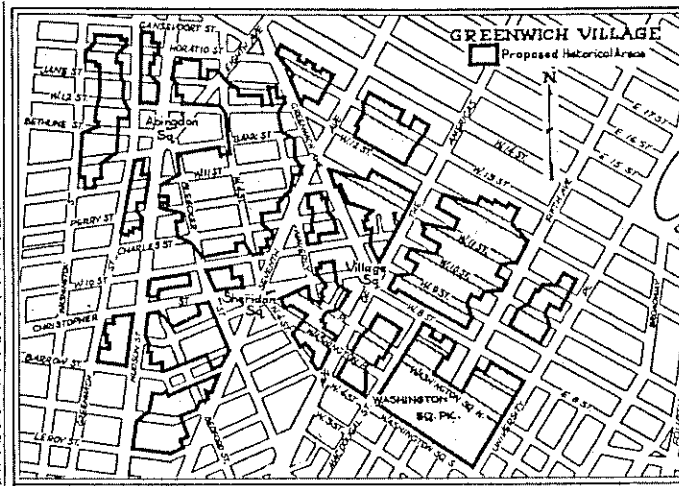
The Landmarks Preservation Commission will hold a special public hearing Dec. 21 at City Hall on its controversial proposal to divide Greenwich Village into separate historic districts, instead of the one district it had originally proposed.

Under the initial proposal, a 65-block area in the Village would be a single historic district. A public hearing on that proposal was held exactly a year ago today.

The commission now proposes to divide the Village into 18 separate historic districts whose total area would be about two-thirds of the original 65-block area. The new proposal is strongly opposed by Village civic groups and homeowners.

Under a historic district designation, the commission would have to approve any alterations to the exteriors of buildings within the area, but not interior changes. The design of any new structures planned in a historic district would have to be compatible with the district and not detract from its appearance.

Geoffrey Platt, the commission's chairman, said yesterday that he believed the smaller districts in the Village with excluded buildings.



The New York Times, Dec. 9, 1964. BEST OF OLDEST: Proposal to make the shaded areas landmarks will be debated

owners strongly supported the commission's original proposal for a single historic district. In the Village. Dismay was mingled with surprise when it recently became known that the commission proposed to divide the Village into separate districts. Some Villagers said the separate district proposal was a victory of hostile real estate interests. The separate district proposal will be fought by members of the Association of Village Home Owners, Local Planning Board 2, the West Village Committee, the Greenwich Village Association, and the Village Independent Democrats. The members have formed the Greenwich Village Historic District Council. Each of the proposed 18 separate districts would have a name, derived from a prominent street within the district.

MR. PLATT

Harmon Goldstone was marvelous. I don't think his administration has been appreciated enough because he worked very hard. He worked full time. Of course, just let me say, that when I was Chairman there was no compensation for the Chairman. And I got the compensation put in for the next Chairman, which was Harmon Goldstone, not because he was my friend, but because I thought that the chairman should be paid. But actually, when I was Chairman myself, I was glad I wasn't being paid. It strengthened my position enormously. People would say, "What's in it for him." They said, "Nothing. You know, he really has got to care about this thing if he's willing to do all this work for nothing." So I didn't mind. It was a good position to be in.

MR. WOOD

So you feel that Harmon Goldstone's guidance also went in a pretty good direction?

MR. PLATT

Oh, yes, absolutely. He worked out a lot of things with the City Planning Commission. You know they got more and more zoning things, and the air rights business was all worked out with the City Planning Commission.

MR. WOOD

That seems to be so crucial, to get the two agencies to work--

MR. PLATT

Oh, yes. You see we were working hand in glove from the beginning. This is the source of great strength to us, because in some other cities, the City Planning Commission feels separate and jealous of their prerogatives. One of the reasons that the relations have been so good was that Frank Bloustein was a member of the City Planning Commission, and he took part in the drafting of the legislation. In there, is the section that states very clearly what the limitations of the Landmarks Commission are in respect to zoning and all that kind of stuff. So that the two turfs were very clearly defined.

The other thing that Harmon Goldstone did that he worked terrifically hard on was the Grand Central case. The trial took place when he was Chairman.

MR. WOOD

Was he the moving force behind--you almost need one person kind of stirring the pot up behind some of these things--was he really one of the key people behind the whole Grand Central fight?

MR. PLATT

Yes. He's never gotten the proper credit for it.

MR. WOOD

I've been wondering. To me the Grand Central fight is one of the most interesting in a lot of ways, but I've had a hard time getting a handle on who were the people really pushing to fight for the law.

MR. PLATT

Well, he did a terrific amount of work on it. Judge Saypol, you know, he wished he'd never got mixed up in it. He sat on the case for almost a year. Yes, they had all their arguments, and he sat on it, and I think he wished it would go away.

MR. WOOD

I was looking through some old papers at the Municipal Art Society, and came across a whole case of these boards with newspaper clippings of that train ride they had much later; I tell you, it was all over he place.

MR. PLATT

You know, that was--you can't influence the Supreme Court by riding trains.

MR. WOOD

I wondered.

MR. PLATT

No. There was a terrific amount of work done on that case, and I think that the--I heard it argued, though not very well, because the acoustics were not great. But the lawyer for the Corporation Counsel did a very good job, a very good job. But you see, there's a book that's been written by the Municipal Art Society about the Grand Central Station.



MR. WOOD

Oh, right. The one that went with the exhibition.

MR. PLATT

History only begins when Jackie Onassis and Kent Barwick get to work on it. None of the stuff that I've been talking about. We had the original task of designating it. And they wanted to make a deal. They said if we would say that we wouldn't designate it, then they wouldn't--"

MR. WOOD

Build on it?

MR. PLATT

"Everything would be all right." We said nothing doing, and we designated it.

MR. WOOD

I know there was quite a struggle to get the city to appeal the decision. Or so I've heard.

MR. PLATT

I never heard that. I never heard that. But that doesn't mean that it wasn't so.

MR. WOOD

I'm at a moment when I have a lot of bits and pieces, trying to get the whole picture.

MR. PLATT

Lindsay's Corporation Counsel was Lee Rankin. I got to know him very well. He was terribly interested in the work the Landmarks Commission was doing. As a matter of fact, he had originally drafted the legislation or whatever it was that started the National Trust. You look him up. Because we had some awfully extraordinary situations. I suppose I should have kept a diary. I was practicing architecture and also Chairman of the Landmarks Preservation Commission. I had all I could do.

MR. WOOD

I don't know how you could juggle that. One question I had that slipped my mind earlier, you were at the Commission when the Jerome Mansion came up?

MR. PLATT

Which?

MR. WOOD

The Jerome Mansion case. It was the landmark that had to be torn down under hardship. Was that in your administration? It was the one right there on Madison Square.

MR. PLATT

Oh, yes, sure. Oh, yes. That was definitely in my administration.

MR. WOOD

Tell me a little about that. That's a fascinating case. We cite it all the time for the fairness of the law.

MR. PLATT

That was interesting, because they sued on that. And the Judge came down on our side. That was very crucial right in the beginning there. You know, it said the city had the right to do this. And then the people who owned the property were very cooperative. They said, "We'll do everything we can to help you find somebody who can use this building." And they did, and we couldn't find anybody.

MR. WOOD

It shows how dramatically times have changed.

MR. PLATT

So we said "Uncle."

MR. WOOD

I think the loss of that building has helped, actually, because it just showed that the process worked.

MR. PLATT

Sure, the escape hatch in there was terribly important for the judges that acted on the law as it went up through the courts.

MR. WOOD

Was the escape hatch always there, from the very beginning, when you started to draft the law?

MR. PLATT

Oh, yes. From the very beginning. The other thing that was in there that I was very interested in was the timetable. You know, after a certain length of time you must do this, after a certain length of time you must do that. So that the Commission could never be accused of just dragging something out for four or five years. That has worked, you know.

MR. WOOD

Looking back on all that went on in the Municipal Art Society in the early 1950s, with the putting together of the list, and some of those exhibitions, it looks like that really helped stir things up. Did it really, at that time?

MR. PLATT

Oh, definitely! Oh, definitely! That started it. Because Alan Burnham's book didn't come out until 1963. But that gave form to all that talk there, and it was the beginning of this agitation. Then it was Robert Moses, really, who had more effect than anybody else.

MR. WOOD

That's very interesting. We kind of have him to thank for making people mad enough to--

MR. PLATT

Because he thought--he hated do-gooders. We were the worst kind of do-gooders! (Laughter.)

MR. WOOD

Did you have any battles with Moses yourself?



The Jerome Mansion.

MR. PLATT

No. I was sort of on the sidelines when some of the great battles took place. You know about the Brooklyn Battery Bridge. That was a little bit before your time. That was a terrific battle. Somebody who knew Eleanor Roosevelt had to get to her to tell the President not to support this thing and that is what killed it.

MR. WOOD

Moses wasn't stopped easily.

MR. PLATT

No. Did you ever read the book about him?

MR. WOOD

Oh, yes. Caro's book. A fascinating book. One of my favorites. I read it all the time.

MR. PLATT

He had this terrific technique of--during the depression--getting the plans all made, and then he would propose his project. And then he would say, "The plans are all done, we can begin tomorrow." And everybody was so frightened--about unemployment and so forth--not to go ahead immediately. That's what he tried to do with this bridge, which would have been a disaster of the first magnitude.

MR. WOOD

The description of it in that book is enough to--

MR. PLATT

But he did an extraordinary job.

MR. WOOD

Well, you've been terrific, talking with me, and if its all right, I'm going to invite myself back after I've--

MR. PLATT

Let's do that. Some of the things I've told you may not have been quite in order. I'm just telling you what I remember.

MR. WOOD

Also when I do a bit more reading, I know I've got some more questions I'm going to want to run by you.

MR. PLATT

Sure. I'm very anxious to have the record established as to how this law came about.

MR. WOOD

I've just been doing a little research now, for about four months, and I find it so useful to me in my work, everyday, to have a better sense of the history of what it took to get the Commission started. I feel so much more grounded.

MR. PLATT

It took an awful lot of talking to an awful lot of people. You see, when I would appear before these trustees, like the Citizen's Housing and Planning Council, there were a lot of important people on those boards.

Oh, a funny incident. This was way back, I was asked to come over to the Pratt Institute to talk about landmarks, and Roger Starr was going to talk too, so I got up and made my spiel about landmarks. And he got up and said, "There's no sense doing anything. There aren't any landmarks." (Laughter.) I confronted him with that a couple of years ago, and he said, "Did I say that?"

MR. WOOD

Well, he's still a problem. I wish The New York Times was as supportive these days of preservation as it was to help it all get started. Roger Starr's part of the problem still. One last question. What do you think, looking back at your time at the Commission--what are you most proud about having accomplished?

MR. PLATT

The fact that the Landmarks Preservation is still in business today. That it led the nation. That the law withstood all the legal attacks against it.