

Plans Offered to Save 2 Grace Church Houses

By ROBERTA B. GRATZ

The possibility of rescuing Grace Church's row of Gothic Revival houses on Fourth Av. from demolition remained slim today, even though at least one preservation proposal has been worked out that would, according to estimates, cost the church less than demolition and replacement.

Church plans now call for the demolition of two buildings that form an integral part of the 1843 church, which faces Broadway and 10th St. Only the church itself is a designated landmark and protected by the city's preservation law.

The entire church complex was designed by James Renwick, credited with sparking this country's 19th Century Gothic renaissance. Grace Church was Renwick's first major work, and he later designed St. Patrick's Cathedral.

A new two-story building providing a gymnasium and classrooms would then be built. The facilities have long been needed for the Grace Church school, an 80-year-old elementary school with 24 students primarily drawn from non-church-affiliated families.

At a heated three-hour meeting last night, several concerned architects presented proposals, all of which would retain the Gothic Row and provide new school facilities. Some of the ideas had been considered and re-

jected as unfeasible long ago by the church's architects, Hutchins, Evans and Lefferts.

The preservation effort is led by Prof. James Marston Fitch of Columbia University, a leading architectural historian. His proposal to retain the basic Hutchins architectural program but to place it behind the Renwick facades had been submitted for cost estimates to two contractors selected by the Hutchins firm.

The contractor, already scheduled to demolish and rebuild for the church, estimated that the Fitch plan would cost \$246,000 more than current plans. The second contractor estimated that the same plan would cost \$27,697 less. At either cost, the Fitch plan provides for an additional 3000 square feet of space that could be either rented for income or saved for expansion.

The various alternatives were often challenged by the church's architects, vestry members and the rector, Rev. Benjamin Minifie. Reminding the audience of that "the church has been very conscious of its stewardship of these buildings," Rev. Minifie argued that "most of what has been presented here is misleading and somewhat preposterous."

A community representative then commented: "I detect a note of finality in your voice."

For the most part, the

meeting held in the church choir room remained strained but polite.

Whitney North Seymour Sr., one of the early leaders of the battle to establish the city's landmarks preservation law and a senior vestryman of Grace Church, noted that "despite the upsurge in preservation interest, the amount of private money to support it is deplorably small."

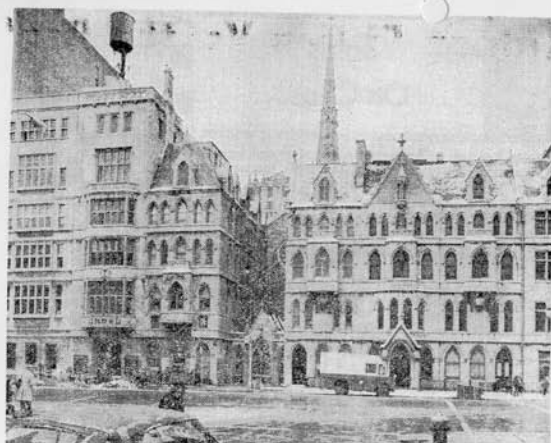
Earlier Drive Failed

In 1968, Seymour led a fund-raising drive to preserve the Renwick buildings but the effort failed. So far, according to Seymour, "no gesture of financial support has come from any foundation, person or group. If substantial funds were forthcoming, it could make a difference."

Following the architectural presentations, Seymour said that architect Robert Hutchins would study them all carefully, resolve the discrepancy in cost estimates, and report to the 15-member church vestry, who will make the final decision.

Less than two weeks remain, however, because after three postponements for signing the new building contract, the final deadline now is March 1.

Despite the deadline, Prof. Fitch noted that more often than not this is when preservation battles are won. "Historic Savannah was saved," he said, "at the 11th hour and 59th minute."



These are the Grace Church buildings on Fourth Av., most of which will be demolished for new school facilities unless preservation plans can be worked out and considerable money raised.

Post Photo by Richard Gummere