

Combined Victorian Society Testimony for June 11, 2024: Proposed Willoughby-Hart Historic District, Brooklyn (LP-2683); 402 West 20th Street (LPC-24-08677); Soldiers and Sailors Monument, Riverside (LPC-24-10137)

Approximate time: 9:30; join Zoom by: 9:30

LP-2683 -- Proposed Willoughby-Hart Historic District, Brooklyn

Good morning, commissioners, _____ for the Victorian Society New York. Founded in New York City in 1966, the Victorian Society in America is dedicated to fostering the appreciation and preservation of our 19th and early 20th century heritage. The NY chapter promotes preservation of our historic districts, individual and scenic landmarks, interiors and civic art.

The Victorian Society enthusiastically supports this designation. These compact, cohesive, and intact rowhouse streetscapes are architecturally and culturally significant. The district clearly meets the criteria for designation. Designation would protect an architectural and historic anchor for a neighborhood with few designated landmarks and no historic districts. It would also add a layer of support for the efforts of the residents and owners who have lovingly maintained the houses for generations.

It's necessary to mention the recent, tragic demolition in 2022 of what would have been the district's gateway and its most architecturally significant building—the Jacob Dangler House. These preservation losses have happened before, and they will unfortunately surely happen again. It was just such tragedies that brought the Landmarks Commission into being nearly 60 years ago.

When these tragedies occur, they often have the effect of galvanizing the public, overcoming the opposition of elected officials, and encouraging this Commission to act. Such reactions are reasonable, even righteous.

We think the Dangler House site should be included in the historic district. This now empty lot is not an edge to be excluded, but the gateway to an otherwise intact district. The Landmarks Commission should have a role in the design of the district's gateway. This is absolutely within the sphere of good preservation planning. Including the lot would also have the beneficial effect of sending a message that cavalier actions regarding the Landmarks Law have consequences.

June 25, 2024: Designated 8-0.

Approximate time: 1:15; join Zoom by: 12:15

LPC-24-08677 -- 402 West 20th Street - Chelsea Historic District, Manhattan

Good afternoon commissioners, _____ for the Victorian Society New York.

The Victorian Society was very pleased to see that an LPC permit has been issued for exterior work which includes the removal of the modern stoop gate, installed without permits.

However, the removal of an illegal gate shouldn't be rewarded with a permit to install a new gate. We appreciate that the applicants have made a sincere effort to produce a good design, but we don't feel that any gate is an acceptable response to this distinguished building.

At 409, C. P. H. Gilbert designed an unusually gracious entrance. It had, before that illegal gate was installed, a very welcoming appearance. While the adjacent 19th century rowhouses have high stoops which rise above the sidewalk, the entrance sequence at 409 begins with a couple of low risers leading to a broad intermediate terrace. Three more steps then rise to wide doors set at an angle to the streets. All of this was significantly diminished by the installation of that illegal gate in 1984. We ask that it not be legally diminished by the installation of a second stoop gate in 2024.

The Victorian Society has testified against stoop gates at three other buildings on this block. We do so again at 409 West 20th Street.

Thank you, commissioners.

Approved 6-2 (Goldblum, Jefferson); consider working with staff on details.

Approximate time: 1:30; join Zoom by: 12:30

LPC-24-10137 -- Soldiers and Sailors Monument, Riverside Park - Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument - Scenic Landmark and Individual Landmark, Manhattan

Good afternoon commissioners, _____ for the Victorian Society New York.

With its setting in Riverside Park adjacent to the Riverside-West End Historic District, the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument is a perfect example of classic New York urbanism. The Monument is not only within a scenic landmark. It is an individual landmark, designated in 1976. This important fact was omitted from the agenda description. In its Riverside Park Scenic Landmark Designation Report the Commission calls the Monument a "building," and because it's an existing building, we think Landmarks should assert its binding jurisdiction in design review, as mandated by the City Charter.

The proposed comprehensive restoration of historic features is much needed and appropriate.

Replacing deteriorated sandstone paving at the terraces with herringbone-patterned red brick will restore the original design. But we need a sample paver! It needs to be dimensioned, colored, and finished to match historic pavers of the period. Modern red brick pavers will not do.

The proposed accessible route is an excellent solution. It consists almost entirely of a sloped walk through the naturalistic landscape bordering the monument. It's far better than the brutal insertions of ramps that we see all too frequently in parks, including a couple of recent examples in Central Park. But doing this causes some troubling effects that we think warrant discussion.

These effects include disconnecting the monumental eastern stair from the historic terrace and crowding it against Riverside Drive. The expanded terrace also results in the loss of the bases of the two huge volutes that flanked the steps. They're left looking partly buried. At the beginning of this route, at the south stair, the new walk crowds the landscape and may require excavating and exposing the base of the balustrade.

We recommend that the intrusive flood light poles throughout the site be removed in favor of less obtrusive lighting hardware.

There are many new and replacement handrails proposed for the stairs and a short section of ramp. These are proposed to be of extremely simple, square-sectioned form. This is a mistake. Instead of helping them disappear, this design will stand out as a modern

intrusion within the Beaux Arts splendor of the monument and the picturesque landscape of the park. We recommend simple changes, such as adding volutes to the ends of the rails and softer, historically elegant shapes to the rails and posts. This will allow the new railings to blend more comfortably with their historic surroundings. Some examples are provided in our written testimony.

The masonry and pavement configuration at the present site of the cannonballs is historic. More of it should be retained. And we recommend a more interesting arrangement of cannonballs and pavement at the new site.

Finally, we compliment the applicants on this presentation. It's the clearest and most comprehensive we've ever seen for a complicated landscape project.

Favorable report 8-0, with the following recommendations: ensure that railing design is minimal and doesn't detract, explore ways to retain visibility of wall's base at west side, explore pavement setting details for durability; one commissioner suggested relocating new stair to the north.

Stop reading here

Some recent, classically inspired handrails that we think would be a better fit at the monument are shown below:



City Hall stair



Richmond County Courthouse stair, Richmond Terrace



Central Park