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A Single Brownstone Remains Between 62nd and 63rd

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY FEB. 10, 2011

YOU can barely see it now, the little 1871 brownstone at 815 Fifth Avenue, concealed by construction netting. Indeed, all its peers have vanished, too, although those were lost to the wrecker's ball. This block of Fifth, between 62nd and 63rd Streets, had the earliest town house on Fifth Avenue opposite Central Park, and its thumbnail biography paints a picture of Fifth as a street of single, not multiple, dwellings.

Much of Central Park was completed by the mid-1860s. The pioneer town house builder on Fifth opposite the park was Runyon Martin, who had been living on lower Seventh Avenue. Mr. Martin does not present much of a target for the researcher, although he did once sue Jay Gould over a financial matter. Mr. Martin's architect, Jacob Wrey Mould, gave him No. 816, a violent, High Victorian Gothic sneeze of color, daring contrasts in stripes and blocks. A sales brochure for an adjacent property in 1869 promised that "as a future center of elegant buildings and high values, this is not to be surpassed."

Others agreed, and the block filled in almost completely in the 1870s, including a pair of Italianate brownstones at 814 and 815 Fifth in 1871. The residents were rich, like Thomas Rutter of No. 814, at one time the president of the New York Central Railroad, and William Belden of No. 810, a partner of Jay Gould. Mr. Belden

later sold to Catherine Wolfe Bruce, a patron of astronomy after whom an asteroid was named “323 Brucia” in 1891.

But life in a Fifth Avenue town house was not without its concerns. In 1883 Mr. Belden, worried about the heat, went to the basement and found his boilerman, Thomas Sullivan, apparently drunk, and the steam pressure at twice the safe level. Mr. Sullivan popped him in the face. In 1885 the owners of 811, 813, 814, 815, 816, and 817 Fifth Avenue tried to persuade the Board of Estimate to remove the zoo from Central Park, saying the animals “pollute the soil, thus rendering it offensive and unwholesome.” The zoo won the argument.

The paradigm of the urban mansion started crumbling in the 1910s, when the apartment house for the upper classes was perfected. There followed a flood of new tall-building construction, and the midblock mansions were bookended by the present 810 Fifth on the south and 817 Fifth to the north.

These buildings had full-floor apartments, and No. 810 offered a drawing room with 28 feet of exposure on Fifth Avenue; this would not have fit inside any of the old town houses.

The “servant problem” (really, an employer problem) is often cited for the move to apartment houses, although a quantitative study remains to be done. The 1900 census of the entire row reported a total of 15 employers and 28 servants. But the 1930 census of the two apartment buildings found the master/servant ratio pretty much unchanged, 29/53.

Some people held on to their single-family town houses, like No. 815, the residence of Verna Cushman, noted for her philanthropy, and her husband, James Stewart Cushman, who had started the Allerton chain of women’s hotel residences. Mr. Cushman, a Mayflower descendant, was active in Newport society.

Mrs. Cushman altered the front of the building, in 1923 hiring Murgatroyd & Ogden — who did many of the Allerton hotels — to simplify it. The Cushmans’ neighbor at 814 Fifth was the investment banker and art collector Jules S. Bache. Like many rich men, he wanted his house to survive him as a museum, his Raphael,

Rembrandts and other works on the wall just as he had enjoyed them, but his collection wound up at the Metropolitan Museum.

The controversial financier Serge Rubinstein bought the Bache house in 1944. He had angered various governments with his currency manipulations and shady accounting. But it was a conviction for draft evasion that resulted in different living quarters — two years at Lewisburg Federal Penitentiary.

In 1955 he was found in the town house dead in his silk pajamas, his hands bound. The murder was never solved. Mr. Rubinstein had many enemies; Time magazine quoted a reporter as saying, "They've narrowed the list of suspects down to 10,000."

In 1961 the houses at 812, 813 and 814 were on their last legs, economically, when the developer Sarah Korein bought them. Alice Snow Lucey, who lived at 813 with a female servant and an Airedale, was the last to leave, and her house was razed with the others for what became the bare-bones modern apartment house at 812 Fifth Avenue.

By that time, 815 Fifth had been almost completely stripped, cut up into small apartments, of which one — on the back — is now for rent for \$3,300 a month.

Only the rusticated stonework on the ground floor survives, and that is covered by layers of brown paint. It is probable that the 19th-century residents of 815 Fifth, now hemmed in by tall apartment buildings, would not recognize their own house — or even their own block.

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