

Harper House,  
New York City.

New York Co.

HABS No. 4-7

HABS  
NY,  
31-NEYO,  
12-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

District No. 4  
Southern New York State

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Wm. Dewey Foster, District Officer,  
25 West 45th Street, New York City.

HARPER HOUSE  
(THE JAMES HARPER RESIDENCE)  
No. 4 Gramercy Park, New York City

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History and Ground Title

This house is known by the name of its first owner and occupant, under whose direction it was constructed in 1846-7. Members of his family lived there throughout the next 75 years. When built, it stood in an outlying part of the city, previously undeveloped, on the west side of the newly laid-out Gramercy Park which had been planned, as St. John's Park was, to be the center of a local community of handsome and exclusive city homes.

The inception of title was unusual. It arose from a speculative investment in land made by Samuel B. Ruggles in 1831, when he purchased a part of James Duane's large farm which lay along the Bowery Road. After acquiring an area of about 50 acres from various Duane heirs, Ruggles levelled the uplands and filled in the marshes, squared the lines to conform to the Randel Survey of proposed uptown streets, and laid it out into building lots along the south side of 20th Street and the north side of 21st Street in the long block between Third and Fourth Avenues. At the center of this block he reserved land for a park or square having additional lots facing its east and west sides, backed by other lots facing on the avenues. On December 17, 1831, he conveyed to five trustees and their successors "42 lots of land" by a conveyance which required that the trustees should "enclose not more than 420 feet of the length of this tract with an iron fence, having ornamental gateways, by May 1, 1833, and lay out the grounds with roads and paths and plant them with trees before May 1, 1834". This park, he said, "shall be maintained at the expense of the surrounding lots for their particular benefit". Named after

The James Harper Residence

Duane's farm, Gramercy, this park has been so maintained to this day.

See Stokes, Iconography of Manhattan Island, V: 1706, citing Liber Deeds 278, p. 528; also Valentine's Manual for 1856, p. 465; the 24th Ann. Rep., Am. Scenic & Hist. Pres. Soc. (1919), 98-103; and John B. Pine's The Story of Gramercy Park (1921).

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James Harper (of the old publishing firm of Harper & Bros.) had been Mayor in 1844-5, and bought his lot in 1846 from Norman White, its original purchaser, who had already begun to build the two houses that are still standing at Nos. 3 and 4. Completed in 1847, Mr. Harper occupied his new home until 1869. At his death in that year, title passed to his widow, and then to her daughter Elizabeth who finally sold the residence in 1923 to the present owner and occupant, Mr. Frederick C. Hodgdon.

Architectural Description

The most striking feature of this four-story-and-basement house is the splendid exterior first-floor balcony of ornamental cast iron porch with overhanging roof. It is undoubtedly the finest example remaining in New York of this type of work. Two lamp-standards placed on either side of the steps indicate that this was a Mayor's residence. The fence on either side of these, along the front of the lot, is in harmony with the fence and ornamental gates enclosing the Park.

The front of the house is red brick, with basement walls, steps, window heads and sills of brownstone. The windows have hinged wooden blinds painted green. All iron is painted black; and the two sets of outer doors are white.

There is an attractive entrance hall with wood stairs, but the most important artistic feature of the interior is the classic design of the high-ceilinged, beautifully proportioned living room and library with

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handsome pilasters, cornices and great mahogany doors.

The house is in excellent condition, and remains as originally designed except in the following particulars: The entrance vestibule and doorway probably date from the sixties or later. In the early nineties, Stanford White remodelled the dining room, using mahogany wall panelling. The alcove of this room was later partitioned off and used for service space. Mr. Hodgdon had modern improvements installed in the basement in 1923. The second story bed room was opened into the alcove at the rear by the removal of piers; and apartments on the third and fourth floors were formed, an inner stair was installed between the first and second floors, forming a duplex arrangement; and a small fourth floor stair was added. In 1932-3, kitchenettes and baths were added. (From field-notes supplied by the architects of the present survey).

Written, March 29, 1934, by

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*Reviewed 1936, H.C.F.*