

THE HISTORY OF 121 CHARLES STREET



Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation

Researched and written by
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November 2014



The wooden house at 121 Charles Street in Greenwich Village had previously been located at 1335 York Avenue, between 71st and 72nd Streets. Saw marks found on the wood indicate that it was built after the introduction of saw mills, which would date the house to the early 19th century at the earliest.¹ A knocker that used to be on the front door had an inscription that read, “Cobble Court 1810”. There has also been speculation that the house was built in the late 18th century.



COBBLE COURT, a bucolic oasis in the midst of Manhattan's skyscrapers, is Miss Brown's New York home. Fur rugs and couch add a distinctive note.

Margaret Wise Brown, *LIFE*, 1946.

William Glass and his wife bought the property and farmhouse in 1868² and operated a dairy there (interestingly, they had previously lived in Greenwich Village).³ At the time York Avenue was known as Avenue A. They built a two-story brick residence in front of the farmhouse c. 1869, blocking it from view.⁴ The property became known as Cobble Court because of the cobblestones that paved the area between the two houses.⁵

In the early 20th century, the house was a restaurant. Over time, the farmhouse was rented out, most notably to Margaret Wise Brown, author of *Goodnight Moon* (1947), in the 1940s.⁶ Her book *Mister Dog* (1952) features the house. In 1960, Sven Bernhard rented and renovated the home. His wife Ingrid later moved in after they married in December 1964.⁷

¹ Maas, Jan A., “After being moved, old farm house is alive and well in the West Village,” *The Daily News*, 7 December 1969.

² Manhattan property conveyances, deed transfer 14 April 1868.

³ “Cobble Court in the News,” *The Dolphin*, Nurses House, Inc. newsletter, undated.

⁴ Glass, Thomas, “Lost for One Hundred Years,” *New York Chronicle*, Spring 2001.

⁵ “Cobble Court in the News.”

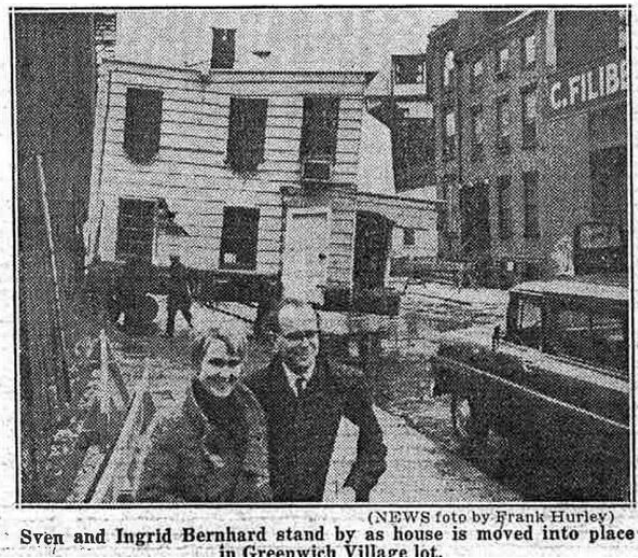
⁶ Bliven, Jr., Bruce, “Child’s Best Seller,” *LIFE*, 2 December 1946.

⁷ Judith Stonehill, email to the author dated 6 October 2014 regarding recent comments from Ingrid Bernhard.

William Glass' grandchildren – William and Robert Glass, and Margaret Glass Healy – eventually sold the property to the Archdiocese of New York in 1965 (it took the Archdiocese 15 years to convince Healy to sell since she was so attached to the property).⁸ The Archdiocese planned to demolish Cobble Court so it could build the Mary Manning Walsh Home for the Aged.



Turning west onto 14 Street from Second Avenue.
The New York Times, 1967.



Sven and Ingrid Bernhard stand by as house is moved into place
in Greenwich Village lot.
The Daily News, 1967.

Still renters but unwilling to give up their beloved house, the Bernhards went to court and eventually won ownership around July 1966.⁹ They had six months, until January 31, 1967, to move it elsewhere. William Shopsin, a young architect interested in preserving historic buildings, was hired to find a new site that would preserve the house's charm.

He found Charles Street on February 3rd (the first of two extensions the Bernhards received to move the house).¹⁰ The lot's unusual shape was also able to accommodate the 26-foot-wide house, which would have trouble fitting on the standard 25-foot-wide Manhattan lot.

Before moving, he needed the permission of numerous city agencies, including the Department of Buildings (DOB), which had no record of the building due to its age (its construction predated DOB's formation in 1866). To further complicate matters, wooden houses had been outlawed in Manhattan so while it was grandfathered on the York Avenue site it would not meet contemporary code requirements in another location.

When the story caught the interest of Manhattan Borough President Percy Sutton and Mayor John Lindsay, their influence helped get the approvals needed to move the house.¹¹

⁸ "Ennis, Thomas W., "A Bit of Old City Comes to Light," *The New York Times*, 20 February 1966; Manhattan property conveyances, deed transfer 27 May 1965 (William T., Martha C., Robert V., and Adolphine Glass); Manhattan property conveyances, deed transfer 9 July 1965 (Margaret Glass Healy).

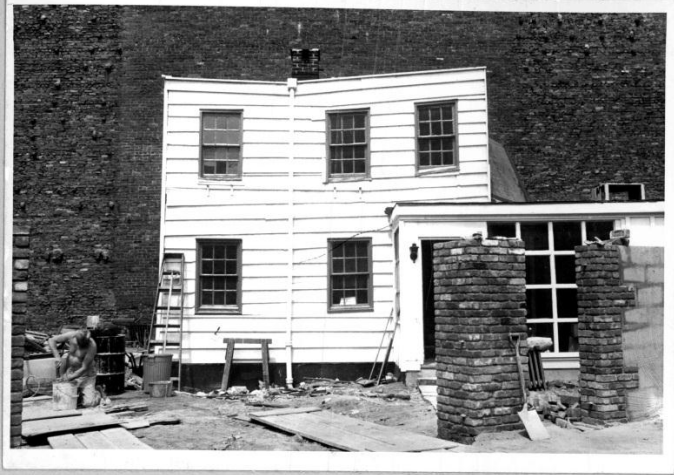
⁹ Maas, Jan A.

¹⁰ Weinraub, Bernard, "5-Mile Trip Along Street Costs the Owners \$6,500," *The New York Times*, 6 March 1967.

¹¹ Maas, Jan A.



A welcome committee with the Bernhards at 121 Charles Street. Unknown source, 1967.



The farmhouse at 121 Charles Street with its new foundation. Landmarks Preservation Commission photograph, summer 1967.

The court gave a final March 6th deadline to move the house otherwise it would be demolished. After snow threatened the move, the event took place on Sunday, March 5th (see the accompanying map in this report). Borough President Sutton and a committee of West Village residents were at 121 Charles Street to greet the house's arrival.¹²

The house sat on a platform for six months while the necessary permits were granted to dig a foundation (meanwhile, the Bernhards lived in a nearby apartment on Hudson Street).¹³ The one-story wing seen in the above photograph from the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) had to be temporarily removed during the house's journey downtown since it could not fit on the flatbed truck. It was reattached after a new foundation was laid at the Charles Street site. The Bernhards used this space, which they called the Winter Garden, as their kitchen and dining room.¹⁴

The cobbles from the York Avenue site were brought here to recreate Cobble Court. *The Daily News* in 1969 describes the lot, "On the left is an open yard and on the right, tucked into a corner, is a garden. In summer, flowers grow around the house and along the path to the door." Ingrid Bernhard had iron gates installed so that onlookers would have a clear view of the house.¹⁵ That same year, the house and property gained landmark status with the designation of the Greenwich Village Historic District.

The Bernhards lived here until 1986.¹⁶ It passed through two owners in two years before Suri Bieler bought it in 1988 (Bieler had been fond of the house since first seeing it on Charles Street as a

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Bent, E.S., "Red Tape Entangles 2 Rescuing House," *The New York Times*, 2 June 1968, R1.

¹⁴ Information based on a phone call between Judith Stonehill and Ingrid Bernhard, 11 November 2014.

¹⁵ Green, Penelope, "From Another Time and Place," *The New York Times*, 30 October 2008.

¹⁶ Ibid.

child in the 1960s). She lived here with her husband Eliot Brodsky and their son, and hired architect George Boyle to complete an extensive renovation to the house in 2000-01. The first and second floors were expanded, and great care was taken to preserve the quirky charm of the house (for a full description of the renovations, refer to “121 Charles Construction History”).

This renovation received the approval of the Landmarks Preservation Commission in September 1996, as is noted in Certificate of Appropriateness (C of A) permit # COFA 01-5436. The permit mentions that the approved work consists of a “two-story addition on the east façade and one-story additions on the south and west facades, and also interior alterations.”

The permit also calls out the building’s “age, style, scale, materials, details and unusual history” as being “among the features which contribute to the special architectural and historic character of the Greenwich Village Historic District.” It notes that the “vernacular style 19th century house” was moved to this site in 1967.

The permit also states that, with regard to the proposal, the LPC “found that the design skillfully avoids overwhelming the diminutively scaled original building by breaking down the additions into a number of small discrete sections; that the irregular massing of the new sections reinforces the informal vernacular character of the original; that the careful placement of the largest section, the two-story eastern addition, responds to the unusual shape of the lot and the angle of the street while also helping to minimize the bulk of this wing; that the building’s vernacular quality is further reinforced by the sensitive mix of window types and sizes; and that for these reasons the proposed additions will reinforce the unique character of this building and site, and the special character of the Greenwich Village Historic District.”

121 Charles Street Timeline
(referred to here as “farmhouse” before its move to Charles Street)

c. 1810: Farmhouse constructed

1868: William Glass buys 1335 York Avenue property, including farmhouse, and operates as a dairy; he builds a two-story brick residence at the front of the property c. 1869, which blocks the farmhouse from view until 1966-67

Early 20th century: Farmhouse operates as restaurant

c. 1946: Margaret Wise Brown, author of *Goodnight Moon*, rents the farmhouse

1960: Sven and Ingrid Bernhard rent farmhouse from Glass family

1965: William and Robert Glass, and Margaret Glass Healy – grandchildren of William – sell property to the Archdiocese of New York

c. July 1966: Bernhards gain ownership of farmhouse through court case and have six months to move house; Archdiocese retains ownership of property

January 31, 1967: First deadline to move house

February 3, 1967: Deadline to move house extended

March 3, 1967: Bernhards buy 121 Charles Street property (deed recording)

March 5, 1967: House moved from 1335 York Avenue to 121 Charles Street one day before final extension date

1969: Farmhouse and 121 Charles Street site become protected landmarks with the designation of the Greenwich Village Historic District

1986: Bernhards sell property

1988: After passing through two owners in two years, Suri Bieler buys property

2000-01: Renovation undertaken, including room expansions, with the help of architect George Boyle; work received approval by the Landmarks Preservation Commission in 1996

2014: Real estate listing advertises 121 Charles Street for sale

Construction History of 121 Charles Street
Based on "Little House, Big City," by Ryan Robbins, *This Old House Magazine*

ORIGINAL HOUSE

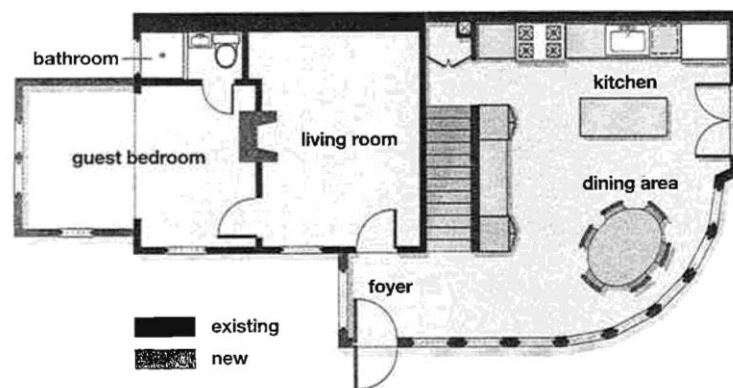
- Two-story, two-bedroom house with exterior staircase
 - Roof sagged, windows badly out of square, front door measured 5" taller on one side than on the other
 - By the time Bieler/Brodsky bought property in 1988, the stairs and a side porch had been enclosed to create an entry vestibule and a cramped galley kitchen; house had been vacant for several months, was covered in graffiti, and only had plastic over its broken windows
 - Couple spent first 10 years in home "charmed by its various quirks" but once their son reached 6 years old they felt it had become too small and that it needed repairs

RENOVATION, 2000-01

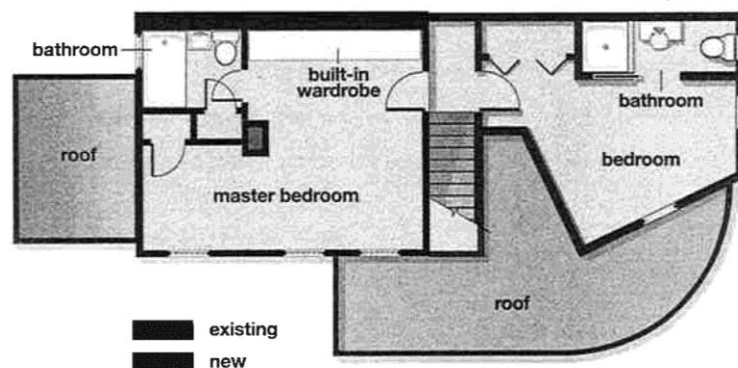
- They hired George Boyle, architect, to renovate in 2000-01
 - Added new wing that nearly doubled the house's size (from 920 square feet to almost 1,900) – this became the kitchen with dining area, their son's bedroom, and a full finished basement
- Original wood-framed structure long outlawed in NYC
 - Old sections were grandfathered, but the new wing had to be built with steel framing and reinforced concrete block walls
- First floor of addition: 400-square-foot quarter-circle, with a small leg off one corner for the main house's foyer; rest of space opens into large kitchen/dining room that replaced the galley kitchen; curved wall has nearly floor-to-ceiling south- and east-facing six-over-six windows
- Ceiling height: home's original 7'3" ceilings didn't meet DOB code (8")
 - Thin-profile steel joists for the new addition's floor and ceiling (instead of thick timbers used in the original house) allowed for extra headroom without having to raise the roof significantly
- New basement space beneath kitchen used as media room, connects to existing partial basement used for laundry, a workshop, and mechanicals
- Second floor addition: trapezoidal shape above new kitchen holding son's new bedroom and bath (Boyle, "It's the only part of the new construction you can see walking by the house so I wanted it to fit in with the existing streetscape.")
 - As such, the bedroom's long front wall is not squared with the rest of the house's second-story façade but is angled to run parallel to the street
- Two floors are connected by the once-exterior staircase (still lined with original clapboards)

- Original structure was gutted; had previously held master bedroom and bath stacked atop a smaller bedroom, a second bath, and a small living room with brick fireplace
 - House's envelope was tightened up, its framing was reinforced, new plumbing/electrical installed
 - Finished space looks exactly as it did decades ago: sloping ceilings, off-kilter windows, etc. Boyle: "The goal was not to make things plumb."
 - Only change was an 8' extension of downstairs guest bedroom
- Old and new structures are connected by a wavy roof Boyle describes as a "potato chip"
 - Its various peaks and valleys add to the illusion that the structure was expanded ad hoc over the years; they also enable water to drain toward the building's rear
 - Most of roof is covered in a waterproof rubberized membrane, but small shed roof above stairwell (only roof surface visible from street) is standing-seam copper. Boyle, "It creates the illusion that the entire roof is copper."
 - House's white-painted clapboards are not wood, they are fire-resistant fiber-cement siding (building code)
 - Original front door (now surrounded by steel-framed entryway) was left crooked with 200 years' worth of paint
 - Crooked window openings were preserved; new wood windows cut to fit by Brooklyn-based contractor John Kemp (windows made in unfinished basement)

First Floor

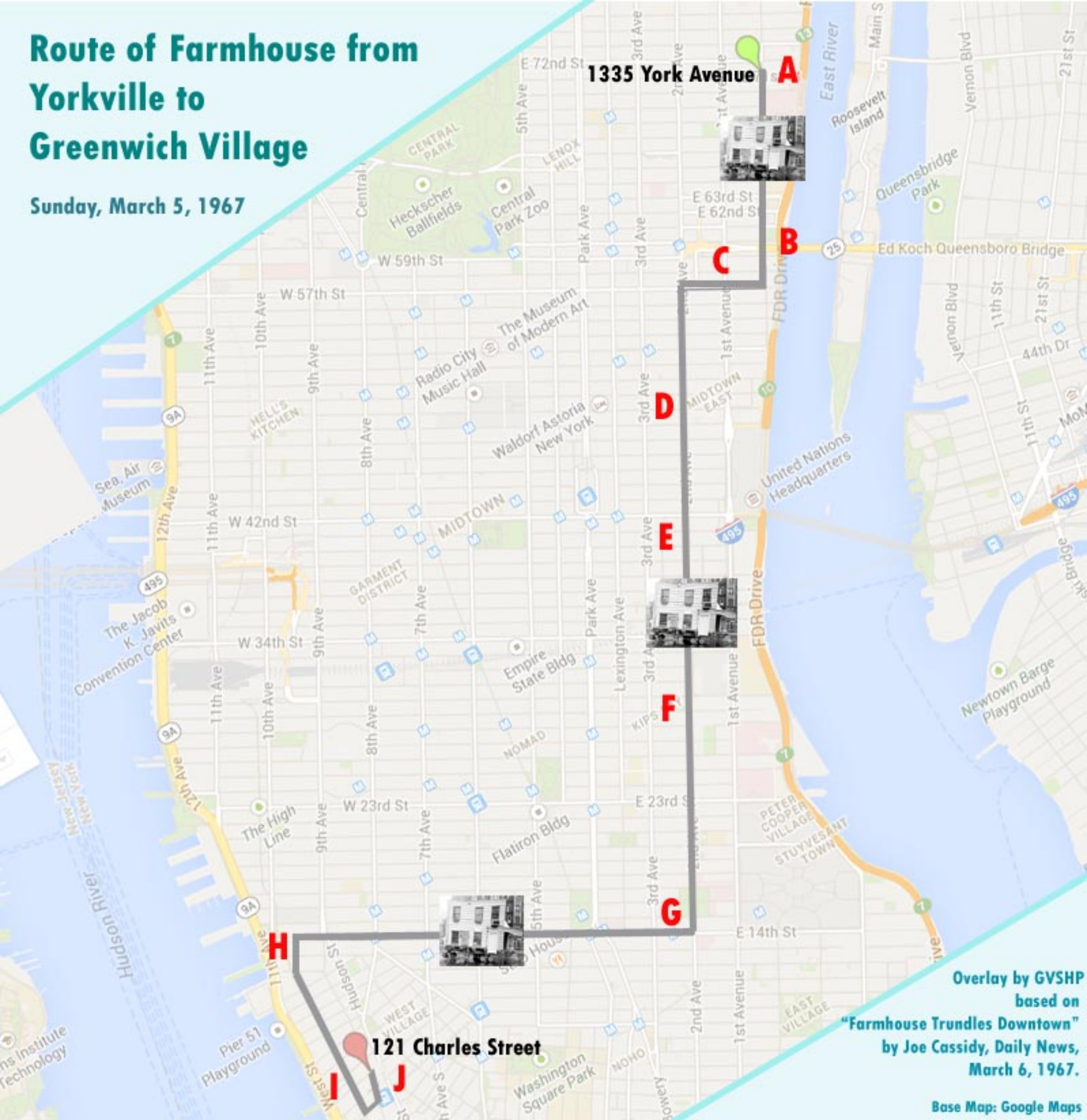


Second Floor



Route of Farmhouse from Yorkville to Greenwich Village

Sunday, March 5, 1967



Overlay by GVSHP
based on
"Farmhouse Trundles Downtown"
by Joe Cassidy, Daily News,
March 6, 1967.

Base Map: Google Maps



THE NEW YORK CITY LANDMARKS PRESERVATION COMMISSION
1 CENTRE STREET 9TH FLOOR NORTH NEW YORK NY 10007
TEL: 212 669-7700 FAX: 212 669-7780



PERMIT

CERTIFICATE OF APPROPRIATENESS

ISSUE DATE: 03/22/01	EXPIRATION DATE: 9/24/2002	DOCKET #: 15424	COFA #: COFA 01-5436
<u>ADDRESS:</u> 121 CHARLES STREET <u>HISTORIC DISTRICT</u> GREENWICH VILLAGE		BOROUGH: MANHATTAN	BLOCK/LOT: 632 / 36

Display This Permit While Work Is In Progress

ISSUED TO:

Suri Bieler
121 Charles Street
New York, NY 10014

Pursuant to Section 25-307 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission, at the Public Meeting of September 24, 1996, following the Hearing of September 24, 1996, voted to grant a Certificate of Appropriateness for the proposed work at the subject premises, as put forth in your application completed on August 1, 1996.

The proposed work consists of a two story addition on the east facade and one story additions on the south and west facades, and also interior alterations, all as shown in a site plan, elevations of the existing and proposed conditions, a model, and photographs, all prepared by George Boyle Architect and presented at the Public Hearing and Public Meeting.

In reviewing this proposal, the Commission noted that the designation report describes 121 Charles Street as a vernacular style 19th century house which was moved to this site in 1967; and that the building's age, style, scale, materials, details and unusual history are among the features which contribute to the special architectural and historic character of the Greenwich Village Historic District.

With regard to this proposal, the Commission found that the design skillfully avoids overwhelming the diminutively scaled original building by breaking down the additions into a number of small discrete sections; that the irregular massing of the new sections reinforces the informal vernacular character of the original; that the careful placement of the largest section, the two-story eastern addition, responds to the unusual shape of the lot and the angle of the street while also helping to minimize the bulk of this wing; that

the building's vernacular quality is further reinforced by the sensitive mix of window types and sizes; and that for these reasons the proposed additions will reinforce the unique character of this building and

site, and the special character of the Greenwich Village Historic District.

However, the Commission made its determination subject to the stipulation that two sets of Department of Building filing drawings for the approved work be submitted for review and perforation.

Subsequently, on March 13, 2001, the Commission received the requested filing drawings, Z.101, GN.101, GN.103, D.101, A.101, A.102, A.103, A.201, A.302, A.303, A.402, and A.403, all dated August 31, 2000, GN.102, A.104, A.501, A.502, and A.602, all stamped "Received Preservation Department 3/13/01", A.105, A.301, A.601, all dated October 1, 1999, S-1, S-2, and S-3, all dated June 2, 1997, M-1, M-2, M-3, and M-4, all dated June 26, 2000, all prepared by George Boyle, Architect. Staff has reviewed these drawings and finds that the approved design has been maintained in the filing drawings. On this basis, Certificate of Appropriateness 01-5436 is being issued.

This permit is issued on the basis of the building and site conditions described in the application and disclosed during the review process. By accepting this permit, the applicant agrees to notify the Commission if the actual building or site conditions vary or if original or historic building fabric is discovered. The Commission reserves the right to amend or revoke this permit, upon written notice to the applicant, in the event that the actual building or site conditions are materially different from those described in the application or disclosed during the review process.

All approved drawings are marked approved by the Commission with a perforated seal indicating the date of the approval. The work is limited to what is contained in the perforated document. Other work or amendments to this filing must be reviewed and approved separately. The applicant is hereby put on notice that performing or maintaining any work not explicitly authorized by this permit may make the applicant liable for criminal and/or civil penalties, including imprisonment and fine. This letter constitutes the permit; a copy must be prominently displayed at the site while work is in progress. Please direct inquiries to John Graham.

Meenakshi Srinivasan
Chair

PLEASE NOTE: PERFORATED DRAWINGS AND A COPY OF THIS PERMIT HAVE BEEN SENT TO:

George Boyle, George Boyle, Architects

cc: George Boyle Architects

Sources

Bent, E.S., "Red Tape Entangles 2 Rescuing House," The New York Times, 2 June 1968, R1.

Bliven, Jr., Bruce, "Child's Best Seller," LIFE, 2 December 1946.

Cassidy, Joe, "Farmhouse Trundles Downtown," The Daily News, 6 March 1967.

"Cobble Court in the News," The Dolphin, Nurses House, Inc. newsletter, undated.

"Ennis, Thomas W., "A Bit of Old City Comes to Light," The New York Times, 20 February 1966.

**Glass, Thomas, "Lost for One Hundred Years," New York Chronicle, Spring 2001.

Green, Penelope, "From Another Time and Place," The New York Times, 30 October 2008.

"Little house, Bit City," by Ryan Robbins, This Old House Magazine, c. 2001.

Maas, Jan A., "After being moved, old farm house is alive and well in the West Village," The Daily News, 7 December 1969.

Weinraub, Bernard, "5-Mile Trip Along Street Costs the Owners \$6,500," The New York Times, 6 March 1967.

**Thomas Glass is the great-great-grandson of William Glass, who bought Cobble Court in 1868 when it was located on York Avenue.