

NIGHTHAWKS AT THE DINER

Finding the restaurant that inspired Hopper's painting

by Elizabeth Finkelstein
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Historians have long questioned the location of the restaurant immortalized in “Nighthawks at the Diner”, believed to be based on a scene in Greenwich Village and which Edward Hopper began painting in December 1941. Popular thought holds that the restaurant once occupied a now-vacant lot on Mulry Square, where Greenwich Avenue, West 11th Street and Seventh Avenue South converge. A recent proposal by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority to construct an emergency ventilation plant on this site led GVSHP to investigate the validity of this claim and to seek out other locations that may have served as Hopper’s inspiration.

Greenwich Avenue

As was typical of the artist, Hopper left few clues as to his subject’s whereabouts except for one statement recorded in Gail Levin’s 1998 biography in which he attributes his inspiration to a “restaurant on Greenwich Avenue where two streets meet”:

Years later Jo confirmed her invention: “I was the one who thought up its name: Nighthawks. E. & I did all the posing for figures except the young blond boy in charge of the counter & he is practically ‘Capt. Ed Staples,’ dreamed up by E. himself & perished with a car load of modern masterpieces in a R.R. accident.”⁴ Her witness to their renewed collaboration is confirmed by sketches for a figure wearing the belted safari jacket that she had purchased for Edward at Abercrombie & Fitch.

Jo’s suggestion for a name stuck. The picture became a favorite with Edward, who confessed to liking it “very much. . . . [It] was suggested by a restaurant on Greenwich Avenue where two streets meet. Nighthawks seems to be the way I think of a night street.”⁵ Another interviewer gathered that the picture was “based partly on an all-night coffee stand Hopper saw on Greenwich Avenue in downtown New York, ‘only more so.’”⁶ To a query about loneliness in the picture, Hopper responded: “I didn’t see it as particularly lonely. I simplified the scene a great deal and made the restaurant bigger. Unconsciously, probably, I was painting the loneliness of a large city.”⁷

“Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography” by Gail Levin, 1998

Mulry Square

Many people believe that Hopper's diner once existed on Mulry Square; indeed, by superimposing the diner on the site, one can see a near-perfect replica of the painting. However, all evidence indicates that no one-story metal diner ever existed on Mulry Square.



Mulry Square today (source: Google Maps)

In the Landmarks Preservation Commission's designation report for the Greenwich Village Historic District, written in 1969, Mulry Square is described as follows:

GREENWICH AVENUE West Side (Betw. West 11th & Perry Sts.)

#61 A (White Tower) diner now occupies the southerly part of the former site of an enormous brick building, over one-hundred-and-forty feet long, which was literally bisected by the southerly extension of Seventh Avenue in 1919.

The entire building was razed, and only a small triangular lot remained with a filling station (described under Seventh Avenue South) filling the northern apex. This large building was a brewery and was once a conspicuous feature of The Village, at the southwest corner of West Eleventh Street and Greenwich Avenue. It later became Monahan's Express Company (stables) and, after the turn of the century, the Manhattan Screw & Stamping Works (a factory).

The hard, white cubism of the diner, although a good trade mark, relates to nothing else in The Village unless it be the filling stations on the Avenue. Where a commercial enterprise enters an Historic District, it should be realized that a special situation exists and that stock company designs are often not only inadequate but offensive to the entire neighborhood. To insure that the spirit of the district is not violated, special study should be given to this problem by the company architects to evolve something which would be compatible, if not in scale, at least in its use of forms, materials and architectural details.

Landmarks Preservation Commission Designation Report, Greenwich Village Historic District, 1969

This tells us two things:

- 1) Prior to the extension of Seventh Avenue in 1919, the lot housed a large brick brewery
- 2) In the year 1969, a gas station and White Tower diner existed on the site

Digging deeper, it becomes clear that no diner existed on Mulry Square at any point in the years between 1919 and 1969. By 1930, according to an alteration permit, the site was already being leased by the same White Tower diner described in the designation report.

NOTICE—This Application must be TYPEWRITTEN and filed in TRIPLICATE, and ONE copy sworn to by Applicant. A copy must be kept in plain view on the work at all times until completion.

PERMIT No. 1486 ¹⁹³⁰ ~~192~~ ¹⁹² ₁₉₂ } Application No. 1112 ¹⁹³⁰ ~~192~~ ₁₉₂ }

NUMB.
ALT.
FILED
RENEW
SIGN

LOCATION 179- 183- 7th. Ave South BLOCK 613 LOT 59
S.W.C. Greenwich Ave

New York City June 11th 1930

To the Superintendent of Buildings:

Application is hereby made for a PERMIT to perform the entire work described in the above numbered application and the accompanying plans. If no work is performed within one year from the time of issuance this permit shall expire by limitation as provided by law; and the applicant agrees to comply with all provisions of the Building Code of the City of New York and with the provisions of all other laws and rules relating to this subject. Compensation insurance has been secured in accordance with the requirements of the Workmen's Compensation Law as follows: Liberty Mutual Ins Co. WC. 115710-NY exp. Jan 1st 1931

STATE, COUNTY AND }
 CITY OF NEW YORK } ss.: W. J. C. Brian for White Tower System Inc.

being duly sworn, deposes and says: That he resides at Number c/o Employers Mutual Lia. Ins Co in the Borough of Wasau in the City of Wasau, in the County of Wisconsin, that he is

contractor for the lessee and that Mrs. Josephine Gesner Kaul are owner in fee of all that certain lot, piece or parcel of land, shown on the diagram annexed to the approved application and made a part thereof, situate, lying and being in the Borough of Manhattan, City of New York aforesaid, and known and designated as Number 179- 183- 7th. Ave South, S.W.C. Greenwich Ave

and therein more particularly described; that the work proposed to be done upon the said premises, in accordance with the approved application and accompanying plans is duly authorized by Kesbec Sales Co.

and that White Tower System Inc. is duly authorized by the aforesaid lessee to make application for a permit to perform said work set forth in the approved application and accompanying plans, and all the statements herein contained are true to deponent's own knowledge.

(SIGN HERE) W. J. C. Brian
 Sworn to before me, this 11th day of June 1930

[Signature]
 COMMISSIONER OF DEEDS

Satisfactory evidence having been submitted as indicated above that compensation insurance has been secured in accordance with the Workmen's Compensation Law, a permit is hereby issued for the performance of the entire work described in the above numbered application and the accompanying plans. JUN 11 1930

EXAMINED AND RECOMMENDED FOR APPROVAL ON 1930

[Signature]
 Examiner
[Signature]
 Superintendent of Buildings, Borough of Manhattan

Approved JUN 11 1930 192

The White Tower can be seen in this 1933 photo:



Source: New York Public Library, Percy Loomis Sperr Collection

A 1939 plot diagram shows that a gas station existed at the front of the lot, with the White Tower lunch room and gas station office in the rear.

DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND BUILDINGS

BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN, CITY OF NEW YORK

MANHATTAN BROOKLYN BRONX QUEENS RICHMOND
Municipal Bldg., Municipal Bldg., Bronx County Bldg., 21-19 49th Avenue Boro Hall,
Manhattan Brooklyn Grand Concourse & E. 161st St. N. Y. City St. George, S. I.

NOTICE—This Application must be filed in quadruplicate

APPLICATION No. **2988** 19 **39**

(N.B., Alt. Etc.)

LOCATION 179-187 7th Avenue, 61 Greenwich Avenue, southeast corner

PLOT DIAGRAM

OWNER Doris Gesner and Josephine Gesner, Raul Address 179 Park Road, East Orange, N. J.

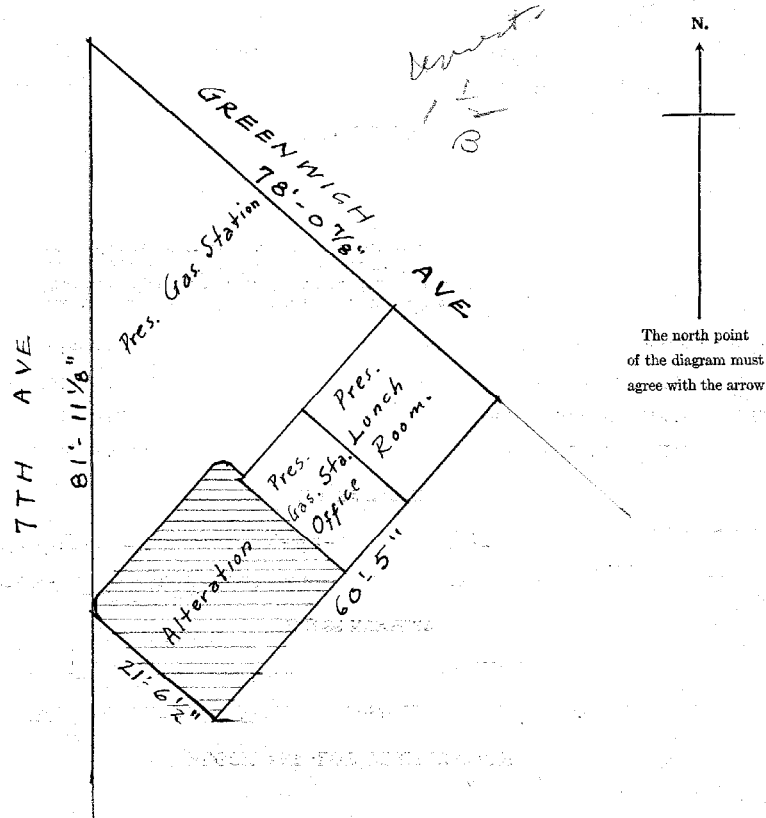
ARCHITECT William A. Rolleston Address 202 West 78th Street, N. Y. City

SIZE OF LOT 81' 11-1/8" feet front 78' - 7/8" feet side 60' - 5" feet rear 21' - 6-1/2" feet side

AREA OF LOT 5000 square feet Percentage of lot occupied 42.5 %

The lot lines and exterior walls of the building must be drawn to indicated scale. Show dimensions of lot, building, courts and yards.

The following information must be obtained from the departments and bureaus concerned and verified by them. A diagram must be made showing the correct street lines from the city plan; the plot to be built upon in relation to the street lines and the portion of the lot to be occupied by the building; the legal grades of streets at nearest points from the proposed buildings in each direction; the house numbers; and the Block, Lot, Section and Volume numbers. The data for the above may be obtained from the Bureau of Highways, and the Tax Department.



The ca. 1940 tax photo also shows a White Tower on the rear of the site and a gas station in the front. This would have been taken just before Hopper began the painting in late 1941.



Source: NYC Department of Records

If one looks carefully, the remnants of the old White Tower are visible in the 1980 tax photo:



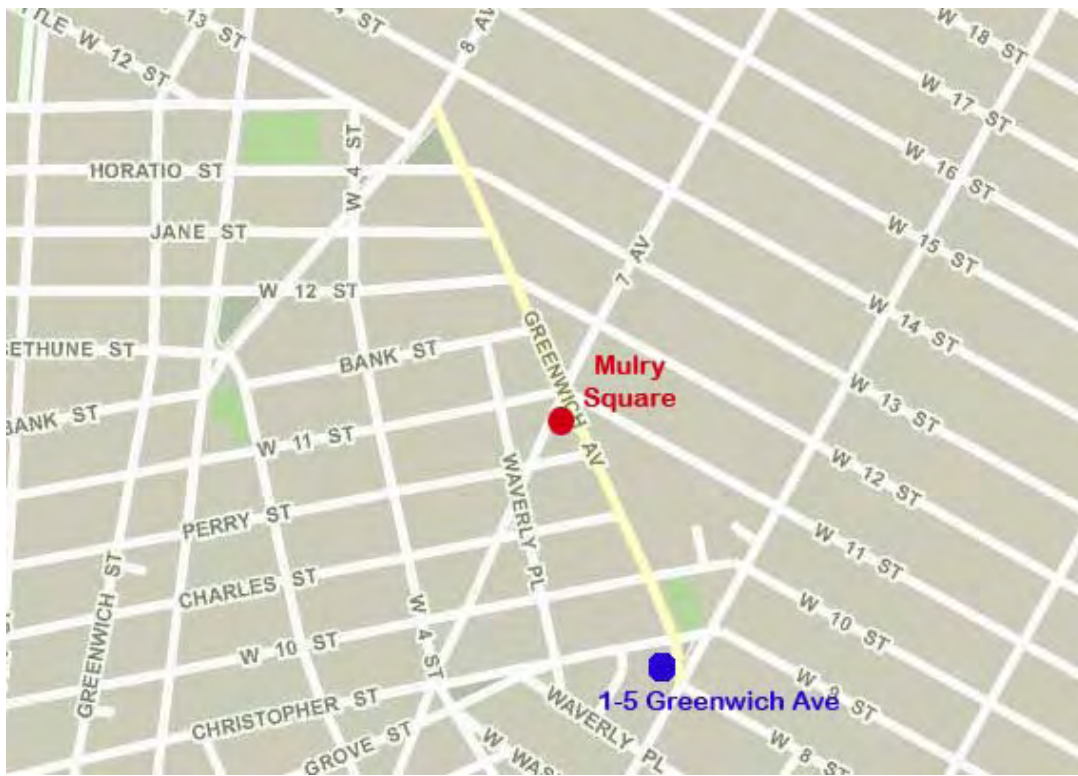
Source: NYC Department of Records

1-5 Greenwich Avenue

Having ruled out the possibility that Hopper's diner ever existed on Mulry Square, we sought to uncover other sites along Greenwich Avenue that may have housed diners. Because December 1941 is within a year of when the city would have finished compiling a collection of "tax photos" of every building in all five boroughs (taken between 1939 and 1941 and now available for viewing on microfilm at the NYC Department of Records), the logical first step was to view the tax photos for all lots along Greenwich Avenue. While we could not locate a one-story, triangularly-shaped diner with curved glass in any of these photos, restaurants of varying scales and detail did appear. One such diner was at 1-5 Greenwich Avenue, shown below in the tax photo:



Source: NYC Department of Records



1-5 Greenwich Avenue today

The Jefferson Diner existed at this site as far back as 1937, according to a permit for its construction found in the online database of the Office of Metropolitan History (www.metrohistory.com):

Manhattan NB results

<http://www.metrohistory.com/dbpages/NBresultsPrint.lasso>

OFFICE FOR METROPOLITAN HISTORY :: MANHATTAN NB DATABASE SEARCH RESULTS, SORTED BY YEAR

Citation format: Office for Metropolitan History, "Manhattan NB Database 1900-1986," (date of access), <http://www.MetroHistory.com>

NEW SEARCH

SEARCH PARAMETERS: YEAR: **1937**,

1 RECORDS FOUND, DISPLAYING (1 TO 1)

KEY: (o) = OWNER, (a) = ARCHITECT

YEAR	DOB	NB#	COST	ADDRESS, OWNER, ARCHITECT	DESCRIPTION, COMMENTS
1937	206		\$3,000.00	6TH [Sixth] AV, 403-415 (o) City of New York (l) Frank Billecis (l) 415 6th [Sixth] av (a) J. Z. Cohen (a) 50 Court st, Bklyn	lunch wagon, 60x16x30

1 RECORDS FOUND, DISPLAYING (1 TO 1)

NEW SEARCH

[Home](#) | [Document Recovery](#) | [Reports](#) | [Writing](#) | [Building Permit Search](#) | [Contact](#)

Two photos from the Percy Loomis Sperr Collection of the New York Public Library show that its presence in 1939:



According to New York Times classified ad, the Jefferson Diner survived at least as late as 1943 – two years after “Nighthawks” was painted.

Ready employment. 231 Jackson Ave., Jersey City, BERGEN 3-8737.

CABINETMAKERS

WAR WORK—GOOD PAY.
Statement of availability required.

Call between 9-12.

ULOVA Watch Co.

10 WOODSIDE AVE., WOODSIDE, L. I.

CABINET MAKER

TAIL FURNITURE EXPERIENCE,
STEADY POSITION: GOOD PAY. /
HENSHAW FURNITURE

55 18TH ST., BROOKLYN, N. Y.

CABINETMAKER, carpenter: 51 hour.

Essmuller & Son, 1770 2d Ave.

CABINET makers. to be able to work on a

machine. 415 E. 47th St.

CAFETERIA WORK

AGES 21 TO 55

Cost Accountant

Factory accountant experienced in basic standard cost installation. Opportunity for permanent connection. Availability statement required. R 1628 Times Downtown.

COUNSELOR, experienced, boys' outdoor group; chauffeur's license. 303 W. 91st.

COUNTERMEN

Permanent; Good Pay; Rapid Advancement

Vacations; Free Meals and Uniforms

APPLY 7 A. M. TO 9 P. M. DAILY

RIKERS FREE EMPLOYMENT OFFICE

309 W. 50TH (W. OF 8TH AVE.)

COUNTERMEN, riddlemen; advancement;

also day-night managers; good salary.

Remel 23d St.-7th Ave. Hours 7-11 A. M.,

4-5 P. M., 8-9 P. M.

COUNTERMEN—COOKS

Nights; good pay; meals, uniforms.

McGinnis Restaurant, 48th St. and B'way.

COUNTERMAN, for night work. C. & S.

Luncheonette, 420 B'way.

COUNTERMAN, days, experienced, steady

Jefferson Diner, 6th Ave.-8th St.

COUNTERMAN, good pay, no Sundays.

Ideal, 524 11th Ave. (41st).

ELECTRICIANS, experienced wiring and pipe work. Woodw Third Ave., Bklyn.

Elevator Operat Bonwit Teller, I

HAS OPENINGS

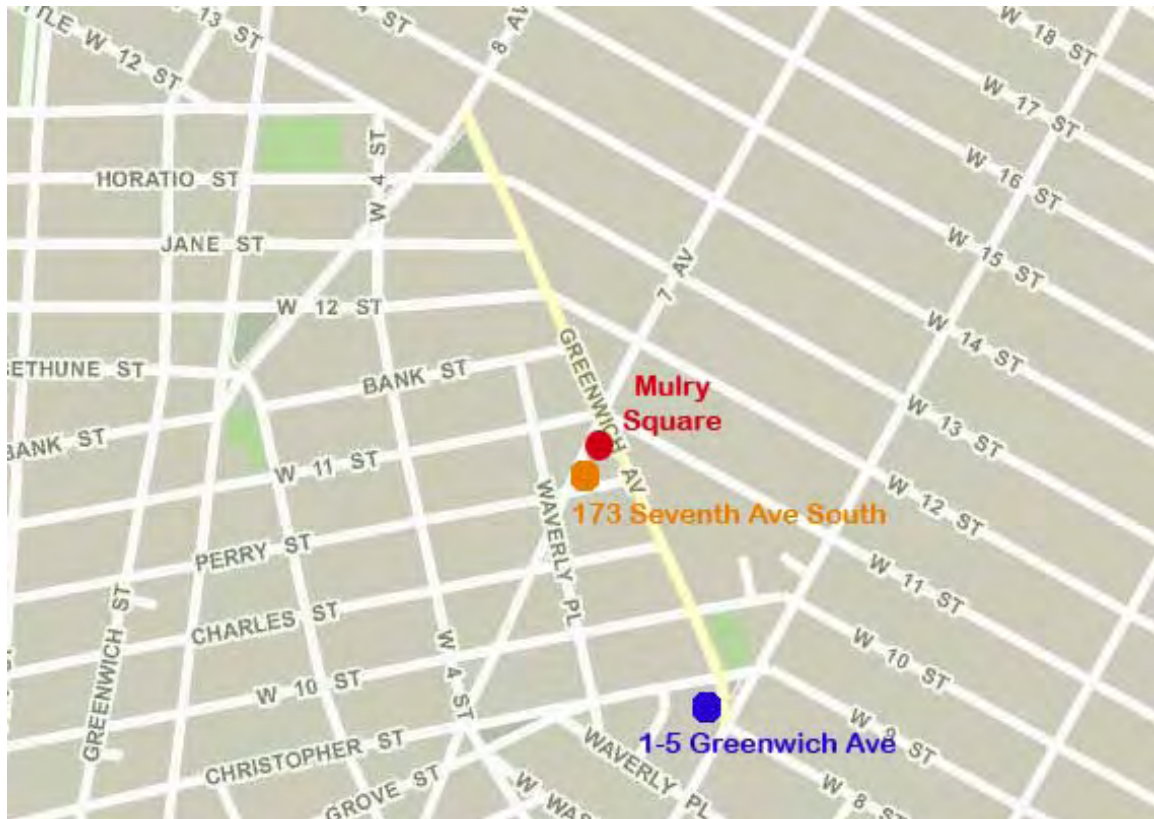
APPLY PERSONNEL OFFICE
7 EAST 56TH ST.

Essential workers need release s

Source: New York Times, October 19, 1943, page 36

173 Seventh Avenue South

A one-story diner also existed at the corner of 173 Seventh Avenue South, just south of Mulry Square, which now houses an Empire Szechuan restaurant.





173 Seventh Avenue South today (source: Google Maps)

This diner was constructed in 1941, just after the tax photo would have been taken. It had been demolished by 1969, when the Greenwich Village designation report was written:

SEVENTH AVENUE SOUTH East Side (Betw. Perry St. & Greenwich Ave.)

#173
(#173-177)

The restaurant constructed to the south of the service buildings along Seventh Avenue South is one story high of white brick. It has uniformly spaced windows separated by aluminum uprights with fixed glass lights. Above and below these windows are panels with buff colored diamond-shaped tiles. They are located on the Avenue side toward the south end. A corner entry with brick steps and wrought iron handrails is located at the corner of Perry Street. It has a low, triangular-shaped canopy supported by a single Lally column at the apex. This is the principal entrance to the restaurant. The Perry Street side (Nos. 3-5) is of white brick with round-arched windows and entrance door giving access to the bar.

#179-183

This small triangular block retains only two residences (Nos. 57 and 59 Greenwich Avenue), the balance being occupied by an assortment of latter-day service buildings. A gasoline filling station with service garage occupies the entire northern end of this conspicuous site with a restaurant (No. 173) extending south along the Avenue side where a diner once stood. Here existed an opportunity to make these utilitarian structures a credit to the neighborhood they serve. Actually no attempt has been made in the garage to use compatible materials or design details. These buildings, by their lowness, are as much out of scale with the houses of The Village as some of the apartment houses are by their height. This is all the more reason that a filling station should be made compatible with its surroundings, in every way possible where its very scale works against it.

A Certificate of Occupancy from website of the Department of Buildings shows that a new building permit for a one-story lunch wagon was filed sometime in 1941, and that the structure was completed by March 18th, 1942:

DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND BUILDINGS

BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN, CITY OF NEW YORK

No. 28774

Date March 18, 1942.

CERTIFICATE OF OCCUPANCY

(Standard form adopted by the Board of Standards and Appeals and issued pursuant to Section 646 of the New York Charter, and Sections C26-181.0 to C26-187.0 inclusive Administrative Code 2.1.3.1. to 2.1.3.7. Building Code.)

This certificate supersedes C. O. No.

To the owner or owners of the building or premises:

THIS CERTIFIES that the new ~~altered~~ ~~existing~~ building ~~premises~~ located at

173-177 Seventh Avenue South
46'6" front

Block 613 Lot 62

, conforms substantially to the approved plans and specifications, and to the requirements of the building code and all other laws and ordinances, and of the rules and regulations of the Board of Standards and Appeals, applicable to a building of its class and kind at the time the permit was issued; and

CERTIFIES FURTHER that, any provisions of Section 646F of the New York Charter have been complied with as certified by a report of the Fire Commissioner to the Borough Superintendent.

N.B. or Alt. No.— 105-1941

Construction classification— metal

Occupancy classification— commercial . Height 1 stories, 11'0" feet.

Date of completion— February 26, 1942 . Located in unrestricted Use District

B Area 1 1/2 . Height Zone at time of issuance of permit 2832-1941

This certificate is issued subject to the limitations hereinafter specified and to the following resolutions of the Board of Standards and Appeals: (Circular numbers to be inserted here)

PERMISSIBLE USE AND OCCUPANCY

STORY	LIVE LOADS Lbs. per Sq. Ft.	PERSONS ACCOMMODATED			USE
		MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL	
Cellar					Boiler room
1st Story	100			40	Lunch wagon

Fire Department approval
Fuel Oil January 13, 1942.

Though the Certificate of Occupancy is dated 1942, an inspector's report shows that work on this diner began prior to August 1941:

Form 60 114 SA-2052-70M-70240

DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND BUILDINGS
BOROUGH OF *Manh.*, CITY OF NEW YORK

N.B. APPLICATION No. 105-41
(N. B., ALT., or ELEV. P. D. SPRINKLER, D. W., ETC.)

LOCATION 173 - 7th Ave. S. BLOCK 613 LOT 62

REPORT OF INSPECTOR AS TO COMMENCEMENT OF WORK

CITY OF NEW YORK, Aug 21 1941

To the Borough Superintendent:

I beg to report that the work described in the above-entitled application was begun ^{prior to} on the 20th day of August 1941.

P2832

(Signed) D. Horgan
M. C. Inspector # 5 District

[PAGE]

Source: NYC Department of Records

Further inspection reports chart progress on the building's construction, and indicate that most of the work have been completed by October 1941:

Form 58-30M-111440 114

DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND BUILDINGS BOROUGH OF

ISSUED BY DATE III 23 1941 INSPECTION REPORTS SHEET NO. 2

Date & Hours	Inspection Reports	Remarks
8-20-41	Started prior to date. Excavation completed	APPLICATION 105-41 N. B. ALT. P. D. SPRINKLER PREMISES N.E.C. Perry St. 173-177 - 7th Ave S
8-22-41	Inspection of footings for foundation walls	
8-29-41	Concrete work completed to grade. D.H.	
8-29-41	Concrete block walls for extension	
9-8-41	Masonry completed. Extension roof beam set. D.H.	
9-19-41	Roofing over extension roof. Masonry work completed. Plastering in progress. D.H.	
9-23-41	General finish details. D.H.	
10-17-41	Inspection from approved plan. All work completed except repairs to extension building tile roof. D.H.	
10-22-41	Same as report for 10-17-41. D.H.	

