

5. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE: Oliver Street—Alfred E. Smith Historic District
(Within the National Register Two Bridges Historic District)



From left: Nos. 29, 27, 25 (Smith residence) Oliver Street. (Partial view of nine brick row houses). Photo: Bruce Monroe

Executive Summary: The two-block area bordered by Oliver Street, Madison Street, and St. James Place, and bisected by James Street, merits Historic District designation for its compelling cultural significance, its architectural character, and its distinctive sense of place. This core of New York’s old 4th Ward was central in shaping the life and career of four-term Governor and Presidential candidate Alfred E. Smith (1873-1944). Smith’s immigrant roots, humble beginnings, and Catholic religion made him an unlikely success at the upper echelons of government. He has been called a unique figure with “no exact parallel in American history.” (NY Times Obituary) And Smith’s Progressive initiatives for New York would later inspire FDR’s New Deal. Still further, this area is noteworthy for the presence of early institutions that provide valuable insights into New York’s religious and educational history.

Architecturally, the blocks of this small triangular area include designated Individual Landmarks, as well as other highly distinctive buildings. The housing stock—built from ca. 1800-1902—showcases the evolution of accommodations for the growing immigrant population on the historic Lower East Side. The area’s intimate milieu, with low-scale structures and narrow streets and sidewalks, remains remarkably intact from the time Smith walked the neighborhood. The 29 residential and mixed-use buildings are dominated by 3-story structures, with two as low as 2 stories and only six reaching a maximum of 6 stories. The row of 3-story brick row houses on Oliver Street—including Smith’s National Register-designated former residence—is a particular stand-out. Given the government figures who once lived on that block, it became known as “Politicians Row.”

Alfred E. Smith and His Neighborhood:



Al Smith and family. c. 1920. 25 Oliver Street stoop. Photo: MCNY.

Al Smith was a second-generation New Yorker, born and bred in the 4th Ward, now roughly coinciding with the neighborhood called Two Bridges. His roots there were deep. He often recalled: “My mother, my father, my sister, my wife and five children were all born within blocks of each other.” His birth date of 1873 was significant. That began the period known as the Gilded Age, but Smith represented the “other half” of that story—he identified with tenements crowded with immigrants, not glittery mansions on 5th Avenue. Smith’s heritage was German and Italian on his father’s side and Irish on his mother’s, though he strongly identified with his Irish roots, particularly after his father died when he was 12.

For the first nine years of his life, Smith lived on the South Street waterfront, swimming with his friends in the East River and climbing on the ships docked there. He thoroughly enjoyed that childhood, even as his mother worried about the sailors, saloons, and brothels surrounding their building. Smith also had a front row seat to a momentous event in New York City history—the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge, which opened in 1883 when he was 9. He liked to say: “The Brooklyn Bridge and I grew up together.”

Smith’s neighbors represented not only the Irish Catholic community of his church and school, but also other nationalities, including a growing number of Italian and Eastern European Jewish arrivals. When he became a successful politician, he boasted that the 4th Ward had more nationalities than any other in the city and that people representing all of them came out to celebrate his election victories on Oliver Street, where he settled for 20 years, after many moves around the neighborhood.

Neighborhood Anchors:

Mariner’s Temple

Certain places Smith encountered during his everyday activities surely would have served as anchors for him and his neighbors. The Mariner’s Temple, an imposing Baptist church on Oliver Street, could hardly be ignored even though it was not Smith’s place of worship. Designated a New York City landmark, this handsome structure, in the Greek Revival style widely popular in the 1830s and 1840s, has sometimes been attributed to noted architect Minard Lafever. However, it is likely the design of Isaac Lucas, a builder and church member, working from images found in Lafever’s popular pattern books. Slender Ionic columns, Doric pilasters, and a bold pedimented entablature grace the austere yet elegant façade.

A Baptist congregation has been on this spot as far back as the 1790s, at a time when Oliver Street and surrounds would have been very different from the period when Al Smith lived there. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, single families occupied 2-story brick row houses along Oliver Street. Earlier



Mariner's Temple. 1842. Oliver Street. (Greek Revival). Photo: Bruce Monroe

church buildings on this site were variously called the Oliver Street Baptist Church and the Oliver Street Meeting house and served a neighborhood of a certain respectability, filled with fairly prosperous families of middle- and upper-class merchants, artisans and maritime tradesmen. But in the 1840s the congregation changed its name and direction, with a mission focusing on seamen docked at the East River. It was now the Mariner's Temple. Those goals later expanded to include the immigrants who arrived as the 19th century unfolded. The housing stock on Oliver Street also changed accordingly, to accommodate this

rapidly growing population. Formerly 2-story, single family houses were raised to three stories, usually for a separate family on each floor, or for boarding houses.

First Shearith Israel Cemetery



First Shearith Israel Cemetery. 1683. St. James Place. Photo: Wikipedia

Smith would have daily encountered another spot now designated as a New York City landmark. His school was just down the block from the First Shearith Israel Cemetery, established by the first Jewish congregation in New Amsterdam, which was founded in 1654. The cemetery opened in 1683 when the population of New York was concentrated further south, at the tip of Manhattan. Among those buried there are Jewish Revolutionary War soldiers who are celebrated each Memorial Day. The Shearith Israel congregation thrives today on the Upper West Side.

Originally, the cemetery was much larger. It was in 1855 that the street it faces today—St. James Place—was cut through on a diagonal, decreasing the graveyard’s size and requiring bodies to be reinterred elsewhere. That street was originally called “New Bowery” since it extended the well-known Bowery thoroughfare (north of Chatham Square), south to Pearl Street. For Smith, that street was always “New Bowery” as the name change occurred only in the late 1940s. Then, in 1999, the street got an honorific title as well—a tribute to Walter Jonas Judah. Born in 1778, Judah was the first Jewish student admitted to the medical school of King’s College, later Columbia University. He died of yellow fever at 22 years old while tending to others suffering from the disease. He is buried in the First Shearith Israel Cemetery.

Another difference, today, from Smith’s experience of this block would have been the Elevated trains rumbling along New Bowery as they approached Chatham Square, a major transportation hub with a double-decker station serving the 3rd Avenue and 2nd Avenue lines. The sights, sounds, and dirt of the El must have dominated the area and are difficult to imagine in this very open location today. The last of the elevated tracks here were demolished in 1955, long past Smith’s time in the neighborhood. A new 2nd Avenue subway was promised to take their place.

St. James Roman Catholic Church



*St. James Roman Catholic Church. 1836. James Street. (Greek Revival).
Photo: Bruce Monroe*

A second Greek Revival-style religious institution, and Individual Landmark, in the proposed Historic District is St. James Roman Catholic Church on James Street, a block away from the Mariner’s Temple. While also austere in its overall presence, this building is more detailed and incorporates Doric columns rather than the Ionic columns of the Mariner’s Temple.

Like the Mariner’s Temple, St. James Church was among New York City’s earliest designated landmarks and it, too, was attributed to architect Minard Lefever. But, again, the design most likely came from one of the Lefever’s pattern books. Lefever was of Huguenot background and would have been an unlikely choice to design a Roman Catholic Church.

Just after it opened in 1836, St. James was the founding place of the Ancient

Order of the Hibernians, the foremost Irish fraternal organization. This was one of many societies established to bolster the immigrant Irish community and help protect it against widespread and virulent anti-Irish prejudice, including violent attacks on churches. The street sign for James Street (named for James DeLancey [1703-1760]) includes an honorific designation to the Ancient Order.



Al Smith as an altar boy at St. James Church (second row, center, in front of the priest). c. 1883. Photo: MCNY

St. James Church was more than a visual anchor for Smith as he traversed the neighborhood; it was central to his life and career, as it was for all in its very large parish. Smith's relationship to St. James was a family affair. His father was baptized there and met his wife, Smith's mother, there. His parents would marry at St. James in 1872, a year before his birth.

Smith often cited the wide-ranging influence of the Church and its priests during his childhood years when he served as an altar boy and participated in the various clubs they

offered. St. James was not simply a place for religious services—it was a community center that gave his family, and his Catholic neighbors, a sense of belonging.



Al Smith (left) as Annie Oakley in a production of Buffalo Bill with the St. James Players. Photo: MCNY

As a young man in his late teens and twenties, Smith was most involved with the St. James Players, a dramatic society that mounted productions to raise funds for church initiatives. He became something of a star and even considered becoming a professional actor. He credited his stage performances with giving him a new sense of confidence. And, later, when he ran for office, he was already well-known in the neighborhood because of his "celebrity" as an actor.

The empty lot beside the Church once held an affiliated girl's orphanage. Today, children from Transfiguration School (formerly St. James School), across the street, play there and make use of the Church basement for activities. A school instructor gave this researcher a tour of the basement, pointing out the stage where plays were produced in Smith's day. He noted, however, that the upper portions of the Church are quite damaged. At one point, the Ancient Order of the Hibernians helped repair

the roof, but religious services have not been held at St. James since 2014. Unsafe conditions may be a factor but, more importantly, the Catholic Diocese has gone through a period of consolidation. St. James merged with nearby St. Joseph's, and then both merged into Transfiguration Church on Mott Street, which is now the overall administrator of the parishes.

Former St. James Church School (now Transfiguration School)

The former St. James Church School on the corner of James Street and St. James Place is a distinctive building of architectural excellence and also a place of historical importance for the Roman Catholic immigrant community. A triangular-shaped building across the street from St. James Church, the school has one façade on James Street and the other on St. James Place (formerly New Bowery). Al Smith and his five children all attended classes here. His mother went to the parish school when it was in a different location, before this building opened in 1868.

In the early 19th century, the Catholic Church in New York determined that their youth should not be educated in the city's available schools because of the Protestant influence there, with Bible readings, hymns, and prayers. By mid-century, Bishop (then Archbishop) John "Dagger" Hughes, had led the way in establishing what was a parallel parochial school system. Smith and his family were educated through that system at St. James School, which was considered among the best, as well as among the largest in the city.

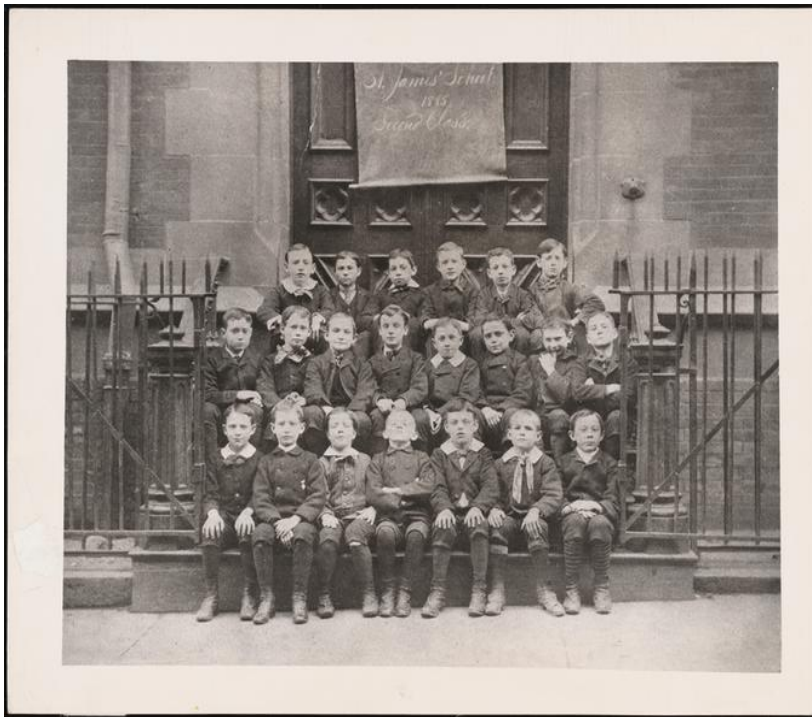


*Former St. James School (now Transfiguration School). 1868. Corner of James Street and St. James Place. (Eclectic).
Photos: Bruce Monroe*



Former St. James School (now Transfiguration School). 1868. Details. Photos: Bruce Monroe

Soon after it opened, the school building was commended for the quality of its architecture. The church leadership called it, “a noble building of the most modern style, which throws in the shade some of the Public School buildings that cost the city millions. It is perfect in all its arrangements.” With a polychrome effect created by red brick and contrasting light stone trim, the school makes an immediate impression in its highly visible, corner location. It displays a combination of styles: the French Second Empire is represented by a mansard roof, Gothic Revival is suggested in pointed arches topping the windows, and a Classical influence is seen in the projecting cornice. Adding to its merit is its “flat-iron” shape, a result of the lot created when New Bowery was cut through at a diagonal.



Al Smith (first row, second from left) and his class at St. James School. 1884. Photo: MCNY

An 1884 photograph shows Al Smith, at age 11, sitting with his class on the steps of St. James School. (The spiked fence remains today.) Smith is seated in the first row, second from the left. On his jacket he sports a pin won in a city-wide, parochial school elocution contest. He was a gifted and engaging speaker even from a very young age. Later he claimed that, although he received many other medals, “none meant more than this one.” It must have held particular value since it stayed in the family and was given to the Collection of the Museum of the City of New York.

Smith left the St. James School at the age of 14, just before his 8th

grade graduation, ending his formal education. His father had died when he was 12 and while his mother made every effort to support the family and keep him in school, ultimately, she needed his help. He took various jobs, including newsboy and messenger, but most often reminisced about the one he held on the waterfront, at the nearby Fulton Fish Market. With a grueling pace from 3 a.m. to 4 p.m., the job brought the Smith family a relatively good income and as much fish as they could eat. Much later, during a conversation with colleagues in the State Assembly, the talk turned to alma maters. Smith's fellow Assembly Members spoke about Harvard, Yale, Cornell, and the U. of Michigan. Smith joined in by saying he was an "F.F.M." man himself—paying tribute to the unconventional education he received at the Fulton Fish Market.

Oliver Street:

The street in the old 4th Ward most closely associated with Al Smith, is Oliver Street (named for Oliver DeLancey [1718-1785], brother of James Delancey). Only one block long today, Oliver Street once extended for two more blocks, right to the waterfront and not far from Smith's birthplace on South Street. In fact, his father was born on the block of Oliver Street closest to the river.

The longer Oliver Street was what Smith knew. Once, when accused of trying to amass too much power in state government, he responded with a quip, acknowledging that, indeed, he was "the King"... "the King of Oliver Street!" He lived there in three different locations, for more than 20 years.



Before marrying, Smith, his mother and his sister rented an apartment in a small building on the southwest corner of Oliver Street and Madison Street. They were forced to move when it was announced that their building, along with several others of the same size—on lots similar to those still lining Oliver Street—would be torn down to build the large, 6-story "New Law" tenement that is seen today at 31-33 Oliver Street (51-53 Madison Street). (This building will be discussed in detail later.)

*Nos.31-33 Oliver Street (Nos. 51-53 Madison Street). 1902.
Photo: Google Street View*

After Smith was married in 1900, he lived in two locations further east on Madison Street and eventually moved with his family to 28 Oliver Street, occupying the third-floor apartment where his fourth child was born. That building, and others on the half block between P.S. 1 and Madison Street, and on the block along Madison Street to Catherine Street (seen below), were torn down in 1950 to build the current playground. But it remains significant that Smith resided in yet another Oliver Street address.



SE corner, Oliver and Madison Sts. 1948. Demolished 1950. 28 Oliver-2nd building after P.S. 1 (left). Downtown Tammany Club (stepped, gable-front roof)-3rd building on Madison St. (right). Photo: Pratt: LaGuardia-Wagner Archive

No. 25 Oliver Street (National Historic Landmark)

In 1909, when the quarters at 28 Oliver Street became too crowded for the growing family, the Smiths moved across the street to 25 Oliver Street, a building owned by St. James Church. They occupied the basement, first and second floors, with the Church maintaining the 3rd floor. Eventually the Smiths occupied the third floor, as well. Smith's fifth child was born at No. 25. The family would lease that house through Smith's time as Governor but when he held that office the family lived in the Governor's Mansion in Albany. (He was elected to four two-year terms: 1919-1920; 1923-28.) According to Smith's eldest daughter, the Church sold No. 25 in 1926 and put the Smith's belongings in storage. Other documentation says the Church maintained ownership longer than that.

No. 25 Oliver Street, and the other brick row houses on the west side of the street, were built in the early 19th century as single-family homes of two stories, most likely with an additional half-floor in the front-gabled roof area, with dormer windows. Indications that those buildings were raised to three stories can be seen in brickwork changes on their facades. Flemish bond was used on the first two floors, and stretcher bond (or running bond) on the third floor.



Smith's residence was recognized as a National Historic Landmark in 1973; a plaque adorns the first-floor façade. The building also merits designation as a New York City Individual Landmark for its connection to one of city's most distinguished citizens, and with its additional significance as an example of how housing evolved in immigrant neighborhoods.

The house has broader impact when seen in the context of the eight other 3-story brick row houses lining the block, an intact group that creates a rare and notable streetscape on the Lower East Side. All are Federal-era buildings later raised to 3 stories. The cornices were added as part of the enlargement process.

No. 25 Oliver Street. Early 19th Century. Building raised c. 1860s-80s. (Federal/Greek Revival/Italianate). Photo: Bruce Monroe



Left to Right: Nos. 29-13 Oliver Street. Early 19th c. Buildings raised c. 1860s-1880s. Photo: Bruce Monroe

No. 23 Oliver Street



Next door to where the Smiths lived, was the St. James Church Rectory. A sign remains on the building today, but the house is no longer a residence for priests. During the Smiths years in the neighborhood, as his eldest daughter has pointed out, having the priests living right on the block deeply enmeshed them in the lives of all their neighbors.

No. 25 Oliver Street (left) and No. 23 Oliver Street (right). (Federal/Greek Revival/Italianate). Photo: Deborah Wye



No. 23 Oliver Street with Saint James Rectory sign. 2022. Photo: Deborah Wye

No. 15 Oliver Street



Among the brick houses on Oliver Street, No. 15 stands out with its elaborate green, pedimented cornice, lintels, and door surround. This was once the home of “Big Tom” Foley, a neighborhood saloon keeper and downtown Tammany Hall leader who was Al Smith’s political mentor. (He is also the namesake of Foley Square.) Foley knew Smith from the time he was a boy and Smith once said that, next to his mother, “Tom Foley was the best friend I had.” Not only were Foley and Smith neighbors on Oliver Street, for a time other government officials also lived on the block, which became known as ‘Politician’s Row.’

No. 15 Oliver Street. Early 19th c. Building raised c. 1860s-1880s. (Federal/Queen Anne). Photo: Bruce Monroe



Downtown Tammany Hall Clubhouse. 59 Madison St. Demolished 1950 for current playground. Photo: NYPL

It is important to recall that close by and just around the corner of Oliver Street, was the now-demolished, stepped-gabled front, Downtown Tammany Hall Clubhouse. It stood on the north side of Madison Street for some fifty years—a very convenient spot for Smith as he rose in politics. (A playground now fills that block of Madison Street.) Later, as a member of the State Assembly, Smith kept an office in the building and spent many evenings there meeting with constituents. The Clubhouse functioned as a quasi-community center for the neighborhood, where residents came for advice, job referrals, charitable aid, and social activities. Like the church, the Clubhouse was an anchor for those who lived in the 4th Ward. In return for services, loyalty was expected on election day.

“Tammany Hall” conjures up the worst connotations in terms of political machines and corruption. To some, Boss Tweed is synonymous with the organization, overall.

But in the period in which Smith rose up in politics, Bosses like “Honest” John Kelly and later, “Silent Charlie” Murphy—of what became the Irish leadership of Tammany Hall—pursued a reform agenda and a range of Progressive initiatives that benefitted the working class in ethnic neighborhoods. Tammany Hall recognized where the mass of voters lived. Smith never turned his back on these political roots and his name was never associated with corruption.

No. 9 and No. 11 Oliver Street



No.11 (left) and No. 9 (right) Oliver Street. Pre-1879. (Italianate). Photo: Deborah Wye

Completing the row of buildings on the west side of Oliver Street, at the northern end, are three that are larger in scale than the dominant row of 3-story brick buildings. They demonstrate further aspects of housing evolution in New York.

All three appear to date from before the 1879 Tenement Law, as evidenced by their plan configurations, which show no narrow shaft between them. Nos. 9 and 11 are rather handsome, matching, 4-story structures that read as one building. The brick facades are faced with a brownstone veneer on the first floors. And the height of these buildings, their entrances, arched windows on the fifth floor, and projecting cornices, all provide for a certain singularity on the block.

No. 1 Oliver Street.

The building that completes the west side of Oliver Street also has an address of 59-63 St. James Place, as one of its facades faces that street. Its lot is triangular, like that of St. James School, since both were created from the diagonal cutting through of New Bowery. The building’s shape has the resultant “flat-iron” form.

At five stories, No. 1 Oliver Street is the tallest structure on the west side of the block. At one point, it is said to have functioned as a hotel. It also housed an Italian olive oil importer and grocer on the first



floor, with tenement apartments above. The building probably dates to the mid-19th century, before the Tenement Law of 1879, like the neighboring buildings at Nos. 9 and 11. It was modified in 1912 by Joseph Petzel. With a distinctive shape, façades of brick and contrasting brownstone quoins, and a projecting cornice, No. 1 provides a handsome entry to Oliver Street.

No. 1 Oliver Street. (Nos. 59-63 St. James Place), c. Mid-19th c.; modified 1912. (Classical Revival/Vernacular). Photo: Bruce Monroe



No. 2 Oliver Street. 1821. Building raised in 1850. Builder: Robert Dodge. (Federal/Greek Revival). Photo: Bruce Monroe

No. 2 Oliver Street (Formerly calendared by LPC)

On the east side of the block, at No. 2 Oliver Street, is a brick building of the same period and style as those in the row on the west side. This house has been well documented and was formerly calendared by LPC for consideration as an Individual Landmark, along with other Federal buildings throughout Manhattan. It was built in 1821 as a single-family dwelling by Robert Dodge, who lived nearby. A third floor was added in 1850 and the original lintels were replicated for the new windows.

Dodge leased the house to James O'Donnell, who was a trained architect when there were few professionals in the field in America. Most houses at that time were designed and constructed by builders, such as carpenters and masons. Dodge was called a "painter and glazier." At one point the house served as a convent for the Sisters of St. Margaret of the Episcopal church, which was associated with Trinity Church and did missionary work on the Lower East Side. No. 2 Oliver Street provides an important 19th century context for the landmarked Mariner's Temple next door.

P.S. 1—Alfred E. Smith School



Corner street sign engraved on P.S. 1-Alfred E. Smith School. Photo: Bruce Monroe

P.S. 1—Alfred E. Smith School, the remaining building on Oliver Street, fills the southeast corner at Henry Street. Opened in 1899, it was designed by celebrated architect, C.B.J. Snyder, the city's Superintendent of School Buildings from 1891-1922. Snyder designed more than 400 schools and additions, meeting the needs of the huge influx of immigrant children who arrived in New York during those years. The chateau-like P.S. 1 is an architectural gem and serves as a civic monument for the neighborhood, an effect Snyder sought for his educational institutions. Its roofline is punctuated by Dutch-inspired gablettes, and its large windows bring in the light and air that Snyder deemed essential.



P.S. 1. Alfred E. Smith School. 1899. Corner of Oliver and Henry Streets. Architect: C.B.J. Snyder. (Chateausque). Photo: Bruce Monroe

Contributing to its significance is the fact that P.S. 1 has have been linked to the early history of New York City's public schools. According to some sources, its origins may trace back to the New York Free School Society, founded in 1805, an organization in which Henry Rutgers was involved. (Henry Street bears his first name.)

When P. S. 1 opened, Al Smith had finished his formal education, so he did not attend this school. Also, his parents believed firmly in a Catholic education and would not have sent him to a public school, in any case. But

Smith must have been struck by this imposing building as he passed it daily. In addition, it served as his voting place. In 1918, he voted at P.S. 1 during his first run for the Governorship. He was joined by his wife, Catherine Smith, who was voting for the first time in that election, since women's suffrage had just become law in New York State.



Al Smith and Catherine Smith voting at P.S. 1 in November 1918 election. Photo: MCNY

The Evolution of New York Housing:

The proposed Historic District is especially noteworthy for the way its residential buildings demonstrate important steps in the evolution of housing in New York City during the 19th century and into the 20th. In this period, the Lower East Side's population density grew to historic levels as successive waves of immigrants filled the neighborhood. Additional housing was in dire need. Both scrupulous and unscrupulous developers and landlords stepped in, with the city eventually establishing regulatory laws to keep them in check and to protect tenants. The area includes examples of pre-Law, Old Law (dumbbell), and New Law tenements. Smith would have been familiar with all the buildings in this discussion.

The two blocks of Madison Street under consideration, here, include buildings from c. 1800 to 1902 and show how changing housing needs were met.



No. 25 Madison Street. (Nos. 27-29 St. James Place). Mid-19th c. (Italianate). Photo: Bruce Monroe

No. 25 Madison Street (Nos. 27-29 St. James Place)

The building at 25 Madison has one façade facing St. James Place and is the third of the “flat-iron”-shaped buildings in the proposed Historic District resulting from cutting through New Bowery. A mixed-use, “pre-Law”

tenement from the mid-19th century, 25 Madison Street has a store on the ground floor and apartments above. Stone lintels punctuating the red brick façade, a prominent bracketed cornice, and the distinctive “flat-iron” shape, all contribute to the building’s dynamic impact at the corner.

Similar to the previously discussed tenement buildings at Nos. 1, 9 and 11 Oliver Street, No. 25 Madison was built before the introduction of any housing regulations. Purpose-built, multi-family dwellings like this one would become the norm in immigrant neighborhoods, and regulatory laws would gradually be enacted. For example, in 1867, fire escapes were mandated, and additional rules went into effect in 1879 and 1901.

39-45 Madison Street

The four identical buildings flush against each other at 39-45 Madison Street appear as one large structure, except for the presence of individual cornices. They date from c.1850, also before



Nos. 39-45 Madison Street. c. 1850. (St. James Church to left.) (Classical Revival). Photo: Bruce Monroe

any tenement laws were in effect. The well-maintained facades are spare but include stone lintels, as well as decorative panels—outlined vertical rectangles in white stone—at the center of each building that create focal points.

With 1850 as their approximate date of construction, these buildings are from a period that witnessed a dramatic rise in immigration to New York and the Lower East Side. The Great Famine in Ireland led to a massive influx of Irish immigrants to New York neighborhoods, among them the 4th Ward and the nearby 6th Ward, home of the notorious Five Points. In addition, political revolution and upheaval on the European continent brought many German immigrants to New York. While some settled in this neighborhood and in others, the largest concentration was found further east and north, in a Lower East Side neighborhood that became known as *Kleindeutschland* (Little Germany).



Nos. 45-47 Madison Street. Late 18th/ early 19th century. (Federal).
Photo: Bruce Monroe

Nos. 47-49 Madison Street

The next building on this block of Madison Street, numbered 47-49, is a unique example in the proposed Historic District, of a Federal-style building that retains typical elements of the single-family houses once dominating the neighborhood. While the first floor has been altered, the second floor, side-gabled roof, and dormer windows remind us of that early period. At that time, the first floor may have been used as a workshop or a store for the family living above.

When the house was built, before the era of mass immigration, this area was populated with families of Native-born New Yorkers of certain financial means. Comparable houses filled the west side

of Oliver Street, where Al Smith and his family eventually lived in a brick Federal-era house raised to 3-stories. Nos. 47-49 Madison Street allows one to imagine how Oliver Street once looked.

This building was threatened with demolition within the last year when plans were announced for a contemporary structure to replace it. Late in April 2022, those plans were dropped and the fate of the building is now unknown. There were two such Federal-style buildings in the neighborhood in 2003, at the time of the National Register of Historic Places Inventory for the Two Bridges Historic District. The other one, at 24 Henry Street, has since been demolished, leaving 45-47 Madison as the only example remaining in the vicinity.

Nos. 51-53 Madison Street (Nos. 31-33 Oliver Street)

The final building on this block, from 1902 and occupying the corner of Madison Street and Oliver Street, conforms to new housing rules enacted in 1901 and is referred to as a “New Law Tenement.”



Nos. 51-53 Madison Street (Nos. 31-33 Oliver Street). 1902. Architect: Bernstein & Bernstein. (Queen Anne). Photo: Deborah Wye

As noted earlier, Smith lived on this corner with his mother and sister in the 1890s, in a small building of a lot size similar to those still on the west side of Oliver Street. That building, and several others like it, were torn down to make room for this tenement.

Smith later remarked that he was often forced to move to new locations as large tenements with small apartments replaced the older buildings where he lived. But he preferred those earlier buildings, saying: “I always liked large rooms and, therefore, always seemed to choose old houses soon to be marked for destruction. As a result, no two of my children were born in the same house.”

Nos. 51-53 Madison Street was designed by Bernstein & Bernstein, a prominent architectural firm during an era when architects who practiced primarily in affluent neighborhoods were beginning to work in tenement districts. Some of

this activity was in response to a real estate boom at the end of the 19th century.

The façade here displays a creative use of brickwork, resulting in a multi-faceted, textured effect. Such decorative elements were not seen on the earlier, mid-19th century tenement buildings at 25 Madison Street and at 39-45 Madison Street. With a relatively low-cost technique, the architect responded to current market demand, as immigrants rising in economic and social circumstances sought housing of some distinction that reflected their new, hard-earned status but also allowed them to remain in their communities.



*Nos. 51-53 Madison Street (Nos. 31-33 Oliver Street). Detail.
Photo: Deborah Wye*

Decorated Tenements

The growing attention to decoration on tenements in immigrant neighborhoods is also exemplified by two Old Law (dumb-bell) tenements in the proposed district, at the corner of St. James Place and James Street. Both make use of terracotta ornamentation and creative brickwork.



Left: No. 47 St. James Place. 1887. (Eclectic); Center: No. 45 St. James Place (No. 22 James Street). 1884. (Renaissance Revival). Photo: Bruce Monroe

47 St. James Street

The mixed-use building at 47 St. James Street, built for commercial space on the lower floors and tenement apartments above, was designed by William C. Frohne, a prominent German-born architect, who himself lived on the Lower East Side. He also designed the landmark German American Shooting Society Clubhouse at 12 St. Mark's Place in 1889, two years after this building. Frohne typified the immigrant architects and developers who were

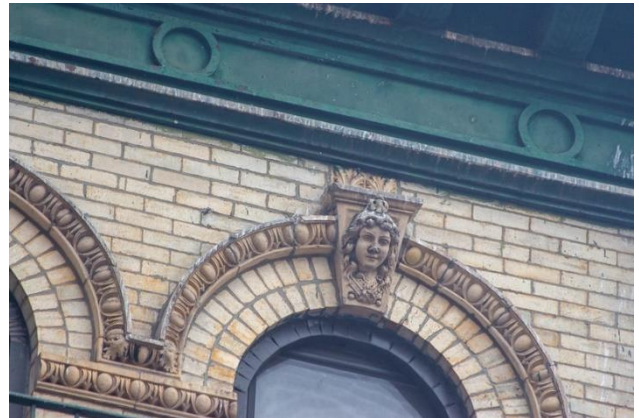
beginning to design buildings with eye-catching ornamentation to give form to the aspirations of potential tenants.



Facade details. No. 47 St. James Place. Photos: Bruce Monroe

No. 45 St. James Place (also 22 James Street)

Built in 1884, three years before its neighbor, 45 St. James Place is also an Old Law tenement. From the front, it appears to occupy a very small footprint, but the building extends quite far back on the lot. The architect is unknown, but the efforts made to enliven the façade are impressive. There are plaques, elaborate lintels, key-stone masks, and egg-and-dart and bead-and-reel trim filling the surfaces, fashioned from economical terra cotta and brick.



Façade details. No. 45 St. James Place (No. 22 James Street), 1884. Photos: Bruce Monroe

Nearby Related Sites

(Outside the proposed district)

Alfred E. Smith Houses

A discussion of housing in the proposed Historic District must make note of the New York City Housing Authority complex situated just across the street from our demarcated area. It has direct links to Alfred E. Smith—not only was it named for him; it also was whole-heartedly supported by him. Smith had been an advocate for low cost, safe, clean, and fireproof housing for the immigrant community for his entire political career. In the case of this NYCHA project, it meant that two blocks of tenements on Oliver Street and on James Street, leading down to the river, would be demolished, including the block of Oliver Street where Smith’s father was born. Yet, once the site was determined, Smith enthusiastically led a tour for journalists. He was also scheduled to speak at the groundbreaking ceremony in October 1944, but died earlier that month, at the age of 70.



Alfred E. Smith Monument

Soon after his death, Smith’s friends got together to fund monuments in his honor for the housing complex. Standing in a playground, between the buildings, and along a path that would have been Oliver Street, is a monumental sculpture depicting Smith by artist Charles Keck. Its size and remarkable likeness gives the former Governor at least a symbolic presence in his old neighborhood. The monument was created and unveiled before the full complex was even completed. It stands in a New York City Parks & Recreation area and is currently under the jurisdiction of the Public Design Commission.

Governor Alfred E. Smith Monument. Alfred E. Smith Houses Playground. 1946, dedicated 1950. Sculptor: Charles Keck. Photo: Deborah Wye



Governor Alfred E. Smith Flagstaff. Alfred E. Smith House Playground. 1946, dedicated 1950. Sculptor: Paul Manship. Photo: Deborah Wye

Alfred E. Smith Flagstaff

The Alfred E. Smith Houses playground boasts a second, highly significant sculpture: a flagstaff by noted sculptor Paul Manship, decorated with a delightful animal motif. It, too, was funded by friends of the Governor. An inscription along the base reads:

“Governor Alfred Emanuel Smith—Great and Good Friend of the Children.”

The subject of this sculpture is particularly fitting given Smith’s well-known love of animals. As a boy he kept a variety of pets in the attic of his building on South Street, at the Governor’s Mansion in Albany he established a menagerie out back, and in his later years he served as “Honorary Night Supervisor” of the Central Park Zoo, so named by his old friend Robert Moses when Smith lived across the street from Central Park.

Beyond the Neighborhood

Smith had all the personal qualities that would lead to success as a politician. He was savvy, but also charming and witty. He could be called by the current term, “a people person.” He never lost the common touch that was so fundamental to his appeal, and he could usually be found with a broad smile, sporting a brown derby and smoking a cigar.

As Smith rose up through the local Tammany Hall Clubhouse on Madison Street, he held various positions within the city and state government—process server for jurors, Sheriff, State Assembly Member and Speaker, and finally Governor. He was a staunch champion of Progressive causes, including legislation to improve factory conditions after the devastating Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. He supported labor and tenant rights, public health measures, increased spending for schools and especially public parkland.

In 1928 Smith was the Democratic Party’s nominee for President, the first Catholic to reach that height. But the popular city boy from the Lower East Side was not appreciated by the country at large—not his



Alfred E. Smith (1873-1944). Dubbed "the happy warrior of the political battlefield" by FDR. Photo: MCNY

accent, his theme song "Sidewalks of New York," his roots in Tammany Hall, his stance against Prohibition or, most importantly, his Roman Catholicism. Although he won the majority vote in most major cities, that did not translate to victories in the states. He lost by a landslide to Herbert Hoover.

After leaving the Governor's Mansion in Albany, Smith did not return to Oliver Street, in the 4th Ward district where he had lived for nearly three quarters of his life. He briefly resided in an apartment house on lower 5th Avenue, then settled further uptown across from Central Park. By then he was involved in business ventures, most importantly as President of the Empire State Building Corporation.

Smith maintained his interest in politics but became embittered toward Franklin Roosevelt, who he had hand-picked as his successor in the Governorship. There was certainly jealousy involved as FDR attained the Presidency, but also deep disappointment that he was not included as a close advisor. While an

estrangement persisted, and Smith's thinking took a conservative turn, their relationship eventually improved before Smith's death. Roosevelt, who earlier had dubbed Smith "the happy warrior of the political battlefield," often credited him and his Progressive initiatives for New York as the inspiration for the New Deal.

The Proposed Oliver Street—Alfred E. Smith Historic District

The proposed Historic District represents highly significant aspects of New York City's cultural and architectural history, including not only a deep connection to one of our most distinguished citizens, but also important developments for housing, and for our religious and educational institutions. Still further, the area retains a unique sense of place, attributable to its low scale building stock and housing dating from c. 1800-1902. The streetscapes remain much as they were in Smith's time.

One notable difference for Smith would be the wave of Chinese immigrants who came to the neighborhood after the Chinese Exclusion Act ended in the 1940s, and additional restrictions were lifted in 1965 and later. The tiny Chinese enclave Smith knew grew exponentially into the broad-based Chinatown of today. Smith would have welcomed this newest immigrant group as he had championed so many earlier arrivals to the neighborhood. He was fond of referring to America as the "gateway of opportunity." He personalized that experience, noting how remarkable it was that this was a country

where “a man born in a tenement home, if he be worthy, can become Governor of the State of New York.” The symbolic core of the neighborhood that gave rise to this prominent—indeed unique—figure should be duly honored. As Smith’s *New York Times* obituary stated so succinctly:

“From a newsboy and fishmonger to four-time Governor of the Empire State, and the candidacy of his party for President, the rise of Alfred E. Smith had no exact parallel in American history...where a city urchin, earning a precarious living in the streets, ever rose so superior to his lack of youthful advantages and had so distinguished a public career.”

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