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NYC Explosion Destroys 1880s Brownstone with Covert WWII Ties

Story by Kim A. O'Connell / July 13, 2006

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The mysterious blast that rocked New York City's Upper East Side this week destroyed a 19th-century building with a history of secrecy.

On July 10, a gas explosion leveled the four-story structure, injuring five pedestrians, ten firefighters, and a doctor who lived in the building. A police investigation is now examining whether a bitter divorce battle led the doctor, who later died from his injuries, to trigger the explosion in an attempted suicide.

Completed in 1882, the brownstone was designed by noted New York architect-builders L. D. Russell and J. B. Wray, according to Seri Worden, executive director of the Friends of the Upper East Side Historic Districts.

"The building was an intact 1880s brownstone, and there aren't too many of those left, because many of those houses were updated in the early 20th century," Worden says. "That particular brownstone had been minimally altered. It retained its stoop, cornice, and incised Neo-Grec detailing." The Neo-Grec style incorporated Greek and Roman details but was considered less rigid than standard Neoclassicism.

According to *The New York Times*, the house also served as a meeting place for a clandestine group of New Yorkers who shared gossip and gathered intelligence during World War II. Called "the Room," the group formed in 1917 and included such notable figures as book publisher Nelson Doubleday; real estate magnate Vincent Astor; Kermit Roosevelt, son of Theodore Roosevelt; and newspaper publisher and department store heir Marshall Field III, the *Times* reported.

The Room continued until it was superseded by more formal entities such as the Central Intelligence Agency after the war. In 1981, the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission included the building as a contributing historic resource in the Upper East Side Historic District.

The Friends group now plans to weigh in whenever a new structure is built on the site. "We will testify [before the landmarks commission] on whatever is built," Worden says, "and will work with the developers and architects to develop something that is appropriate for that historic district."

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The 1880s brownstone (at center) in the early 20th century, before it became a clandestine meeting place (New York City Municipal Archives)

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