

December 17, 2019

Hon. Sarah Carroll, Chair
NYC Landmarks Commission
1 Centre Street, 9th Floor
New York, NY 10007

Re: 14-16 Fifth Avenue, Manhattan

Dear Chair Carroll,

Over a year ago, in anticipation of a possible application to demolish 14-16 Fifth Avenue, we shared with the Landmarks Preservation Commission [research and documentation detailing the very significant history associated with this building](#) within the Greenwich Village Historic District. We have since found even more critical history connected with the building, now made even more relevant as permit applications have been filed for this location and it has become clear that a developer does in fact intend to seek permission to demolish this building. We believe that approving such an application would be a tragic mistake, and contravene the purpose of the landmarks law.

Nos. 14 and 16 Fifth Avenue were originally built by Henry Brevoort, Jr. (1782-1848). Brevoort was the son of his namesake father, whose family farm Fifth Avenue cut through. The elder Brevoort was so influential that he is the reason why Broadway swerves to the northwest at 10th Street – to avoid demolishing his orchard located where Grace Church stands today. The younger Henry Brevoort exerted no less of an influence upon New York's development. A patron of the arts and literature, he was known for his close association with writers Washington Irving and Sir Walter Scott. Like his father, the younger Brevoort also had designs upon shaping New York real estate, and in fact did so extensively.

This stretch of Fifth Avenue's initial development, largely instigated by Brevoort, accommodated elegant townhouses and mansions housing the city's elite. In 1848, 14 and 16 Fifth Avenue were built as two of a row of four Gothic Revival townhouses by Brevoort, just down the block from his own mansion at 24 Fifth Avenue. As the area evolved and these houses gave way to apartment buildings and hotels, Nos. 14 and 16 miraculously held on, combined and converted to multiple family dwellings in 1936. What is equally remarkable is the number of significant figures who made 14-16 Fifth Avenue their home over the course of the buildings' 170 year history. Some of these figures, including the writer Bret Harte, Civil War General Daniel Sickles, Baroness Eva Gourgaud, and magazine editor Cyrilly Abels, were detailed [in our last letter](#). The following are additional historic figures who resided here.

Isaac Merritt Singer, Industrialist and Inventor

Singer (1811-1875), the great innovator of sewing machine technology and the founder of the Singer Sewing Machine



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Isaac Singer, portrait by Edward Harrison May (1869)

Company, one of the first American multi-national businesses, bought No. 14 Fifth Avenue around 1859 for himself, his common-law wife Mary Ann Sponsler, and their children. Singer revolutionized both commercial clothing manufacturing and home sewing with his mass produced sewing machine.

Singer had developed and patented a couple of machines prior to pursuing the manufacture of sewing machines. In 1850, while working on a printing machine he hoped to patent and sell, he came to assist other workers who were in the same building and trying to manufacture a patented sewing machine design. Singer's ideas improved the design, leading to his later patenting his own sewing machine design and forming the I.M. Singer Company in 1851.

Seeing the potential of marketing the sewing machine not just to industry but to the burgeoning

middle class, he created a sewing machine for the home called the "turtle back." At a cost of \$125, however, this machine was still out of reach for the average American household. This prompted the company to set up a rent-to-own program, unheard of for its day. This spurred sales significantly; in 1858 the company had sold 3,594 machines, whereas by 1861 sales were over 16,000.

With the sharp rise in income, Singer was able to develop mass production methods and utilized the technique of interchangeable parts, an innovation first employed in America in the manufacture of muskets for the War of 1812. This brought the cost of production down considerably and therefore the cost to the consumer. By 1876, the Singer Company sold 262,316 machines, reportedly twice as many as their nearest rival.



Singer's 'Turtle Back' sewing machine

Charles E. Strong, Lawyer and Philanthropist

Charles E. Strong (1824-1897), who lived at 14 Fifth Avenue between 1885 and 1894, was the chief of the oldest law firm in the United States, then known as Cadwalader & Strong, and an original member of the Association of the Bar. He was also a very prominent figure in 19th century New York public and private charities, overseeing the establishment of the New York Medical College & Hospital for Women and Children, before which there was no place in New York City where a woman could study medicine.

The Cadwalader law firm, as it is known today, was originally started by attorney John Wells in 1792. He partnered with George Washington Strong (uncle of Charles E. Strong) in 1818. Strong helped found the Bank for Savings in the City of New York and his clients included such



Charles E. Strong
Strong & Cadwalader

Original 1792 home of the law firm on Wall Street

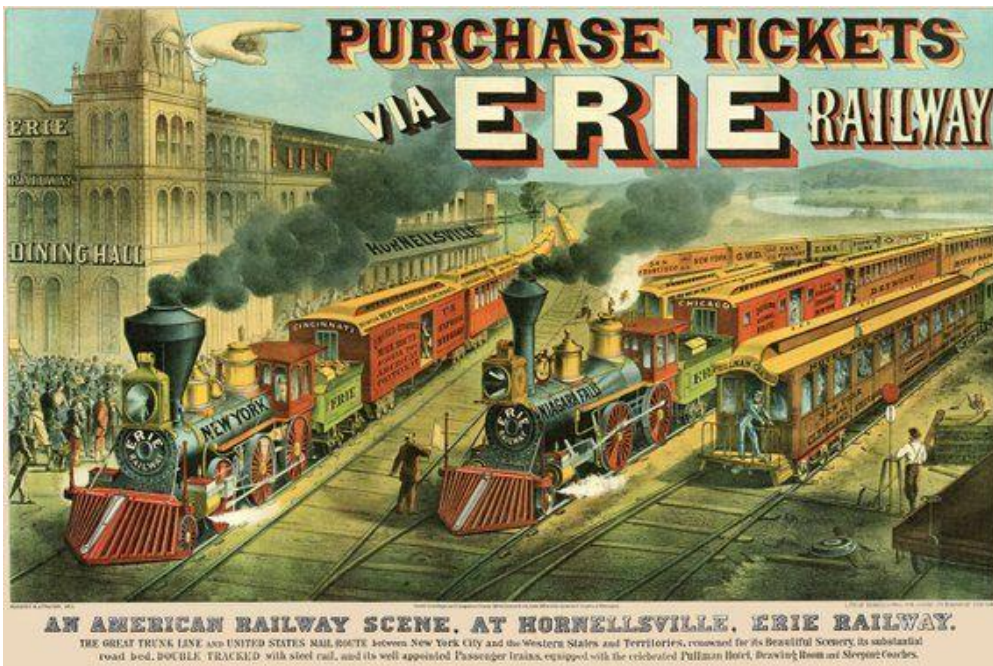
prominent families and individuals such as the Vanderbilts, Eliza Hamilton and John Jacob Astor, as well as Fulton's steamboat company. During the 1870s, Charles E. Strong joined and led the firm, by then known as Bidwell & Strong, and clients under his leadership included Wells Fargo, Western Union Telegraph Company, and Steinway & Sons.



In 1878 John L. Cadwalader, who had served as the nation's Assistant Secretary of State, joined the firm becoming partners with Strong, and it became known as Strong & Cadwalader. The firm was at the forefront of utilizing the latest technology, including the typewriter (1868) and the telephone (1876). It also dispensed with the apprentice system and instead hired law school graduates as associates. During this time, the firm's new clients included the Title Guaranty & Trust Company, the Manhattan Trust Company, the Real Estate Exchange, and the Real Estate Trust.

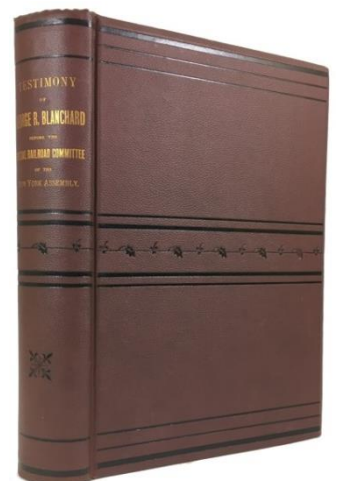
Strong was equally prominent in his philanthropic pursuits. He served on a number of charitable boards including as a governor and later Chairman of the Society of the New York Hospital and Bloomingdale Asylum, a trustee of the Institution for the Blind, and a trustee of the Society Library.

George R. Blanchard, Railroad Tycoon



George R. Blanchard (1841-1900), referred to in his *New York Times* obituary as “one of the most prominent railroad men in this country,” made his home at No. 16 Fifth Avenue in the 1880s. Blanchard was Vice President of the Erie Railroad, which connected New York City with Lake Erie and eventually points west, and played a particularly prominent role in New York's growth and expansion in the 19th century.

Blanchard started as a clerk at seventeen years old with the Cincinnati and Chicago Railroad, and worked his way up the ranks. He served as Vice President of the Erie Railroad between 1874 and 1884, during the time he lived at No. 16 Fifth Avenue. After retiring from the Erie Railroad, he served as the Commissioner of the Central Traffic Association until 1896, and then led the Joint Traffic Association. He was then selected by the federal government to oversee railroad



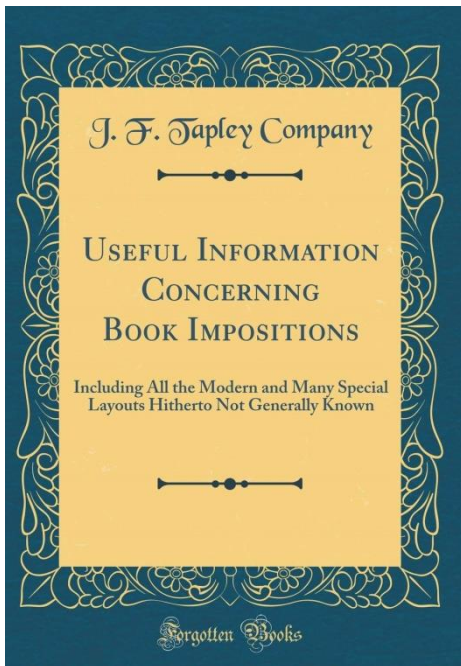
transportation of troops for the Spanish American War. Blanchard exerted a huge influence on railroad policy in the United States, lobbying for and against regulations as the industry grew exponentially and state and federal governments sought to both expand and control its operations.

Jesse Fellowes Tapley, Bookbinding Innovator

Inventor Jesse Fellowes Tapley (1824-1910) came to New York in 1881 having worked in the printing and bookbinding business since he was sixteen years old. He set up a printing and bookbinding business, starting with only a few employees. It would grow to over 200 employees, and develop a national reputation. The company incorporated in 1895 as the

J.F. Tapley Company, and Tapley's wife, Elizabeth, served as vice president of the firm. By this time, the firm was located at 33 Bleeker Street in a surviving building in what is now the NoHo East Historic District.

Tapley was responsible for a number of patented inventions over the course of his career which improved book binding technology. These include but are not limited to an attachment to ruling machines for intermittent ruling (1868), a device for facilitating the manufacture of album leaves (1870) and a permanent letter file with removable index (1879 and 1881). One account from 1906 stated that his ruling machine was used by binderies across the United States and that it had revolutionized ruling. Tapley and his wife lived at 14 Fifth Avenue during the first decade of the 1900s until his death in 1910.



Celeste Holm, Academy Award-winning Actress and Singer

The longtime screen and stage actress Celeste Holm lived at 14 Fifth Avenue in 1942 and 1943, after 14 and 16 Fifth Avenue, which had already been divided up into apartments, were combined into a single building with a rear addition including an elevator. During this time, Holm was cast and performed as the original Ado Annie in the landmark musical *Oklahoma!*, which premiered on Broadway on March 31, 1943. Holm had already appeared on Broadway, but this performance, in which she sang the unforgettable "I Cain't Say No," fueled her rise to fame. Holm's performance was key to the play's spectacular success, which was Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein's first collaboration.

A box-office smash, *Oklahoma!* ran for an unprecedented 2,212 performances, later enjoying award-winning revivals, national tours, foreign productions and an Oscar-winning 1955 film adaptation. In 1944,



Holm in her Oscar-winning role in 'Gentleman's Agreement' (1947) with John Garfield



Holm as the original Ado Annie in Oklahoma! (1943)

Rodgers and Hammerstein won a special Pulitzer Prize for *Oklahoma!*, which has since been credited with entirely transforming the period musical.

Holm had made her Broadway debut at the age of 21 in Ferdinand Bruckner's *Gloriana* (1938), and in the next few years performed in William Saroyan's *Time of Your Life* (1939-1940), Patterson Greene's *Papa Is All* (1942), and John Van Druten and Lloyd Morris's *The Damask Cheek* (1942).

Celeste Holm auditioned for the part of Ado Annie in late 1942, and in January of 1943 she was chosen for the play. Three years later in 1946, she made her film debut in the musical movie *Three Little Girls in Blue*.

Enjoying a seven-decade career, Holm accumulated an array of honors, including an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for her role in the film *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947) with Gregory Peck and John Garfield, as well as two other Oscar nominations for her performances in *Come to the Stable* (1949) and *All About Eve* (1950) with Bette Davis and Anne Baxter.



Holm with Bette Davis in 'All About Eve' (1950)

In addition to its connection to Henry Brevoort, Jr. and the development of Lower Fifth Avenue and the Washington Square neighborhood, Nos. 14 and 16 Fifth Avenue were home to a significant and varied assortment of prominent individuals in the arts, industry, law, and commerce. This array of figures are

representative of the building's nearly two century history, as well as that of the Greenwich Village Historic District. I request that you share this information with your fellow commissioners so that they are aware of and take into account this vital information as they consider the application for permission to demolish this historic structure.

Sincerely,



Andrew Berman
Executive Director

Cc: Borough President Gale Brewer
City Council Speaker Corey Johnson
State Senator Brad Hoylman
Assemblymember Deborah Glick
Community Board #2, Manhattan
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New York Landmarks Conservancy
Historic Districts Council
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