



The Case for a Gansevoort Market Historic District

By Thomas Mellins, Architectural Historian

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New York is a city of architectural icons recognized throughout the world. The Empire State Building, the skyscrapers of Wall Street seen from the Staten Island Ferry, and the Brooklyn Bridge, among many other buildings and structures, all provide images that instantly identify New York not only as a world-class city, but as the modern metropolis. But New York is also a city of hidden architectural treasures, of buildings, enclaves and entire neighborhoods that even people who have lived here their entire lives may not know well. Yet these places, the significance of which perhaps has been obscured by a remote location, a lack of financial investment, or a certain degree of physical neglect, may be, in a sense, landmarks waiting to be discovered. The Gansevoort Market area is just such a hidden landmark; its protection and preservation are critical not only in terms of its constituent buildings, but also because its special urbanism contributes vigorously to the overall complexity and vitality of the city's unique look and texture.

Today many people think of New York as an international capital of finance and culture. But until quite recently, New York was very much a working city, that is, a manufacturing and distribution center. In contrast to its currently thriving service and entertaining-based economy, New York has a gritty past. The city's working heritage is intimately tied to an unparalleled natural resource—its rivers and harbor. Docks and industrial facilities encircled Manhattan Island, and parts of the outer boroughs as well, throughout much of the city's history. (Interestingly, like many other international cities, where the choicest places to live were traditionally alongside rivers and shorelines, in New York, the best address, Fifth Avenue, was the one farthest from the sights, sounds and smells of its working rivers.)

Even before the Civil War and the city's rise to national and international importance, the area between Greenwich Village and the Hudson River, part of which now constitutes the Gansevoort Market, was utilized as a food market. And from the first, it was a mixed-use district; housing coexisted with manufacturing. Later, the area was used as a meat market and food distribution center. Over time, it developed an architectural and urbanistic identity all its own.

Many of the buildings, though designed by little known architects and builders to fulfill rudimentary functions, are nonetheless skillfully articulated and finely realized. They constitute what some architects and architectural historians have

labeled “everyday masterpieces”— those modest but well-designed buildings that provide a fine setting for more flamboyant architectural gems. And the Gansevoort Market area also has a surprising number of very high-quality buildings designed by well-known architects and built for important clients. For example, the commercial building containing stores and loft spaces at 401-403 West Thirteenth Street, completed in 1909, was commissioned by John Jacob Astor, one of the wealthiest New York City merchants ever. And the building at 29-35 Ninth Avenue, originally built as a warehouse and later used as a food processing facility and an electronic parts factory, was designed by the distinguished architectural firm of Boring & Tilton, which was responsible for the grand United States Immigration Station on Ellis Island. Today, hundreds of thousands of tourists visit that building annually and marvel at its noble archways. But careful observation will reveal that elegantly framed archways area part of Boring & Tilton’s industrial building on Ninth Avenue as well. The architects’ rich imaginations and skillful hands reward the patient observer here too in this unexpected location.

Buildings such as these, as well as the neighborhood’s low-rise urbanism, cobblestone streets, distinctive canopies, and open views of the river and sky make the Gansevoort Market area distinctive and memorable. In recent years, the area has become home to popular restaurants and shops. Here, the layers of history that go so far in making the city endlessly fascinating are brilliantly apparent. Each element – retail, residential and industrial – is made richer by the presence of others. The area’s architecture and urban character call out for preservation, so that future generations of New Yorkers and visitors alike will be able to learn from and enjoy this hidden landmark district.

Save Gansevoort Market has retained architectural historian Thomas Mellins to prepare a survey of the area’s historical, architectural and cultural resources, to be presented in the summer of 2001 to the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission. This project is funded by Preserve New York, a grant program of the Preservation League of New York State and the New York State Council on the Arts. Mr. Mellins is the co-author of *New York 1880*, *New York 1930*, and *New York 1960*.