



The New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission

1 Centre Street, 9th Floor North New York NY 10007 (212) 669-7801 Fax (212) 669-7818

<http://nyc.gov/landmarks>



Mary Beth Betts
Director of Research
mbetts@lpc.nyc.gov

August 8, 2007

Mr. Andrew Berman
232 East 11th Street
New York, NY 10003

Re: Webster Hall, 119 East 11th Street - Manhattan

Dear Mr. Berman:

Andrew

In response to the information you submitted concerning the property referenced above, you will be pleased to know that Webster Hall (119 East 11th Street, Manhattan) was calendared by the Landmarks Preservation Commission on July 24, 2007.

We want to thank you for your submission and the obvious effort taken in putting together the information contained in the request for evaluation. We hope that your interest in the works of the Landmarks Preservation Commission continues.

Sincerely,

Mary Beth Betts

Mary Beth Betts



**Greenwich
Village
Society for
Historic
Preservation**

232 East 11th Street
New York, New York 10003

(212) 475-9585
fax: (212) 475-9582
www.gvshp.org

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July 20, 2007

Honorable Robert Tierney, Chair
NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission
1 Centre Street, 9th Floor
New York, NY 10007

Re: Webster Hall, 119 East 11th Street

Dear Chair Tierney,

The Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation has long felt that Webster Hall merits designation as a New York City individual landmark based upon its architectural and cultural and social history.

Please consider the attached narrative and background research a request for evaluation for the site.

Sincerely,

Andrew Berman
Executive Director

Webster Hall History and Significance

Webster Hall, located at 119-125 East 11th Street between Third and Fourth Avenues, merits individual landmark designation for both its intact, richly ornamented Romanesque Revival façade and for its extraordinary cultural history [Figure 1]. Over the last 120 years, the space has hosted everything from debutante balls and society dinners to wrestling matches, political rallies, union meetings, and bohemian costume dances. Although the area around and south of 14th Street and Union Square was once packed with theaters, dance halls, and other forms of entertainment, today very few of these buildings remain, making the preservation of Webster Hall all the more critical.¹

The hall was designed in 1886 (NB 1212-1886) by architect Charles Rentz. While not a great deal is known about Rentz's life, he designed several tenements, many in the Romanesque Revival style, throughout Greenwich Village, the South Village, and the Upper West Side. Rentz's original building for Webster Hall was three-bays wide, covering the addresses 119-123 East 11th Street. Rentz used red Philadelphia brick for the building's façade, detailing it with brownstone and elaborate terra cotta. Throughout the façade, the terra cotta ornamentation features foliage motifs, particularly nicely executed on the façade's panels, spandrels, capitals, and arch. [Figure 2]

Six years later in 1892, Rentz was hired to design an addition to the building, occupying the site of 125 East 11th Street. Using the same materials as the original building, continuing the bracketed metal cornice, and maintaining the same height and proportions, the addition seems to blend in nearly seamlessly with the formerly symmetric 1886 building. However, upon closer look, the difference between the two facades becomes more distinct. Whereas the 1886 façade has elaborate terra cotta foliage, in the addition, Rentz more overtly referred to the activities going on inside the hall. Lyres, violins, and other musical instruments join cherubs in expressing the convivial nature of the dances and celebrations happening inside the building. [Figures 3 & 4]

Historic photographs and documentation indicate that the hall was originally topped with an elaborate mansard roof. [Figures 5 & 6] Presumably, the roof was lost in one of the many fires that plagued the building in the first half of the twentieth century. Fires in 1902, 1911, 1930, 1938, and 1949 nearly caused the demise of Webster Hall, and articles describing the 1930 and 1949 fires indicate that after both the building's roof was rebuilt.² Each time the building was repaired, restored, and brought back to new life, causing the *New York Times* in 1938 to remark that many obituaries have been written for the space over time, and it was not wise to assume that the latest fire would be the end of the hall.³

Other than the loss of the mansard roof, the building's facade has changed very little over the years. Circa 1927, \$220,000 was spent overhauling the space, and like the earlier renovations, the alterations were done in a manner that made them seem part of the original design. Included

in the alterations was the creation of an arched entrance with the initials “WH” engraved in the keystone in the eastern-most bay of the original 1886 building and most likely, the addition of the copper awning over the door. The metal marquee over the main entrance to the building was also added under these renovations.

From the start, Webster Hall was a “hall for hire” where groups could rent either certain rooms in the building or the entire space for whatever functions they chose. In 1938, the *New York Times* noted that Webster Hall was originally primarily used for proper society functions and only later became the go-to place for union rallies and bohemian carousing, stating “Webster Hall...began by seeing red-cheeked debutantes introduced to society and ended—if ended it has—by seeing red-nosed bohemians thumbing defiance at society.”⁴ However, this notion seems to be colored by nostalgia, as even in the hall’s early years, it was rented by socialists, a saloon keepers alliance, a clothing cutters union, and other groups that were outside of the conventions of upper middle class society.⁵ In 1888, just two years after the building was built, the *Brooklyn Eagle* disparagingly wrote, “Webster Hall...[is] where all the year round discontented men meet to discuss their wrongs and sympathize with one another, and where secret societies and political organizations, labor unions and similar associations make a business of pleasure.”⁶

For several decades, Webster Hall was used by a variety of groups for political rallies and meetings and for pleasure. It was here in 1892 that a group of “workmen” and later (and separately) “deaf-mutes” met to officially endorse Grover Cleveland and Adlai Stevenson for president and vice president; in 1930 that anti-Fascists adopted a resolution condemning Mussolini; in 1942 that sixty German-American organizations gathered to pledge their loyalty to the United States and pledged to “unmask agents of [the] Axis and to combat its ideology”; and in 1949 and 1951 that Latvians gathered to celebrate the 31st and 33rd anniversaries of the founding of the Republic of Latvia and to lament that their country was now under Soviet control.⁷

Webster Hall was always a popular place for gathering of the working class, whether it was for union rallies or for evening entertainment, and was the site of significant events in social and labor history. [Figures 7 & 8] In 1912, activist Margaret Sanger marched 119 children of striking Lawrence, Massachusetts workers from the train station to Webster Hall, where they received a decent meal for the first time in weeks and were then placed with families that could provide for them.⁸ The founding convention of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) took place here in December 1914 after many organizers and workers began to feel that the other unions like the United Garment Workers of America were not adequately addressing the workers’ needs.⁹ For decades, ACWA continued to meet and later celebrate its founding at Webster Hall. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Emma Goldman frequently orated at Webster Hall, and in the 1920s, the defense committee for Sacco and Vanzetti met in the space.

Webster Hall’s functions as a home for dance and political activism were often combined by social and political organizations that held parties to raise money for their organizations. The

most famous of these were the masquerade balls hosted by the progressive and socialist magazine, *The Masses*, and by the Liberal Club, based on MacDougal Street. Starting in the 1910's, these parties took inspiration from the bacchanals of Paris and were given names like "Pagan Romps" and "Art Model Frolicks." The parties grew more and more outlandish, and the costumes, skimpier and skimpier. Soon, the fundraising and activism side of the balls gave way to pure celebration and excess. It is estimated that two bohemian balls were thrown on average per week at Webster Hall at its height in 1918 as the war was ending, and the hall was colloquially referred to in the Village as the "Devil's Playhouse."¹⁰ [Figures 9 & 10]

The masquerade parties and their costumes provided an atmosphere where those outside of mainstream society, particularly gays and lesbians, could openly express themselves. Homosexuality was an important part of the attraction of the Village balls; behavior that might seem flamboyant in some neighborhoods was welcomed and accepted at the venue. The bohemian culture that already existed in the Village created a friendly environment for gays and lesbians. Homosexuals first attended the parties of accepting organizations like the Liberal Club, but by the mid-1920s were putting together dances and celebrations of their own at Webster Hall.¹¹

The parties at Webster Hall helped to solidify Greenwich Village's reputation as an off-center and outlandish neighborhood for play. Although Prohibition could have killed the momentum of the parties, in fact, it had the opposite effect. As liquor consumption was driven underground, Webster Hall became a speakeasy, and the legends of the parties grew. Moreover, gay and lesbian celebrations at Webster Hall could continue without harassment, as long as the police were paid off properly.¹² Rumors circulated that the hall was owned by Al Capone, making it seem all the more edgy and appealing.¹³ When Prohibition was finally repealed, a large ball called the "Return of John Barleycorn," was thrown on New Year's Eve to officially and outlandishly celebrate. [Figure 11]

The Great Depression and World War II brought an end to the lavish parties, but Webster Hall survived in the post-war period. Emerging Latin artists like Tito Puente and Tito Rodriguez played Webster Hall in 1949, and the venue had a role in the emerging Village folk scene;¹⁴ Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie frequently played at the People's Artists hootenannies at Webster Hall in the 1950s, and the folk magazine "Sing Out" was founded here.¹⁵ By the end of the 1950s, RCA had converted the building into their East Coast recording studio and called it the "Webster Hall Studios." Elvis Presley, Perry Como, Tony Bennet, Frank Sinatra, Harry Belafonte, and Julie Andrews all sang at the studios, and several musicals, including *Hello, Dolly!* and *Fiddler on the Roof*, were also recorded here.¹⁶ [Figure 12]

Webster Hall reemerged on May 1, 1980 as The Ritz nightclub, and until its relocation in 1986, it was a leading venue for rock shows in New York City. The roster of Ritz performers included, Madonna, Tina Turner, Eric Clapton, Prince, Sting, Guns N' Roses, KISS, among many others. In 1990 the building was purchased by the Ballinger Family from Toronto, and the venue, again called "Webster Hall," became a dance club, which it remains today.

Webster Hall's played an extraordinary role in the cultural development of the Village from the start. The labor leaders, activists, intellectuals, musicians, artists, and bohemians that danced, cheered, argued, and reveled under its roof and in front of its façade all added to and in some ways created the notion of the Village as a place on the forefront of social issues and of entertainment. The intact, elegantly detailed façade of Webster Hall has sheltered some of the Village's most infamous moments, and this first modern night club deserves to be an individual landmark.



Figure 1. Webster Hall Exterior



Figure 2. Detail of the 1886 terra cotta



Figure 3. Webster Hall showing the original 1886 building (left) and the 1892 addition (right)



Figure 4. Detail of the terra cotta on the 1892 addition.



Figure 5. Historic Image of Webster Hall (date unknown) taken by Percy Loomis Speer. From the collection of the New York Public Library (Digital ID 711077F)

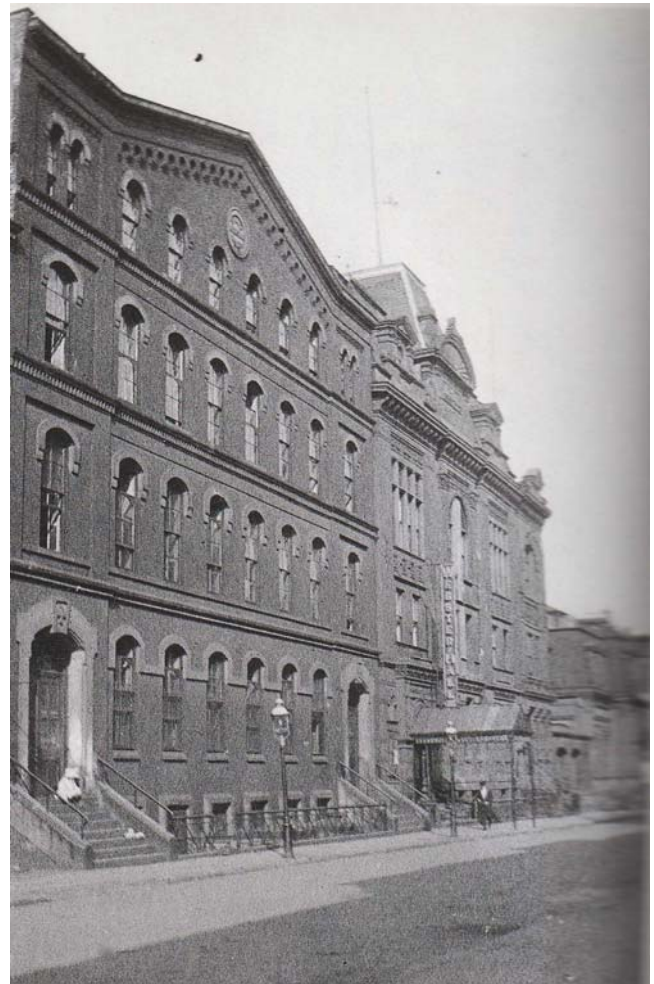


Figure 6. Historic Image of Webster Hall (date unknown). From the collection of the Museum of the City of New York.



Figure 7. Garment workers gathering at Webster Hall (date unknown). From the Library of Congress's Bain Collection (LC-B2-3749-7[P&P])



Figure 8. Greek Americans meet in front of Webster Hall to prepare to return home for Balkan War, October 1912. From the Library of Congress's George Grantham Bain Collection (LC-USZ62-93419)



Figure 9. Poster, designed by John Sloan, for a ball at Webster Hall (date unknown).
From the Library of Congress (LC-USZC2-346)



Figure 10. A costume ball at Webster Hall (date unknown). From the Alexander Alland, Sr., Collection.

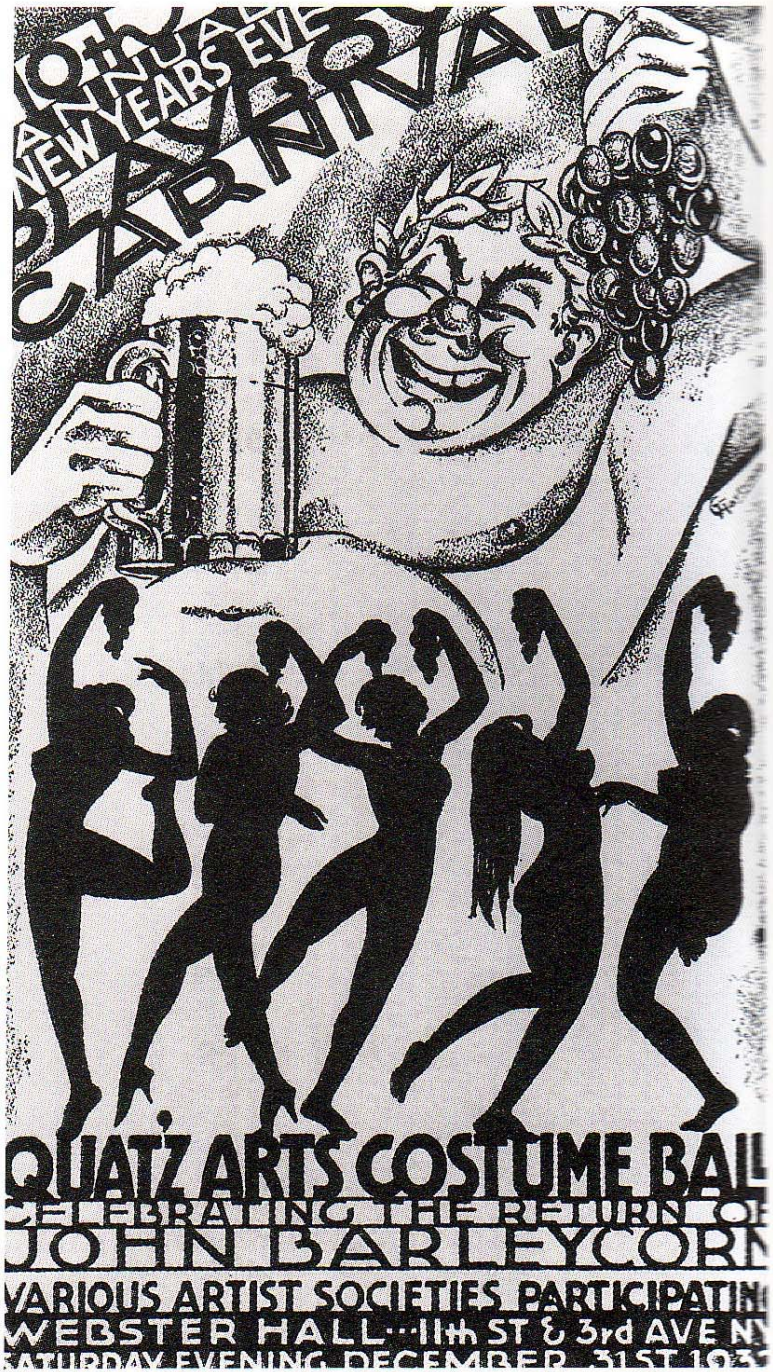


Figure 11. Poster, designed by John Sloan, for the Return of John Barleycorn party celebrating the repeal of Prohibition, December, 31, 1933. From the Museum of the City of New York.



Figure 12. The cast and orchestra of *How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying* recording an album at Webster Hall, Nov. 4, 1961. From the Library of Congress' New York World-Telegram and the Sun Newspaper Photograph Collection (LC-USZ62-132612)

¹ This area around 14th Street/Union Square had been the center of theater activity since the 1850's and by the turn of the twentieth century it had grown in popularity as a location for dance halls as well. By 1910 there were an estimated 195 dance halls in New York City, and most them were on the Lower East Side. Other halls in the area at the time were the Black and Tan Concert Hall at 153 Bleecker Street and Harry Hill's dance hall at 26 East Houston (Ferris, Marc. "Dance Halls and Discotheques." *The Encyclopedia of New York City*. Ed. Kenneth T. Jackson. Yale University, 1995. p. 115-116.)

² See "Webster Hall Fire Ruins Two Floors." *New York Times*. 9 Mar. 1930; "Webster Hall Repairs Cost \$75,000." 16 May 1930; and "Old Webster Hall Wrecked by Blaze." *New York Times*. 6 Feb. 1949. (As found on the *Times*' online archive, 1851-1980.) Also see Alt. #1031-1930, which states, "Rebuilding east wall at balcony to roof between buildings #123 and #125, substituting new built-up steel trusses for wood trusses destroyed by fire and replace all balcony, floor and roof beams where damaged or destroyed by fire, thereby restoring building to its original condition, except as to trusses."

³ "Webster Hall." *New York Times*. 23 Feb. 1938. (As found on the *Times*' online archive, 1851-1980.)

⁴ "Webster Hall." *New York Times*. 23 Feb. 1938. (As found on the *Times*' online archive, 1851-1980.)

⁵ See "Brooklyn 'Progressives.'" *Brooklyn Eagle*. 12 Sept. 1887. Page 2; "Coming Events." *Brooklyn Eagle*. 30 Nov. 1889. p 5; and "Brewers Remain Firm." *New York Times*. 25 Apr. 1888. (As found on the Brooklyn Public Library's online collection of *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* issues from 1841-1902 and the *New York Times*' online archive from 1851-1980, respectively).

⁶ "Talk of New York: About the Theater, Opera and Business." *Brooklyn Eagle*. 1 Jan. 1888. p. 6. (As found on the Brooklyn Public Library's online collection of *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* issues from 1841-1902)

⁷ See "Workmen for Cleveland; They Hold a Big Meeting in Webster Hall." *New York Times*. 5 Nov. 1892; "Applauded by Dear-Mutes." *New York Times*. 6 Nov. 1892; "Mussolini Called Threat to Peace." *New York Times*. 12 Jan. 1931; "U.S. German Groups Pledge Loyalty." *New York Times*. 2 Mar. 1942; "Letts Here Mark Birth of Republic." *New York Times*. 20 Nov. 1949; and "1,800 Here Mark Latvia's Founding." 18 Nov. 1951. (As found on the *Times*' online archive, 1851-1980.)

⁸ Kayton, Bruce. *Radical Walking Tours of New York City*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 1997. p. 70.

⁹ Katz, Ralph. "40 Years Marked by Clothing Union." *New York Times*. 16 Jan. 1955. (As found on the *Times*' online archive, 1851-1980.)

¹⁰ Beard, Rick, and Leslie Cohen Berlowitz, eds. *Greenwich Village: Culture and Counterculture*. New Brunswick, NJ: Museum of the City of New York by Rutgers University Press, 1993. p. 158-160, 342-344, 364-365, 384-385.

¹¹ Beard. p. 158-160, 342-344, 364-365, 384-385.

¹² Beard. 365.

¹³ www.websterhall.com

¹⁴ Shanok, Sarah. "Webster Hall Rallies: The Bowery's up and Clear Channel's down." *New York Press*. Jul. 13, 2004.

¹⁵ www.websterhall.com (the "Sing Out" source, however, cannot be located. It was referenced in another work as by and author "Sholette", but the book or article has not yet been found.)

¹⁶ Shanok and www.websterhall.com.