

METROPOLITAN CHAPTER OF THE VICTORIAN SOCIETY IN AMERICA

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Testimony of the Metropolitan Chapter of the Victorian Society in America Regarding the Designation of The Manhattan Avenue Historic District

Good morning, Commissioners. I am Hilda Regier, second vice president of the Metropolitan Chapter of the Victorian Society in America. Founded in New York City in 1966, the Victorian Society in America is dedicated to fostering the appreciation and preservation of our nineteenth-century heritage as well as that of the early twentieth century (1837-1917). The Metropolitan Chapter, oldest of numerous chapters now flourishing throughout the country, is an independent organization affiliated with the national society.

The Metropolitan Chapter commends the Commission for considering the creation of a Manhattan Avenue Historic District, and we are pleased to support this district here today. Christopher Gray once called the area a “picturesque pocket of Victorian rowhouses” on the Upper West Side, and indeed it is one of those enclaves that one comes across in New York that surprises and delights even a seasoned New Yorker.

Despite having opened in the 1860s, Manhattan Avenue did not begin to develop until after the arrival of the elevated train in 1880 and the construction of the New York Cancer Hospital nearby on Central Park West in 1884. However, once development began, it proceeded rapidly, with all of the rowhouse construction completed by 1890. Unlike the more imposing rowhouses further south on the Upper West Side, the rowhouses on Manhattan Avenue were more modestly scaled at 3-stories and had much lower stoops. The dominant material used was not brownstone, as was still commonly used in many other areas of the city, but rather less expensive brick with stone and terra cotta trim. Architects C.P.H. Gilbert, Frederick Seitz, Joseph Dunn, Joseph Turner, and Edward Angell all designed rowhouses along the avenue, with the Queen Anne and Romanesque Revival styles dominating the streetscape.

It wasn't long before the 37 Victorian rowhouses along Manhattan Avenue between 104th and 106th Streets became an island in an area of tenements and later housing projects. In the closing decades of the twentieth century, the rowhouses became the pride of homeowners who preserved and protected the buildings even as the neighborhood suffered because of the neighboring vacant New York Cancer hospital and increasing crime. We have these homeowners to thank today for the preservation of these wonderful buildings. However, we now have to look to the future and recognize that without historic district protection, the area is greatly susceptible to tear downs and the loss of significant historic fabric and sense of place. I therefore urge you to move forward with the designation of the Manhattan Avenue Historic District.