



THE ADVOCATE FOR NEW YORK CITY'S HISTORIC NEIGHBORHOODS

Date: January 14th, 2026

Lisa Kersavage, Executive Director

New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission

253 Broadway, 11th Floor

New York, NY 10007

Dr. Margaret Herman, Director of Research,

New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission

253 Broadway, 11th Floor

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Dear Ms Kersavage and Dr. Herman,

HDC, alongside concerned community members, requests that the Landmarks Preservation Commission evaluate the property located at 158 South Oxford Street, Brooklyn, for potential designation as an individual landmark and/or its eligibility for the inclusion within a historic district.

158 South Oxford Street, located in the Fort Greene area of Brooklyn, is situated within a neighborhood recognized for its rich architectural fabric, cohesive streetscapes, and historical associations with the early development of residential Brooklyn in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The property contributes to this context through its scale, materials, and design and remains largely intact to this day.

Given increasing development pressures in the neighborhood, an evaluation by the Commission would help determine whether this property warrants formal recognition and protection under the Landmarks Law.

Designation would ensure that future alterations consider the building's historic character, as well as its role as a longstanding presence in the Fort Greene neighborhood.

This Request for Evaluation contains a brief description of the building's occupancy history and architectural significance. We submit this statement of significance as part of the RFE.

Building History

South Oxford Street is believed to have been part of the Nicholas Cowenhoven farmstead, according to land conveyance records. In the 1850s, South Oxford Street became part of what was known as "The Hill," a prosperous neighborhood of brownstones and mansions with street names referencing places in Westminster, England. South Oxford Street was named after Oxford Street and Oxford Circus in London, which were characterized by terraced housing, mansions, and commercial buildings.

158 South Oxford Street was believed to have been built around 1860 by an unknown architect as a private residence with a parlor floor and two upper stories. Nearby, 164 South Oxford Street was owned by lawyer and real estate developer Augustus Knowlton. Knowlton served as Commissioner of Deeds in 1854 and resigned from the position in 1860, according to a *Brooklyn Eagle* report on a Common Council meeting¹. He bought and sold several other lots on this block, consistent with broader trends in speculative housing development for upper-middle-class families. 158 South Oxford Street may have been constructed for similar reasons.

The earliest known record of residency dates to 1867, when an advertisement in the *Brooklyn Eagle* offered a room for rent, describing the house as a "healthy and delightful situation where the comforts of a home may be enjoyed." The first noted occupant was an elderly gentleman named William N. Seymour, who was distantly related to Nicholas Cowenhoven². Following a series of family tragedies, portions of 158 South Oxford Street were made available for rent to single gentlemen and small families during the 1870s. Advertisements for the property emphasized its proximity to the well-known Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church, as well as access to public transportation.

By 1873, William's sister, Ella, and her husband, Abram Odell, moved into the house and became active members of the community. The Odells hosted multiple benefit events at the home in support of a local nursery and orphanage.

The next owner of the house was Henry Maddock, an English immigrant who sought to establish a pottery business in the area. His descendants inhabited the house until the 1950s. Records indicate that numerous

¹<https://d1e1jt2fj4r8r.cloudfront.net/bfc1fe0c-d623-4ffe-82f4-d40095018eaf/kNIb0eCCz/164%20South%20Oxford%20Street%20-%20A%20Brief%20History.pdf>

² <https://sites.rootsweb.com/~conover/connet/connet-o/p2954.htm#i295360>

influential figures—including William A. Marshall, president of the Home Life Insurance Company—rented rooms at 158 South Oxford Street during the colder months. By 1950, the building became the Louis Ceraso & Sons funeral home, a use that capitalized on the many churches in the surrounding area.

During this period, an article in the *World-Telegram* described South Oxford Street as “squalid.” As middle-class residents left Fort Greene for the suburbs, the neighborhood experienced decline and disrepair. However, due to sustained community efforts and the influence of the arts community centered around the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Fort Greene rebounded and remains a vibrant neighborhood today. Since 1996, 158 South Oxford Street has been inhabited by artists and has been described as an “incredibly gorgeous mini mansion” and a “fairy-tale country home.”

Part of Oxford Street has been designated as a part of the Fort Greene Historic District in 1978 and members of the community have been working to extend the historic district to include the whole street, to preserve the existing historical buildings and the history within them.

Architectural Style

158 South Oxford Street is one of the last freestanding 19th Century wooden mansions in Brooklyn. Its architecture is inline with the development of Brooklyn’s middle class residential neighborhoods in the historic period of 1855-1880. Though the house is in a distinctly Italianate style, the Gothic trimmed porch, symmetrical double windows and vibrant yellow color makes it stand out in a neighborhood known for its handsome brownstones.

The Italianate style, much like the street naming conventions in Fort Greene, was influenced by architectural traditions in England. Houses of this style were often two or three stories in height and featured modest ornamentation, including bracketed cornices. At the time of the building’s construction, the Italianate villa style was popularized by Andrew Jackson Downing through publications such as *Cottage Residences* (1842) and *The Architecture of Country Houses* (1850), which provided templates for suburban cottages and villas on land that had only recently been farmland.

The house is characterized by a rectilinear facade composition with regularly spaced window openings in vertical bays, reinforcing a sense of order and farmhouse style that aligns with the landscape around it. The window openings have molded lintels and pronounced surrounds which provide a sense of depth and complements the projecting cornice. On the side, the tall, narrow windows emphasize a verticality, with the top middle window rounded in the traditional Italianate style.

The building has remained in relatively good condition over the years and has continued its long-standing pattern of renting individual floors. It appears stable and clearly legible as a freestanding residence. Character-defining features—including window openings, masonry elements, and ornamental details—appear

to have been minimally altered. Although the accompanying carriage house was nearly demolished in 2007, it survives, and no such demolition has occurred.

Conclusion

In an article published by Brooklyn historian Suzanne Spellman, she wrote about 158 South Oxford Street by stating, “there are only a handful of these houses left, and very few in such good shape. Let’s protect them now, rather than when the ‘dozers are rumbling up the street.”³

158 South Oxford Street is not only a vibrant and verdant building but also one with a well-documented history of homeownership and stewardship. Many aspects of its history parallel those of the Fort Greene Historic District, from speculative real estate development to community revitalization through the arts. The house is an exceptional example of vernacular Italianate architecture that has endured for more than a century and deserves recognition and preservation as an important example of Brooklyn’s residential and social history.

Warm Regards,



Frampton Tolbert
Executive Director

³ <https://www.brownstoner.com/architecture/building-of-the-140/>

Photographs



Front Facade of 158 South Oxford Street (Source HDC)



1940's Tax Photo (Source: Municipal Archives)



Details of the side windows, cornice and bay (Source: Brownstoner)



Back of the house showing window configuration and back porch (Source: Corcoran)