



THE ADVOCATE FOR NEW YORK CITY'S HISTORIC NEIGHBORHOODS

May 1, 2025

Sarah Carroll, Chair
Landmarks Preservation Commission
1 Centre Street, 9th Floor
New York, NY 10007

Re: Request for Evaluation of the Havemeyer/Huntington Mansion at 2780 Schurz Avenue, Bronx, as an Individual Landmark



Summary

The Havemeyer/Huntington Mansion, home to Preston High School since 1947, is a rare, surviving 19th-century waterfront estate in Throggs Neck. Built in the 1840s and later expanded in the French Second Empire style, the mansion is deeply connected to two nationally significant families: Frederick C. Havemeyer Jr., a sugar industry magnate, and Collis P. Huntington, a railroad tycoon. For nearly 80 years, it has also served the Bronx as a

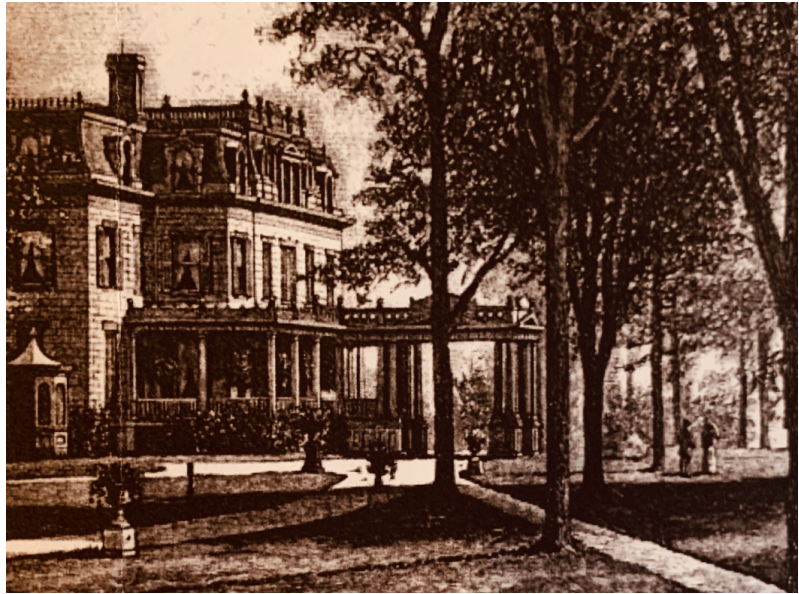
Catholic girls' high school, tying generations of students to its history. As the school faces closure in 2025, the building's future is uncertain, making preservation efforts both urgent and essential. Importantly, this may be the only surviving 19th-century waterfront mansion in the South Bronx, or at the very least, among the last few, making its architectural and historic value even more exceptional.

Initial Development

Constructed around 1840 as a summer villa called *Beau Rivage*, the mansion was the residence of Frederick C. Havemeyer Jr., a leader in the sugar refining industry. Originally a modest brick villa, the home was expanded after the Civil War into a permanent residence, taking advantage of its East River frontage and extensive grounds, complete with boathouses and stables. It reflected the 19th-century pattern of elite New Yorkers building rural retreats in what was then Westchester County.

Architect

While the original architect remains unknown, the mansion evolved over time into a grand Second Empire estate. Its most striking features, mansard roofs with polychromatic slate, dormer windows, and ornate iron cresting, were added during the 1870s, reflecting popular architectural trends of the era. Later expansions introduced Italianate elements, such as bracketed cornices and towered wings, blending elegance with scale. The building's stuccoed masonry core remains intact beneath mid-20th-century aluminum siding.



Notable History/People/Features

Following Havemeyer's ownership, the estate was purchased in 1884 by Collis P. Huntington and his wife Arabella. Renamed Homestead, it became a Gilded Age retreat complete with formal gardens, a waterfront boathouse, and opulent interiors. Arabella Huntington, one of the wealthiest women in the country and a notable patron of the arts, brought national significance to the estate. She later helped build the renowned Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens in California and supported major cultural institutions across the country. Her son, Archer Milton Huntington, who also spent time at the estate, went on to found the Hispanic Society of America in New York, further linking the property to national philanthropic and cultural legacies.

The Havemeyer family also left a deep imprint on American economic and civic life. Frederick C. Havemeyer Jr., the estate's original owner, was part of the dynasty behind the American Sugar Refining Company, known as

the "Sugar Trust," which at its height controlled nearly all sugar production in the U.S. The family's influence extended to public office, William Frederick Havemeyer, a cousin, served three terms as Mayor of New York City, championing municipal reform and helping to establish institutions like the NYPD. The mansion's connection to these figures ties it directly to the story of industrial expansion and governance in 19th-century New York.



In 1927, the Religious of the Divine Compassion converted the estate into a convent and school. By 1947, the mansion had become home to Preston High School, an all-girls Catholic high school. Housed in the historic structure, Preston has educated generations of Bronx women, becoming one of the city's key institutions for young women's leadership and academic preparation. For years, 100% of its graduates attended college. The mansion's riverfront porch has hosted countless graduations and ceremonies, reinforcing the deep emotional and cultural ties between the community and the building. Preston's legacy reflects broader mid-20th-century trends in Catholic girls' education across New York City, when religious orders built schools that offered women rigorous academic and spiritual preparation at a time when other opportunities were limited. Its alumnae network and legacy speak to the building's importance not only as a historic structure but also as a symbol of women's advancement in the Bronx.

Today

Today, the mansion remains a vital part of the Preston High School campus. We are glad that a concerted effort by alumnae, community members, non-profit organizations and elected officials have recently secured Preston's future in this location for at least 25 years. Landmarking this important structure would be a meaningful part of that effort, helping to secure the building's future for generations to come.

Conclusion

The Havemeyer/Huntington Mansion represents a vital chapter in New York City's history, from the industrial age to the Gilded Age and into the 20th-century era of educational and community service. Architecturally, it is one of the few remaining estate homes in the Bronx, showcasing the Second Empire style with a distinctive silhouette. Culturally, it embodies the legacy of two nationally significant families and generations of Bronx women educated within its walls. Individual Landmark designation would preserve this important structure and the rich layers of history it represents.

