

314 East 53rd Street House, 314 East 53rd Street, Borough of Manhattan.
Built 1866; [attributed to] Robert & James Cunningham, Builders.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1345, Lot 46.

On May 16, 2000, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 314 East 53rd Street House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 2). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Two people spoke in favor of designation, including a representative of the Historic Districts Council. In addition, the Commission received a resolution in support of designation from Community Board 6. The Commission previously held a public hearing on this item on December 27, 1966 (LP-0581), which was continued to January 31, 1967. The item was reheard on March 31, 1970 (LP-0581).

Summary

The 314 East 53rd Street House, located on the south side of 53rd Street between First and Second Avenues, was constructed in 1866. It was built, along with its identical neighbor at 312 East 53rd Street, by Robert and James Cunningham, who were listed in directories as builders-carpenters. This small rowhouse is a significant remaining example of the wooden vernacular buildings once constructed throughout Manhattan. The 314 East 53rd Street house was one of the last wood-frame buildings constructed in the neighborhood and is a rare extant example of a wooden building above 23rd Street. Later in 1866, New York City fire laws prohibited the construction of wood-frame buildings in this neighborhood and many existing wooden buildings were subsequently demolished and replaced by masonry structures. Covered in clapboards, the building is two bays wide and two stories high above a brick basement. The mansard roof, dormers, bracketed wooden cornice and door hood, and molded window enframements on double-hung sash windows distinguish this house as a rare vernacular wooden building with Second Empire and Italianate details.



DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Neighborhood

The 314 East 53rd Street House is located within the neighborhood now known as Turtle Bay, which is roughly bound by East 53rd Street to the north, East 49th Street to the south, Lexington Avenue to the west, and the East River to the east. The area was originally part of Deutal Bay farm, an eighty-six acre farm situated by a cove that was populated by turtles. Turtle Bay remained relatively rural well into the nineteenth century due to its distance from lower Manhattan and the lack of public transportation. The cove was filled in by 1868, and during this post-Civil War period the neighborhood experienced rapid development.

Located between First and Second Avenues, the block on which this house is located was originally farmland divided between several owners. The lot at No. 314 East 53rd Street fell within David Devore's farm, which was bisected by the Eastern Post Road. Although most of the block was divided into housing lots by the 1830s, the Eastern Post Road's location prevented full development until 1852, when the city closed the road.¹

By the mid-nineteenth century, when No. 314 East 53rd Street was constructed, the area had a mixed-use character, with residences located amidst factories.² Slaughterhouses along the East River provided employment to many residents of the area. Spurred by the arrival of public transportation, the neighborhood became more densely populated, and tenement buildings began to replace smaller residential structures. The Third Avenue Elevated line was completed in 1878, running from South Ferry to 129th Street, and the Second Avenue Elevated opened in 1880 between Chatham Square and 129th Street.

Wood-Frame Houses In Manhattan

The 314 East 53rd Street House is a significant surviving example of the vernacular wooden structures once found throughout Manhattan. Typically, such small wooden buildings were constructed during the initial stages of an area's urban development. Fire was always a threat in Manhattan, and as wooden buildings were most susceptible to fire, the city enacted fire laws restricting their construction. The laws established fire limits that prohibited the construction of wooden buildings within certain boundaries. By the 1850s, fire limits reached as far north as 32nd Street, and in 1866 they were extended to 86th Street. The buildings at 312 and 314 East 53rd Street were completed in 1866, making them some of the last wood-frame buildings constructed in the area before restriction.³

As neighborhoods developed, wooden buildings

were frequently demolished and replaced with masonry buildings. Relatively few wooden buildings survive in Manhattan, and the majority are found in the neighborhoods of Lower Manhattan, particularly in Greenwich Village. The Upper West Side has only one frame building, and No. 314 East 53rd Street and its twin, No. 312, are among only seven frame houses of note on the East Side.⁴

Design and Construction

Though constructed in wood, No. 314 East 53rd Street was designed to reflect the French influence popular in Manhattan in the post-Civil War period. The Second Empire style first appeared in New York City in the 1850s, but gained popularity in the 1860s. Inspired by the architecture of Paris during the reign of Emperor Louis Napoleon, the defining characteristic of the style was the mansard roof. The steeply-sloped roof created fully-lit attic spaces with high ceilings. In New York City, the style often combined the decorative detailing of the Italianate style with the mansard roof. At No. 314 East 53rd Street, the bracketed wooden cornice and door hood, molded window enframements on the double-hung sash windows, and the round-hooded dormer windows of the mansard roof all reflect the influence of the Italianate and Second Empire styles. Rowhouses in these styles were typically constructed in brick or brownstone. However, as interpreted in wood, the 314 East 53rd Street House is representative of the wooden vernacular buildings once built by carpenters throughout New York City. The majority of rowhouses constructed in mid-nineteenth-century New York were built by local builders and carpenters rather than professional architects. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, pattern books were widely available in the United States. Pattern books provided local builders with plans, elevations, and interior details for rowhouse construction. The vernacular character of No. 314 East 53rd Street is reflected in the wooden clapboards and the asymmetrical window placement. The six-over-six windows of the second floor are placed directly under the dormers, which themselves are placed according to the centerline of the building. The taller four-over-four windows of the parlor level are placed off center because of the stoop and entrance. The house at 314 East 53rd Street and its twin are among the rare surviving examples of wood-frame French Empire style buildings in Manhattan. Other examples include No. 128 East 93rd Street (circa 1868, with ground floor alterations) and No. 17 East 128th Street (circa 1864, a designated New York City Landmark).

Builders usually constructed several rowhouses on

a block, using similar detailing. The width and depth of rowhouses were dictated by the grid system of Manhattan's streets, laid out in 1807 and adopted as the Commissioners Plan in 1811. This plan dictated relatively uniform building lots twenty to twenty-five feet wide by one hundred feet deep. Because the lots of Nos. 312 and 314 lay within the former roadbed of the Eastern Post Road, the lot sizes were not uniformly apportioned. Both buildings are eighteen feet wide.

The houses at 312 and 314 East 53rd Street were constructed by Robert and James Cunningham, who were listed in New York City directories from 1865-1872 as carpenter-builders.⁵ Like many such rowhouses in Manhattan, they were most likely constructed as speculative housing rather than for a specific client. Neither Robert nor James Cunningham resided at 314 East 53rd Street, or its twin. The Cunninghams retained ownership of the property at 314 East 53rd Street until the 1870s when it passed to Francis Lahey, a milkman. Lahey lived in and owned the building until 1884.⁶ The building is still used as a residence.

Description

The 314 East 53rd Street House is two bays wide, with two stories clad in wood clapboards above a high brick basement. An electrical wire runs across the top of the basement from the stoop to the middle of the

building; adjacent to the wire is a non-historic light fixture. The entrance is in the far right bay and

reached by a metal box stoop. A wrought-iron fence with a gate is placed at the sidewalk. The metal treads of the stoop were in place by 1932, and the metal railing matches that of the building's twin, No. 312 East 53rd Street. The historic paneled wood entry door has a glass transom divided into five-over-five lights and is surmounted by a bracketed and molded hood. The building has asymmetrically-placed double-hung wood sash windows with two taller historic four-over-four windows at the parlor level. The second floor has two historic six-over-six windows. All of the windows on these two stories have simple molded surrounds with projecting molded lintels. A bracketed wood cornice surmounts the building, which concludes in a mansard roof with two molded round-hooded dormers. After 1936 the original slate roof was resurfaced with composite slate and the six-over-six dormer windows were replaced with four-over-four lights.

The house has remained largely intact, with few exterior alterations since its construction.⁷ The through wall air-conditioning units were removed at the end of the twentieth century and the house was restored to its historic appearance.

Research by
Susan De Vries

NOTES

1. New York City, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances; I.N. Phelps Stokes. *Iconography of Manhattan Island*. 6 (New York: Robert H. Dodd), 1926.
2. The 1879 Robinson Atlas shows a shoe factory across the street from No. 314 East 53rd Street and a brewery, lumberyard, tobacco factory, and stone yard all within a block of the building.
3. Kenneth Jackson ed., *The Encyclopedia of New York City*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 1204.
4. Wooden buildings in the area above 23rd Street include: 2641 Broadway (1871); 160 East 92nd Street (1852-53, a designated New York City Landmark); 203 East 29th Street (early nineteenth century); 120 and 122 East 92nd Street (1871, 1859 designated New York City Landmarks); 128 East 93rd Street (circa 1868); 17 East 128th Street (circa 1864); and Sylvan Terrace (1882 located within the Jumel Terrace Historic District); Landmarks Preservation Commission. *160 East 92nd Street House, Designation Report* (LP-1630) (New York: City of New York 1988), prepared by Jay Shockley.
5. The New York City directories list many Cunninghams, none of who lived at 312 or 314 East 53rd Street. In 1871, builders Robert and James Cunningham were listed as living at 746 Lexington Avenue.

6. Trow's New York City Directories, 1865-1880.
7. An application on file at the New York City Department of Buildings indicates that both buildings had two-story rear lot stables. It is unclear when the stables were constructed, but they were demolished in 1921. Demolition application 120-1921. See also Dept. of Finance, Borough of Manhattan Tax Photo for Block 1345, Lots 46 and 47 (c. 1939/40) and photos of Nos. 312 and 314 East 53rd Street in the J. Clarence Davies Collection of the Museum of the City of New York (1932).

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the 314 East 53rd Street House has a special character and a special historical and aesthetic interest and values as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the 314 East 53rd Street House was constructed in 1866, along with its identical neighbor at 312 East 53rd Street by Robert and James Cunningham who were listed in directories as builder-carpenters; that this small rowhouse is a rare surviving example of the wooden vernacular buildings once constructed throughout Manhattan; that in 1866 New York City fire laws prohibited the construction of wood frame buildings in this neighborhood and many wood buildings were subsequently demolished and replaced by masonry structures; that the 314 East 53rd Street House was one of the last wood frame buildings constructed in the neighborhood and is a rare extant example of a wood building above 23rd Street; that, the wood clapboard building is two bays wide with two stories and a high brick basement and that it uses the architectural vocabulary of the Second Empire and Italianate styles; and that the mansard roof, dormers, bracketed wooden cornice and door hood, and molded window enframements on double hung windows all reflect this influence.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the 314 East 53rd Street House, 314 East 53rd Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1345, Lot 46, as its Landmark Site.



314 East 53rd Street House, 314 East 53rd Street, Manhattan
Front Elevation
Photo: Carl Forster



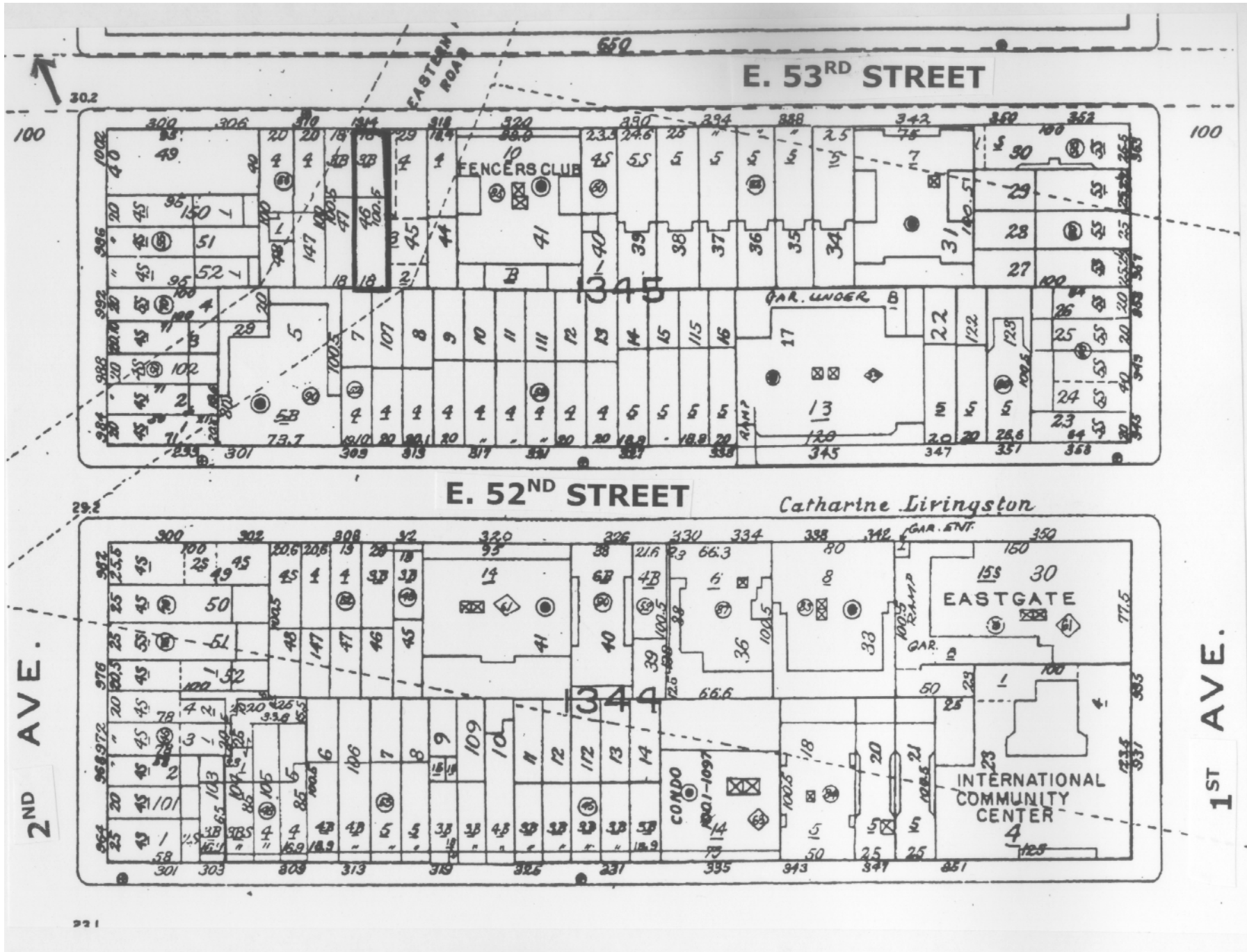
Details of Entrance
Photos: Carl Forster



Detail of First Floor Windows



Detail of Second Floor Windows and Mansard Roof



314 East 53rd Street House, 314 East 53rd Street, Manhattan
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 Source: *Manhattan Land Book*, 199-200, pl. 79

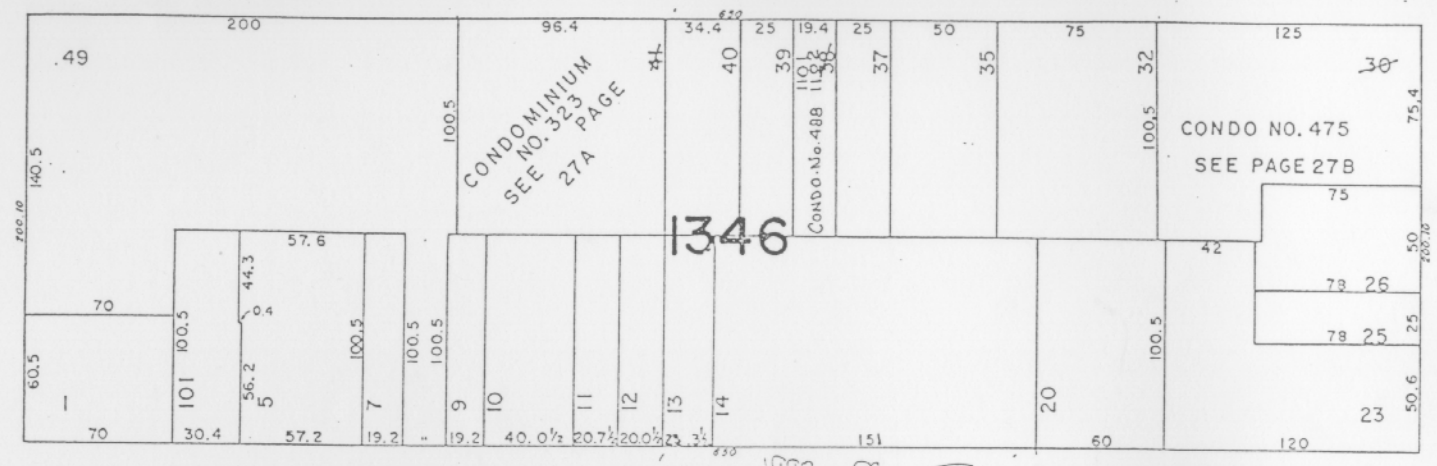


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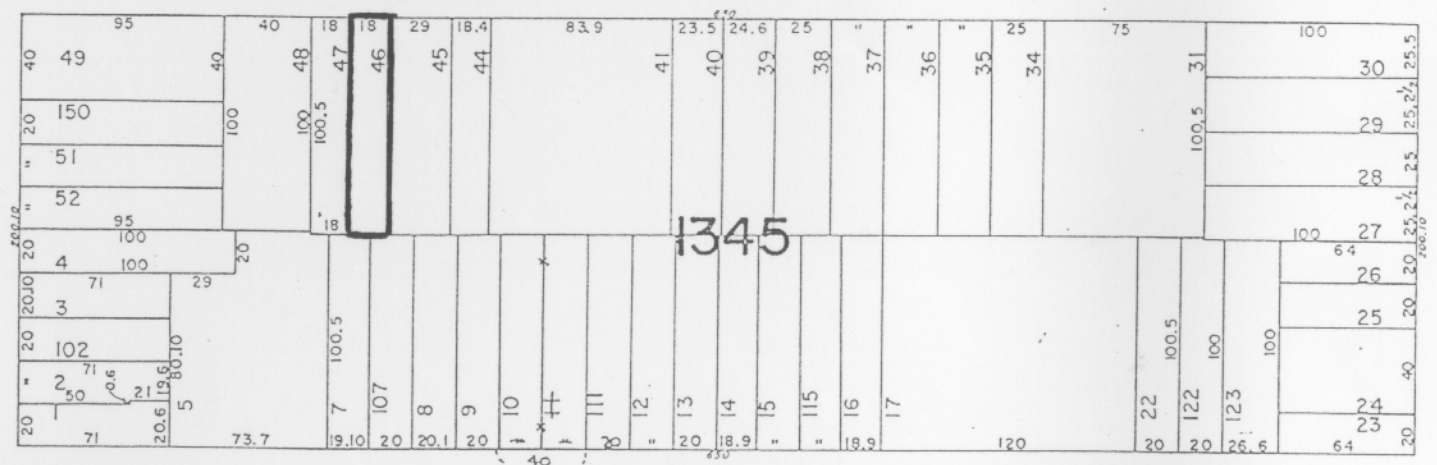
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SEE PAGE 17

E. 53RD ST.

2ND



E. 52ND ST.

27

314 East 53rd Street House, 314 East 53rd Street, Manhattan
 Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1345, Lot 46
 Source: Dept. of Finance, City Surveyor, Tax Map