Appendix B

424 West 155th Street – Historical Background Report
Prepared by Higgins Quasebarth & Partners, LLC
February 2009

414 West 155th Street
New York, NY



Historical Background Report

February 2009

Higgins Quasebarth & Partners, LLC
11 Hanover Square
New York, NY 10005
(212) 274-9468

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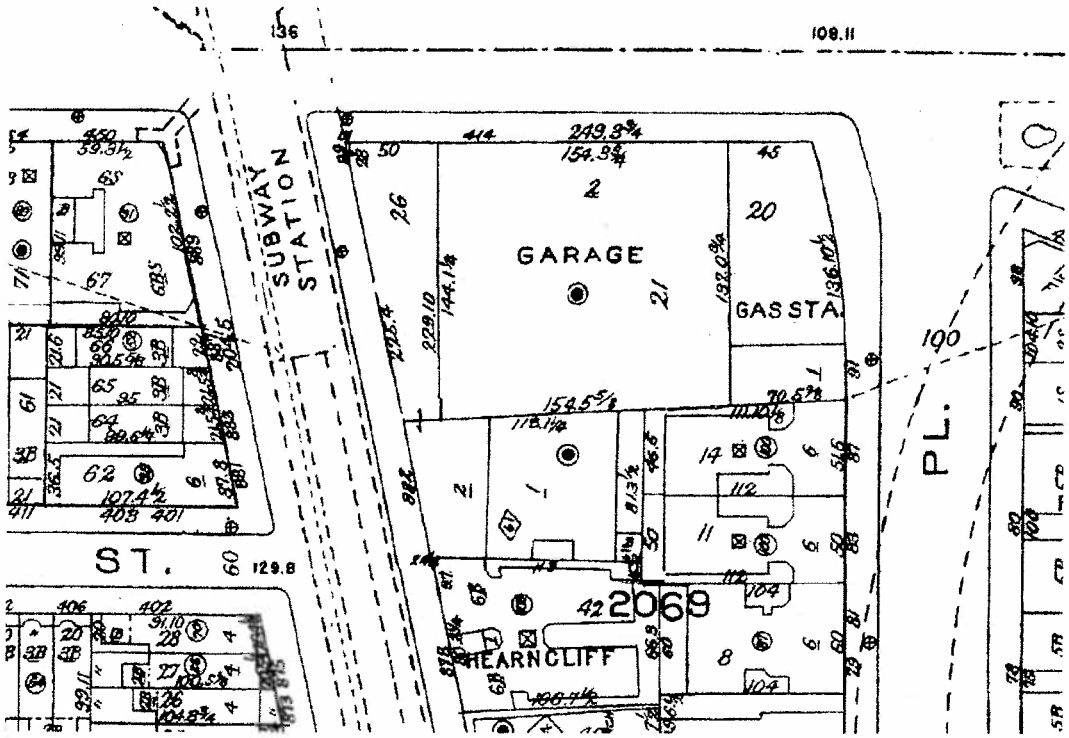
SUBWAY STATION
GARAGE
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2069


2069 -21 M

Top Figure:
Sanborn Map

Bottom Figure:
New York City Municipal Archives Tax Photograph c. 1930

Introduction & Summary

This report has been compiled by Higgins Quasebarth & Partners, LLC., for Broadway Housing Communities, to assist in assessing the history, context and physical fabric of 414 West 155th Street as part of a potential historic preservation review by the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) in connection with planned new construction on the site. 414 West 155th Street is a two-story parking garage on the south side of West 155th Street between St. Nicolas Avenue and St. Nicolas Place. It is located just within the northern boundary of the Sugar Hill National Register District. The National Register Nomination notes it as a contributing structure to the district and describes it as "a two-story neo-Gothic brick and terra-cotta parking garage with Oxford embellishments that lend dignity to an otherwise utilitarian structure." The district is primarily characterized by row houses and apartment buildings. It was designated as much for its historical and social significance as the site of the Harlem Renaissance as for the value of the architectural fabric.

The parking garage and adjacent gasoline station were built from 1927 to 1928. There is conflicting information regarding who is responsible for the design of the garage. The National Register Nomination cites William F. Doyle as the architect. However it is more likely that the building was designed by Shampan & Shampan and that William F. Doyle represented the application before the city reviewers.[1]

414 West 155th Street extends 154 feet along the south side of West 155th Street and 145 feet along St. Nicolas Place, occupying most of the northern parcel of the block. Due to the steep grade in the site to the west, the garage rises three stories at the northeast corner and is one story at the northwest corner. It is clad in buff brick with tan-colored mortar joints and finished with white glazed terra-cotta details. 414 West 155th Street has been modified over time with alterations to the entries and window bays. The brick and terra cotta are in fair to good condition overall.

1 William F. Doyle is noted both in the National Register Nomination and the Municipal Archives Docket (NB 467-28) as the architect on the application. The New York Times however, announced the building noting Shampan & Shampan, an architecture firm from Brooklyn, as the designers. See the discussion of the architects for more details.





Top Figure
West 155th Street looking southwest to north and east elevations of 414 West 155th Street

Bottom Figure
414 West 155th Street looking south-east down West 155th Street

Architectural Description and Existing Conditions

414 West 155th Street has two street elevations: the north, primary, facade on West 155th Street and the east facade, visible from St. Nicolas Place. They are articulated in a tri-partite composition defined by the terra-cotta details at the parapet. There are thirteen bays on each facade, divided into three sections: a center section of seven bays with flanking sections of three bays. The ground floor of the north elevation is composed of numerous entries. At the second floor, both facades have large window bays divided by brick piers. White glazed terra-cotta tiles clad the center bay of each section and are defined by a raised parapet marked with tile-clad pinnacles at the center and terminus of each bay. The pinnacles are all linked by a terra-cotta crenelated parapet.

The ground floor of the north elevation is marked by openings that step up in height as the grade increases. There are five vehicle entries (Bays 1, 3, 7, 11, and 13) and two doors (Bays 2 and 6). The brick is painted black and white at this level. All of the bays have been altered overtime with non-historic infill (concrete and glass block) and non-historic metal windows. The large second-floor window bays have also been altered and are occupied by non-original glass block surrounding non-historic metal windows and louvers. The glass block is in very poor condition. The terra-cotta details begin between the center windows of the three sections and rise up to the parapet. Original rounded terra-cotta pinnacles extend above the crenelated parapet emphasizing these bays.

The east elevation exhibits similar changes over time. The ground floor has a non-original entry and window. Large exposed steel beams, which originally functioned as signage armature, extend from the ground floor to the first floor. The first floor level, which originally was obscured by signage, is clad in common red brick topped by the buff brick of the second floor. The second-floor window bays have the same non-original infill as found on the north elevation. Three of the bays however are clad with the original buff brick.

Historically, 414 West 155th Street had large spans of glazing on the first and second floors. The typical unit consisted of a four-over-four center pivot steel window with four lights above and below. At the first floor this unit was used in the transoms and storefronts. At the second floor, the large bays had two of these units. Non-original infill at the first and second floors has changed the overall transparency and symmetry of the 1920s design. The exposed common red brick and non-original entry on the east elevation have also changed the original character of this facade.

The condition of the buff brick and white glazed terra cotta is fair. The brick shows wear. It is cracked and spalled, notably on the east elevation. The tan-colored joints are eroded. The terra cotta has some surface cracking and spalling. There are also sections of soiling and stains on the terra cotta.

The rolled roof is not original and appears to be in good condition. Eight skylights project from the center of the roof and a bulkhead sits just off center on the rear south elevation.

On the interior, one staircase provides non-vehicular circulation. The concrete of the interior shows typical signs of wear such as cracking and areas of effloresence on the surface. Building management notes concern for the condition of the concrete structure in the eastern half of the garage based on significant cracking in the floor slab.


PARK
PARK


PARK
GAMES



Top Figure (left)
Center, Bay 7, of the north elevation

Top Figure (right)
Looking west along West 155th Street

Bottom Figure
East elevation

Building History and Site Development

414 West 155th Street has continuously been used as a parking garage, but has had numerous tenants over time.

The Sugar Hill National Register Nomination notes that the Speedway Livery Stable was constructed on the site of the garage in 1901 and was owned by Charles A. Peabody. In 1915 the building became a garage. In September of 1928, a two-story brick building was demolished on the site.[2]

The existing garage at 414 West 155th Street was originally owned by Charles A. Peabody. The New Building Application (NB 467-28) describes a three-story fireproof garage and service station to be erected on the block and lot. The application was approved in July of 1928, work commenced in October, and it was completed by May 1929.

Various owners and tenants have occupied the building over time including the Standard Oil Company of New York and the Municipal Gasoline Station Inc.[3] There were relatively few alterations to the building filed at the Department of Buildings. A permit for construction of pits in the first floor (ALT 2556-29) was approved in 1929, but apparently was never executed and expired a year later in 1930. The sole permitted alteration to the exterior was a new exit in the rear brick wall in 1941 (ALT 767-41).

As noted previously, however, changes to the building include: modifications to the ground-floor openings on the West 155th Street elevation, non-original glass block infill at the second-floor windows on both facades, paint on the brick facade, and the removal of historic signage.

The Sugar Hill Historic District[4]

The Sugar Hill Historic District consists of 414 contributing buildings, which are primarily late nineteenth and early twentieth century row houses and apartment buildings. It is bound to the south by West 145th Street and to the north by West 155th Street. It runs irregularly along the side streets west of Convent Avenue and in some cases as far west as Amsterdam Avenue. The hilly topography, parks, and numerous trees create vistas that juxtapose the natural and urban environments.

The district is recognized by the National Register as significant under Criteria A, B, and C for evaluation of historic properties. Criterion A identifies the buildings of the district as important due to their association with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of history. The importance of the built fabric in the district is repeatedly linked to broader transpiration developments. Criterion B recognizes buildings in the Sugar Hill Historic District for their association with lives of significant individuals, notably central figures in the cultural history of Harlem. Criterion C focuses on the diverse architectural character of the buildings in the Sugar Hill Historic District and recognizes it as representative or embodying distinctive characteristics of various styles that resulted from distinct periods of growth and development.

2 New York City Department of Buidlings Demolition Permit 274, 1928.

3 New York City Department of Building applications for alterations and signage begin quickly after the construction of the garage and gas station. Photographs from 1929 and circa 1930 show that the tenant changed in that brief period of time.

4 This description of the Sugar Hill Historic District is taken almost in its entirety form the Sugar Hill Historic District National Register Nomination listed in 2002.


SUPER-X



Top Figure
Looking west along West 155th Street from Edgeombe Avenue; New York City Transit Muesum Photograph, 1929

Bottom Figure
Looking west along West 155th Street from St. Nicolas Place; New York City Transit Muesum Photograph, 1929

The Sugar Hill Historic District is recognized as significant for its association with events that have made an important contribution to the broad patterns of our history in the areas of community planning and development, ethnic heritage, and social history. The period of significance, circa 1856 to circa 1956, incorporates the complex historical and architectural development of the neighborhood.

The Sugar Hill Historic District evolved from its rural beginnings to its subsequent urban form as a result of infrastructure and transportation initiatives. The creation of the Hudson River Railroad in the 1830s and the completion of the Croton Water Aqueduct were important factors in the initial period of development largely characterized by farmsteads and estates. Later periods of expansion from 1876 to 1906 grew as a result of transportation improvements including the Eighth Avenue elevated (1879), the Amsterdam Avenue Cable Car (ca. 1880), and the West 155th Street Viaduct (ca. 1890).

Early development was characterized by freestanding villas and mansions designed by distinguished architects. The completion of the IRT subway (ca. 1904), however, allowed easier access to the area for broader demographics. Sugar Hill became increasingly attractive to middle class families, which created the impetus for the construction of row houses and apartment buildings from 1906 to 1926.

The late 19th and early 20th Century residential architecture of the historic district remains intact. The long rows of well-preserved speculatively built row houses give the district a distinct sense of place. The private residences display remarkable neo-Grec, Romanesque and Renaissance Revival style details of high quality materials. Many of the apartment buildings in the district reflect the Beaux-Arts and "City Beautiful" movements. Other popular styles include the Renaissance Revival, French Renaissance Revival, and Colonial Revival. These buildings were designed by New York architects specializing in residential construction, such as A.B. Jennings, Neri Fouchaux, Frederick P. Dinkelberg, Neville & Bagge and Schwartz & Gross, among others.

The National Register Nomination emphasizes the district's importance as a symbol of the African-American community and culture with particular focus on the role of the neighborhood during the Harlem Renaissance. The period of significance encompasses ca. 1926 to 1958. The mid-1920s saw many noted and affluent African-Americans arrive on Sugar Hill, including professionals active in law, business, literature, music, and art. This phenomenon was facilitated by the new rapid transit: St. Nicolas Avenue's express A train (ca. 1930). It was during this period that the area historically known as Harlem Heights and (lower) Hamilton Heights became known as Sugar Hill. For African Americans living on the Harlem plain, this elevated residential area to the west became increasingly desirable.

Sugar Hill takes its name from the "cream and sugar" of African-American society who lived in the neighborhood. The individuals who played important roles in local and national history included such illustrious figures as future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, sociologist and civil rights activist W.E.B. DuBois, painter Aaron Douglas, jazz musician Edward Kennedy Ellington (Duke Ellington), significant community figures such as Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., and writers Ralph Ellison and Langston Hughes.

Construction in Sugar Hill following the 1930s was minimal and as a result, there are very few buildings that represent the later decades of the period of social and historical significance. The last building to represent the end of this era is York and Sawyer's Bowery Savings Bank apartments erected in 1956. This was the first major building project in Harlem following the 1930s and it housed the first bank to open in Harlem in 48 years. The National Register Nomination notes that, although by the





Top Figure
James Anthonly Bailey House by Samuel Burrage Reed (1888), 10 St. Nicolas Place

Bottom Figure
757-775 St. Nicolas Avenue, Frederick P. Dinkelberg (1895)

late 1950s Sugar Hill had deteriorated, the neighborhood has remained a prominent cultural symbol of the African-American community.

414 West 155th Street was built just prior to the end of speculative construction in the Sugar Hill Historic District. Its materials and style are comparable to construction during that period. It reflects a later revival style and represents the rise of the automobile as an important mode of transportation during the 1920s.

Architects: William F. Doyle and Shampan & Shampan

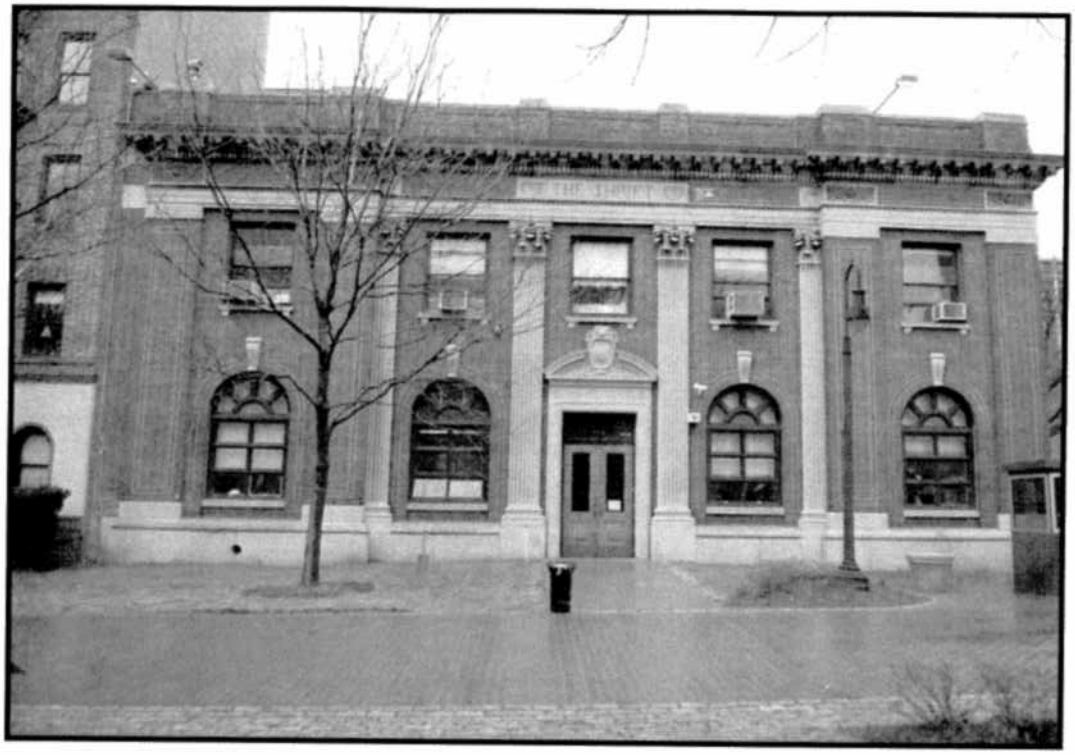
There is conflicting information regarding who actually designed 414 West 155th Street. The National Register Nomination cites William F. Doyle as the architect, probably because the DOB records note him as the architect. Although it is not conclusive, closer research suggests that the bulding's design may have been executed by the architectural firm Shampan & Shampan. The project was announced in the New York Times in 1928. The Times identifies Shampan & Shampan as the designers for a "$400,000 three-story fireproof garage planned for the southwest corner of West 155th Street and St. Nicolas Place measuring 154 feet by 144 feet."[5] Shampan & Shapman, a Brooklyn, developer/design firm had established a sound reputation by the mid-1920s working on garages and apartment buildings. Additional Times coverage in the early 1930s details allegations of corruption in state and federal investigations focused on Doyle's role presenting applications for the construction to the Board of Standards and Appeals. During the investigations, it was noted that Doyle was not an architect.[6]

A former Fire Department veterinarian and Chief of the Bureau of Fire Prevention, William F. Doyle began a second career as a consultant representing building applications for the construction of garages and gasoline stations following his retirement from city service in 1922.[7] Doyle was a renowned expert for acquiring approvals from the Board of Standards Appeals. Through his lucrative services he earned over $1,000,000.00, primarily in cash, from 1922 to 1930.[8] In 1927 alone, the year that work began on 414 West 155th Street, he made $270,000.[9] Doyle regularly charged $10,000 for minor applications and up to $40,000 in more serious applications for zoning variances.

He later became the center of state and federal investigations into the City's corruption.[10] Extensive newspaper coverage of the trials centered on fee discrepancies began in May 1930 and lasted over a year. Before the end of the ongoing court battle, William E. Walsh, Chairman of the Board of Standards and Appeals, resigned due to allegations of fee sharing with Doyle. Walsh was subsequently acquitted and Doyle continued to present applications to the Board of Standards and Appeals.

Additional inquiries into Doyle's deals and associations, however, began again six months after the final days of the first trials. He was tried on charges of perjury and tax evasion. Doyle was sentenced to 30 days in jail for his refusal to share information.

5 "$400,000 Garage Is Planned" New York Times. August 14, 1928 (p.28).
6 "Crain would abolish Standards Board" New York Times. June 25, 1930 (pg. 3).
7 "Crain orders inquiry into permits grants by Standards Boards" New York Times. May 10, 1930 (pg. 1).
8 "Dr. Doyle to face Grand Jury on Monday" New York Times. May 31, 1930 (pg. 8).
9 "850,000 in Deposits by Doyle since 1926 Revealed by Tuttle" New York Times. June 1, 1930 (pg. 1).
10 Doyle, no stranger to the courtroom, was indicted by the NY County Grand Jury on charges of bribery and conspiracy in connection with an alleged moving picture theatre graft in 1919. He was head of the Fire Prevention Bureau of the Fire Department at that time and the charges were dismissed.



Top Figure
Thrift Hall, Pratt Institute, Shampan & Shampan (1916)

His trials occurred just prior to and in conjunction with the larger investigations into the corruption of city politics. These investigations ultimately resulted in the election of reformist Mayor LaGuardia and led to the downfall of Tammany Hall.

In 1933 Doyle was still presenting cases successfully to the Board of Standards and Appeals.

The style of 414 West 155th Street, Doyle's background and the New York Times announcement of the building as the design of Shampan & Shampan do not definitively answer the question who designed the building. However it is most likely that the building was designed by Shampan & Shampan.

Shampan & Shampan

The architectural firm of Shampan & Shampan was founded in Brooklyn in 1907 by brothers Joseph Shampan (c.1886-1961) and Louis Shampan. The architecture and development firm designed apartment houses and taxpayers (one- to two-story buildings, usually transient structures, meant to generate taxes on expensive lots) throughout the city as well as numerous commercial buildings in the garment district of Manhattan. As real estate investors, they developed many building themselves and then retained them as income producing properties. They were the architects for the Thrift Hall (1916) on the Pratt Institute Campus, which was a savings bank for students founded by Charles Pratt, Sr., in 1889. They also designed the Veterans Temple of Peace at the 1939-40 New York World's Fair. Examples of the firm's work are found in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, Brooklyn Heights, Cobble Hill, and Clinton Hill Historic Districts. The firm remained in practice through the 1960s.