

The Story of 891 Amsterdam Avenue and how it became a New York City

Landmark*

by Pam Tice,

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I became Executive Director of Hostelling International New York in 1990. This was to be an exciting venture: the hostel was in an historic building and we were opening the city's first official youth hostel. I lived in the neighborhood and knew the building as a community eyesore, an abandoned structure with tin-sealed windows and chain link-fencing. I had strong memories of the July 1977 blackout when the building was set on fire. Now it was re-furbished and taking on new life and the neighborhood was excited to have it back in such good shape.

I spent the next twenty years working in the building for two organizations. Recently, I had the time to do the research that gave me a fuller understanding of its history. I learned why it was built, how it fell upon hard times, how it was "saved" by a coalition of Columbia students and neighborhood activists, and then re-purposed by a local community development corporation and American Youth Hostels.

This post is drawn from a "history talk" I gave in October 2010 at the Hostel, and shares some of the images that tell the story of 891 Amsterdam.

There were three distinct eras during the life of the building: first, from the time it opened in 1883 until it shut down in 1974 as the Association Residence for the Relief of Respectable Aged Indigent Females. A second era was one of abandonment and the time when the building was saved and re-purposed, from 1974 to 1989. A third era, the past twenty years, starting on January 20, 1990 when the building opened and the first hostellers arrived.

The Association for the Relief of Respectable Aged Indigent Females

While the name brings a chuckle today for its length and oddities of language, the organization was quite remarkable. It started in the fall of 1813 when a group of New York women, the wives of merchants, became concerned about elderly women. It was becoming apparent that a city like New York would need many charitable organizations to take care of disadvantaged people. Not only was rapid urbanization taking place, but there was also starting to be a dissolution of the family unit where care-taking had traditionally been handled. The women who formed the Association were concerned that elderly women needed to "avoid the degradation of the poorhouse." The poorhouse, called



Bridewell, located in downtown Manhattan near today's City Hall, was unpleasant and housed mentally ill, vagrants, many succumbing to liquor, and other assorted mis-fits. No one wanted the Poorhouse to be made comfortable because, it was feared, too many would fake their poverty.

Why would a group of women undertake the chore of collecting donations they would, in turn, dispense to poor women in the form of cash, clothing, fuel, food? This was a time of the "Second Great Awakening" when the churches were re-asserting themselves, and many sought to perform acts of charity as examples of their piety. True, this was a time when women were to remain firmly in the

domestic sphere, but piety was a strong part of the ideal women.

Once the women had enough subscribers, they incorporated, in 1815, as an official corporation of the State of New York. They had officers appointed: a First Directress (President) a Second Directress (Vice President), a Secretary and a Treasurer and well thought-out rules governing their tasks and their meetings. While the Association for the Relief of Respectable Aged Indigent Females is an early charity, here, as in other organizations, there are the beginnings of females taking action to address societal problems. This was crucial to the development of the abolition movement, the prohibition movement, and finally, the suffrage movement.

For the first 25 year of the ARRAIF, they simply collected and disbursed funds to women they deemed worthy of receiving it, operating in a pre-social worker environment. They worked hard. They formed an auxiliary committee for the purpose of making clothing items and disbursing those. Meanwhile, many other charities were formed, some particular to a religious faith, others across denominational lines. The ARRAIF was the latter, with definite evangelical Christian underpinnings — in this era, the Protestant churches, the Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians and Baptists were the "evangelicals."

By the mid-1830s the women decided they needed to have an "Asylum" to house some of their "pensioners." One Sunday, the minister of the Church of the Ascension preached a sermon extolling the idea, and a special collection was taken up. The story goes, that on the way home from church that day, Mrs. Peter Stuyvesant urged her husband to find some land for the Asylum, and he did. John Jacob Astor gave the group \$5,000 if they could raise another \$20,000. They accomplished that; there is no list I could find of their donors, but they did thank "the merchants of New York" for their generosity. Once the funds were in place, the women asked their husbands to form a "Committee of Gentlemen" to handle the tasks of contracting the work and getting the Asylum built. It opened in 1838 on East 20th Street, between First and Second Avenues.

The first Association Residence on East 20th Street

The responsibility of operating such an institution caused the ARRAIF to develop new rules governing the responsibilities of the Matron, rules regarding admission to the Asylum, and rules for the "inmates" as the women in the Asylum were called. These rules give us a sense of life in New York City in the 19th century, as the Matron is charged with keeping a lamp on all night, and making sure there was a fire going in the downstairs stove all night from November to April. She was also to ensure that all the food was prepared and on the table before the women were called to their main meal at mid-day. She was also to dispense spirituous liquor if a woman's doctor recommended it, an early version of the prescription drugs that keep the elderly going today. Women coming into the Asylum were expected to show proof of their respectability, evidenced by recommendations. They were also to bring their bedding and furniture, all of which would become the property of the Association. They

gave the Association \$50 to enter (the 1840's amount) which became \$1,000 much later, and in the mid-20th century, a monthly fee would be charged. All property owned by the inmates had to be turned over to the Association. They could not earn any money after entering the Asylum, but if they had given money to any of the organized societies set up to provide old-age support and funeral expenses, those groups were expected to keep funds flowing.

By the early 1870s, the Association women determined that they should increase the size of their Asylum. By this time, they had numerous property holdings around the City, including sufficient buildable lots on Fourth Avenue (today's Park Avenue) between East 78th and 79th Streets. Again, they asked the men to help out, and they formed an Advisory Committee. They had plans drawn up, but when the NYC Buildings Department required extra fire-proofing of stairwell, this drove the cost of the new building higher than they could sustain. The country was also in the midst of a recession. The group decided to sell the property on Fourth, and did so, but the buyer defaulted and they had to go through the whole process again later in the decade.

The Advisory Committee kept working, and by the late 1870s was chaired by a man named E.D. Morgan who had served as New York's Governor from 1862-1865, and then as a U.S. Senator for six years. A merchant originally from Connecticut, he was a moving force in the new Republican Party, and an influential New Yorker. I would guess that his position in New York society caused the well-known architect, Richard Morris Hunt, to become the architect for the new building. However, there is no evidence as to exactly why Hunt was chosen.

But first, the Association purchased new land, on Tenth Avenue between 103rd and 104th Streets. The twenty lots were bought from Charles Russell at \$4,000 each. As the Association moved into this new phase, Mrs. E.D. Morgan — Eliza Morgan — had become the First Directress.

Hunt had a meeting with the Board of the Association where they made known their wishes for the construction of the new building. These notes show us what it was like at the Residence: nearly every resident had her own room, with a fireplace. There was a dining room, and kitchen large enough to serve 100. The bathrooms were communal. There was a Chapel. The residents moved into the finished building in December, 1883.

Richard Morris Hunt's involvement was the reason that the Association Residence was deemed worthy of landmarking nearly 100 years later. He was the first American Architect to attend the L'Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, and, when he returned to New York City in the 1850s, he established an important architectural practice, eventually becoming the architect of grand homes in the city owned by the wealthiest citizens. Today, those homes have been torn down, but examples of his style include the Breakers, at Newport, Rhode Island, and the Biltmore Estate in North Carolina. But beyond his houses, he undertook buildings like ours, and also the base of the Statue of Liberty, and the front façade of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. These are the remainder of his legacy in New York.

The Upper West Side in the 1880s was just beginning develop. Around the Residence there were very few buildings, and the Broadway was then known as the Boulevard. The area had once been farms, and then country homes during the 17th and 18th centuries. But the recent opening of the Ninth Avenue Elevated train (the "El") was sure to spark real estate development, just as the opening of the IRT under Broadway would do in 1904. The Association was just one of a number of charitable organizations that settled in the country-like atmosphere of the Upper West Side. Years before, the Bloomingdale Insane Asylum located where Columbia University is today. The Leake and Watts Orphanage was located on the grounds of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Nearby the Association Residence was a Catholic Home for elderly people on West 106th Street, and a Jewish home on West 105th.

Across the street from the Association, at the corner of West 104th Street, a Home for Destitute Blind run by the Episcopal Church located in 1893. Over on Central Park West, at West 106th Street, construction began in 1884 of what came to be called the Cancer Hospital, an elegant brick structure. Its round towers were constructed at a time when it was thought cancer germs lurked in corners.



Also of note in the growing neighborhood is a hotel, the Clendenning, located at the south west corner of West 103 Street and Amsterdam.

From the 1880s to World War I, the west side streets filled in with buildings, churches, schools and stores. Initially, many of the residences were single family homes. Many of these were replaced with the apartment buildings we have today. In the streets surrounding the Association

Residence, nearly all the denominations built churches, from Holy Name (Catholic) at Amsterdam and West 96th, to West End Presbyterian at Amsterdam and West 105th, and Grace Methodist on West 104th, and Hope Baptist at Broadway and 104th Street. On West 102nd Street, off Amsterdam, was PS 179, now the location of West Side High School. There was also a fire house on this street.

The original Association Residence did not cover the whole block — it was in 1908, when Mrs. Sage had given them a gift of \$250,000, that the addition extended the building southerly to the corner of West 103 Street. The architect for the addition was Charles Rich. The addition included the installation of Tiffany windows to the Chapel. Those windows are now in a museum in Winter Park, Florida.

So, the women living in the Residence watched the neighborhood grow and change, and lived out their lives. Federal censuses show that the population stayed pretty steady at 100-110 residents, a Matron or Administrator, and about 25 employees, from a cook and a laundress, to an “Ashman” during the time the fireplaces were used, and several housekeepers, and, later, more nurses.

Association Residence chapel

The Upper West Side neighborhood where 891 Amsterdam Avenue is located changed greatly just after World War II, when federal funding for housing, Title 1, and the ambitions of Robert Moses came to the Upper West Side. “Slum clearance” to make room for the new public housing meant that acres of land were cleared of buildings. All the buildings on the blocks from West 100 to 104 Streets were taken down to make room for the construction of Frederick Douglass Houses. Mrs. Cox, the First Directress of the Association in the early 1950’s, was quoted as having to “fight Bob Moses” to keep the Association Residence.

In the 1960s, the Residence went through an extensive renovation, including a new elevator and shared bathrooms for every two rooms. One of the priests at the Cathedral remembers visiting the women there, and how “nice” the Residence was – and especially compared to the Towers Nursing Home over on Central Park West which was later to become the scandalous example of mis-treatment of the elderly.

But things were changing. By the late 1960s, government funding for the care of the elderly through Medicare and Medicaid (for nursing homes) was the most likely source for organizations such as the Association Residence. In order to be eligible, the Association had an inspection but fell short. Some of their problems were operational, like not enough nurses on staff, but some were more troublesome, such as the parquet floors and wooden staircases which were fire hazards. This prompted the Association to decide to tear down the building, and construct a new one. Soon the plan was made known in the press, and the neighborhood knew that they would lose this building too.

And then an interesting series of events ensued. At Columbia, a student named Fred Chapman was given an assignment in his historic preservation class to research and “get listed on the National Register of Historic Places” an historic New York City building. Fred chose the Association Residence, and completed his assignment. In those days, the owner of the property did not have to agree to the listing. Soon Fred was joined by Linda Yowell, a student in the Columbia School of Architecture who had an interest in historic preservation. With the news that the Association planned to tear down the “Hunt Building,” as it came to be known, the students went to the Architectural League where a special committee was set up. Someone advised the students to contact as many of the neighborhood organizations as possible and they did.

A new voluntary community organization was formed as the Committee to Save the Hunt

Building by co-chairs Chuck Tice and Charlie Lee, assisted by several Columbia students. Chuck remembers obtaining Rep. Charles Rangel's assurance to help get the building placed on the National Register of Historic Places, following the committee's first meeting at the Bloomingdale Library.



. 1The Chapel being reconstructed

The Association dug in their heels and insisted that they would tear down the building in order to be



able to pay for the construction of the new Association Nursing Home. Since they would be using federal funds for both the demolition and construction, the students learned that there was a somewhat obscure rule that if federal funds were used for demolition of a building on the National Register, an environmental impact statement would be required. The Association would not comply, and a lawsuit commenced, helped along by yet another student from Columbia Law School. The plaintiffs were the Architectural League, the Natural Resources Defense Council, Congressman Charles Rangel, and others.

The lawsuit had the effect of slowing down the whole process. The Association was running out of money. They moved the women out of the Residence in the fall of 1974. Vandalism of the building began, with copper pipes and other materials removed. The site became an eyesore, and the City of New York put out an order for the building's demolition as a "fire, health, and moral hazard." Since they would be charging the Association \$300,000 for the cost, even the Association Board did not want this to happen. The students and others met with City officials, and they agreed that if the building could be tin-sealed on the first two floors, they would withdraw the order to demolish it. The funding for the tin seal was found. After the July 1977 Blackout, the roof and the rest of the building would be sealed, but by then the City was responsible.

Meanwhile, other events were happening. The State of New York launched investigations — long overdue — of their nursing homes, with the Towers Nursing Home on Central Park West becoming the most visible of the horrendous conditions the elderly were experiencing. Soon funding for new nursing home operations dried up — and the Association was out of money and time. They withdrew totally from their building site, and the building became officially "abandoned." That made it *in rem* property of the City of New York.

Now the discovery began to see what could be done with the building. Initially, it was thought that a combination of senior housing and community center might work. The Columbia students were still involved, and were joined by professors and others.

American Youth Hostels entered the picture in the late '70s after the group started the City's Five Boro Bike Tour and met with city officials as they sought permits to run the bike event. The City Hall officials learned that the City had no official youth hostel and soon had AYH staff working with the Economic Development Corporation to find a building that could be a hostel. This was during the expansion of AYH into urban hostels, a much-needed element in the travel market, as more and more Europeans began to make trips to the United States and were wondering where the youth hostels were.

New York was a daunting challenge to take on as the costs of real estate development were considerable. However, with the City's help, the 891 Amsterdam building was soon identified, and AYH teamed up with the Valley Restoration Local Development Corporation to see if the building could work as a hostel, and to seek the funding that would be necessary to create it.

This process took a number of years — the details are considerable — but everything was in place to begin construction by 1987. A private developer, Sybedon Corporation, was brought into the process to handle the financing and management of the construction, with a contract with AYH that gave the non-profit an opportunity to own the building outright after a certain number of years.

After a number of years of resistance, the City's Landmark Commission finally voted to convey landmark status to the 891 Amsterdam building in 1983. Some accuse the City of "not getting it" — that a poorer neighborhood could also have an important landmark structure. One of the

arguments for landmark status is that the structure in and of itself is important, but the building also gives the neighborhood a context, and a reminder of how it used to be.

The Hostel opened in January 1990 —although not to immediate success. There were 480 beds, and the rate was \$19.00. Many staff and volunteers worked tirelessly to make the Hostel a safe, clean, comfortable accommodation, and to reach out to hostellers with programs and activities that enhanced their visit to New York. The Hostel serves as a neighborhood employer and a place for community meetings and celebrations. Eventually, occupancy began to grow, and an explosion in tourist visits to New York put the hostel on the map. By the late 1990's the Hostel was able to increase its allowed beds, and also occupancy, and it really took off, becoming one of the largest youth hostels in the world. In 2001, the events of 9-11 caused setbacks, but later, tourism and the hostel came back.

The Hostel today has 670 beds, making it the largest in North America. It is a significant part of the Upper West Side community. Its strong management, continuing physical improvements, new programming innovations and devoted staff attention all contribute to its success.

* <https://bloomingdalehistory.com/2013/10/28/the-story-of-891-amsterdam-avenue-and-how-it-became-a-new-york-city-landmark/>