

**NYU's Plans for Demolition  
of the historic Provincetown Playhouse  
and Apartments,  
133-139 MacDougal Street:  
An Outline of Concerns  
*June 19, 2008***



*The historic Provincetown Playhouse and Apartments at 133-139 MacDougal Street,  
with the area NYU has proposed to preserve highlighted*

**from the Greenwich Village Society  
for Historic Preservation**

**[www.gvshp.org](http://www.gvshp.org)**

**to Community Board #2, Manhattan**

## MEMO

**FROM:** Andrew Berman, Executive Director  
Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation

**TO:** Community Board #2 Members

**DATE:** June 19, 2008

**RE: NYU Plan for Provincetown Playhouse and Apartments, 133-139 MacDougal Street**

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The Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation sees several key outstanding issues with NYU's plans for 133-139 MacDougal Street, a building determined eligible for the State and National Register of Historic Places, which we urge the Community Board to consider:

### **Regarding NYU's commitments and planning for the future –**

- 1) **NYU agreed in the “Planning Principles” they signed with the Borough President’s Community Task Force to “prioritize re-use before new development.”** If this is not a building that NYU would “re-use” rather than seek to redevelop, which building would they re-use? If they demolish this building, what meaning does that pledge have at all? As the first project out of the gate under the planning principles, how we interpret them as they apply to this building will have a great effect upon what efficacy, if any, they will have.
- 2) **NYU agreed to support designation of the proposed South Village Historic District –** a proposal which Community Board #2 supports the designation of – and yet they are proposing to demolish one of the most historically significant sites within the proposed district before the Landmarks Preservation Commission has a chance to act.
- 3) **NYU currently estimates that they “need” to add between 3 and 3.6 million sq. ft. of new space in this neighborhood over the next 23 years –** a staggering amount which is the equivalent of 20 more of their recently-constructed 26-story dorms on East 12<sup>th</sup> Street (the tallest building in the east Village) or the equivalent of all new NYU construction in the neighborhood over the last 42 years. It would seem prudent to push NYU to **REDUCE** its predicted increase in square footage in the neighborhood, and to do so by discouraging or minimizing new developments such as this that are not necessary and do not fit the planning principles.
- 4) **NYU says it needs these new facilities for its Law School. And yet just a few years ago NYU built its massive new Furman Hall for its Law School, which required the demolition of the Poe House and Judson Houses.** Why was this urgent need not anticipated when this massive new development was planned?

## Regarding the significance of the entire building –

- 1) **133-139 MacDougal Street in its entirety is one of the most historically significant sites in Greenwich Village AND WAS TODAY FOUND TO BE ELIGIBLE FOR LISTING ON THE STATE AND NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES BY THE NY STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE (see attached information). While staff at the Landmarks Preservation Commission declined to recommend the building for individual landmark designation 10 years ago, this was based on sparse research about the building which has since been supplemented and is now being re-evaluated, and the building is actively under consideration as part of the proposed South Village Historic District.**
- 2) **The building has been called "the cornerstone of bohemia," "the heart of cultural life of the Village," and "the center of much of the resurgence and renaissance associated with Greenwich Village" by scholars and historians, and its rich historic legacy extends well beyond the theater box at #133 which NYU now pledges to maintain. #139 housed the original Provincetown Playhouse in its ground floor, while #135 and #137 housed the Liberal Club, the Washington Square Bookstore, the Heterodoxy Club, and Polly's Restaurant – four establishments considered ground zero for the revolutions of thought, culture, and politics which emanated from Greenwich Village in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. These establishments were closely associated with Eugene O'Neill, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Emma Goldman, Margaret Sanger, Theodore Dreiser, Upton Sinclair, Max Eastman, Jack London, and Sinclair Lewis, among many others. The apartments upstairs from these establishments, which continued to be occupied until last year, attracted a long roster of cultural luminaries including Bernice Abbott, Eli Wallach, Anne Jackson, and Dorothy Gillespie, among many others.**
- 3) **More than one-hundred prominent community leaders, preservationists, scholars, theater advocates, playwrights and actors have signed a letter to NYU President John Sexton asking that the entire building at 133-139 MacDougal Street be preserved (see attached abridged version). Signators include the directors of the Preservation League of NY State the Historic Districts Council, and the Merchants House Museum; playwrights John Guare, Doric Wilson, and Charles Busch; actors Blythe Danner, John Leguizamo, Eric Stoltz and Mercedes Ruehl; Tony Award-winning producer/director Harold Prince; and community leaders representing the East Village Community Coalition, the Hell's Kitchen Neighborhood Association, the Federation to Preserve the Greenwich Village Waterfront and Great Port, the Bowery Alliance of Neighbors, and the Greenwich Village Community Task Force.**
- 4) **The building currently houses a theater, offices, and residences; all uses for which NYU has a great need. The proposed new building would contain a theater, offices, and more offices. Clearly NYU could continue to make very good use of the existing building exactly as it is, and the University would only gain 17,000 sq. ft. of space under the proposed new development – less than 0.3% of the space NYU says it needs to add and develop over the next 23 years. How little space this is for NYU must be balanced against how great a loss the demolition of this building would be for our neighborhood and our city's cultural history.**
- 5) **No one has stated opposition to a sensitive and appropriate alteration or addition to the existing building for it to better serve NYU's needs.**

## **Regarding the future of the theater space --**

- 1) NYU has promised that the four interior walls of the Provincetown Playhouse Theater and the entry façade will never be demolished, regardless of what they do to the remainder of the building. It is important that this commitment be made explicit and in writing, particularly given NYU's failure to maintain similar prior commitments.**
- 2) In its 1998 renovation of the Provincetown Playhouse, NYU destroyed key historic elements of the original theater, including the dome over the stage designed by George Cram Cook, and the original stage.** As much as possible, these elements should be restored, and NYU's commitment to re-use remaining historic elements such as the seats should be made explicit and in writing.
- 3) NYU has promised to continue to use the theater as theater space; however, NYU has made this promise before and then shuttered the theater for years and threatened to turn it into classrooms, and the theater currently appears to remain dark much of the year.** Downtown theater groups are desperately in need of space, and the rich legacy of more than 70 years of theater at this space is not marked and celebrated as clearly as it could be. NYU should commit to a clear and explicit plan for use of the theater space throughout the year, not allowing the space to remain dark, and allowing other theater groups use and access, especially those which celebrate the works and playwrights historically associated with the Provincetown Playhouse.



**New York State Office of Parks,  
Recreation and Historic Preservation**

Historic Preservation Field Services Bureau • Peebles Island, PO Box 189, Waterford, New York 12188-0189  
518-237-8643  
www.nysparks.com

**David A. Paterson**  
Governor

**Carol Ash**  
Commissioner

June 19, 2008

Andrew Berman  
Executive Director  
Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation  
232 East 11<sup>th</sup> Street  
New York, NY 10003

RE: State and National Registers eligibility evaluation request  
Provincetown Playhouse  
133-139 MacDougal Street  
New York County, NY

Dear Mr. Berman:

Thank you for your interest in the State and National Registers of Historic Places. After reviewing your eligibility evaluation request it is the opinion of the State Historic Preservation Office that the Provincetown Playhouse at 133-139 MacDougal Street meets the criteria for listing to the Registers. Attached to this letter is a copy of our Resource Evaluation.

A copy of this letter of eligibility is being forwarded via email to Alicia Hurley at NYU. In order for a building to be listed in the National Register the property owner must not oppose the proposed listing. It is the policy of the State Historic Preservation Office to work closely with owners to inform them of the potential benefits of listing. Not only is listing to the Registers a prestigious honor, it brings with it economic benefits. Not-for-profit organizations that own registered properties may apply for historic preservation grants from various sources. Owners of historic commercial properties listed in the National Register may qualify for a preservation tax credit. The Tax Reform Act of 1986 allows a 20 percent tax credit for the substantial rehabilitation of income-producing historic properties.

If you have any questions about this determination of eligibility please feel free to call me at (518) 237-8643 ext. 3266.

Sincerely,

Kathleen A. Howe  
Historic Preservation Program Analyst

cc: Alicia Hurley, NYU



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## RESOURCE EVALUATION

DATE: June 18, 2008

STAFF: Kathy Howe

PROPERTY: Building at 133-139 MacDougal Street  
(Provincetown Playhouse)

MCD: Manhattan

COUNTY: New York

USN: 06101.016971

- I.  Property is individually listed on SR/NR:  
name of listing:
- Property is a contributing component of a SR/NR district:  
name of district:
- II.  Property meets eligibility criteria.
- Property contributes to a district which appears to meet eligibility criteria.
- Pre SRB:  Post SRB:  SRB date

### Criteria for Inclusion in the National Register:

- A.  Associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history;
- B.  Associated with the lives of persons significant in our past;
- C.  Embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction; or represents the work of a master; or possess high artistic values; or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction;
- D.  Have yielded, or may be likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

### STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:

The four-story, eight-bay-wide brick building at 133-139 MacDougal Street in Greenwich Village is actually four 1840's row houses that were joined behind one unified façade in 1940 though the interiors had been interconnected before that time. Called "the cornerstone of bohemia"<sup>1</sup> the building meets National Register Criterion A in the areas of social and cultural history as a center of the Village's radical cultural, intellectual, and political life especially in the early decades of the twentieth century.

<sup>1</sup> Steven Watson, *Strange Bedfellows: The First American Avant-Garde* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1991).

The Liberal Club, which also served as headquarters for the feminist Heterodoxy Club, occupied the ground floor of No. 137 beginning in 1913. "Until 1918 it sponsored programs of a radical nature ranging from discussions of Freud to lectures on birth control, and also functioned as an art gallery, a poker parlor, a dance hall, and an experimental theater."<sup>2</sup> Polly Holladay's popular basement restaurant opened in the basement of No. 137 in 1914, the same year that Albert and Charles Boni opened their Washington Square Bookstore next door at No. 135. No. 139 housed the Provincetown Playhouse theater from 1916 to 1918. It moved its theater space to No. 133 in 1918 which it has occupied for 90 years. While this space was renovated in 1940 and again in 1998 the original walls, volume, and stage location are intact. The upper stories of the building are historically and currently used for housing.

The Provincetown Playhouse theater, the Boni Brothers' Washington Square Bookstore, the Liberal Club, the Heterodoxy Club, and Polly's Restaurant were important bohemian meeting places where an extraordinary collection of writers, playwrights, actors, artists, and other cultural figures gathered including Eugene O'Neill, Susan Glaspell, George Cram Cook, Charles Demuth, William Carlos Williams, Djuna Barnes, Edna St. Vincent Millay, John Reed, Theodore Dreiser, Marsden Hartley, Sinclair Lewis, Upton Sinclair, e.e. cummings, Edmund Wilson, Max Eastman, Lincoln Steffens, Margaret Sanger, and Jack London, among others. Notable residents of the upper floor apartments included Bernice Abbott, Eli Wallach, Anne Jackson, and Dorothy Gillespie.

The Provincetown Playhouse has been noted as the "birthplace of the new American drama" and many distinguished playwrights and actors have worked here during the past 90 years. Playwrights and actors associated with the theater's early years (1910s-20s) include Edna St. Vincent Millay, Bette Davis, Miriam Hopkins, Djuna Barnes, Paul Green, Paul Robeson, e.e. cummings, Susan Glaspell, George Cram Cook; and Eugene O'Neill. The stock market crash caused the financial collapse of the Provincetown Players in 1929. From 1936 to 1939 it housed the Studio Theater of the Community Drama Unit of the WPA Federal Theater. In the 1950s the theater included productions of Gilbert and Sullivan comic operas and George Bernard Shaw plays. From the 1960s through the 1980s the theater presented over 70 productions including plays by Samuel Beckett, Edward Albee, Harold Pinter, Sam Shepherd, and David Mamet. The theater continues to be the home of many independently produced plays and is an important site in the history of American theater. The renovations made in 1940 and in 1998 represent the ongoing cultural use of this space.

If you have any questions concerning this Determination of Eligibility, please call Kathy Howe at (518) 237-8643, ext. 3266.

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth T. Jackson, ed., *The Encyclopedia of New York City* (New Haven: Yale University Press), p. 667.



**Greenwich  
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252 East 11th Street  
New York, New York 10003

(212) 475-9585  
fax: (212) 475-9582  
www.gvshp.org

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Calvin Trillin  
Jean-Claude van Itallie  
George Vellonakis  
Vicki Weiner  
Anthony C. Wood

May 28, 2008

John Sexton  
President, New York University  
70 Washington Square South, rm. 1216  
New York, NY 10012

**Re: Plans to Demolish the Provincetown Playhouse and Apartments,  
133-139 MacDougal Street**

Dear President Sexton:

We are deeply concerned about NYU's plans to demolish the Provincetown Playhouse and Apartments at 133-139 MacDougal Street.

The Provincetown Playhouse is widely considered one of the most important sites in the history of American Theater in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is considered the birthplace of Off-Broadway and alternative theater, and its contributions to theater extended throughout the Playhouse's lifetime, both before and after the 1940 renovation of the theater's façade.

Demolition of this building would be seen as a devastating act to many historians, preservationists, theater advocates, and Village residents. It would also be seen as an abrogation of NYU's commitment to "prioritize re-use before new development" in its plans for its campus core, as well as its support for the proposed South Village Historic District, of which the Playhouse is a key and integral part.

We hope that NYU will reconsider its plans to demolish the Provincetown Playhouse and instead preserve this incredibly important historic site.

Sincerely,

Cynthia Adler, Actor/Writer

Michael Arkin, Actor, Screen actors Guild Board 1997-2001

Jon Robin Baitz, playwright

Simeon Bankoff, Executive Director, Historic Districts Council

Silvia Beam, VanDam Street Block Association

Andrew Berman, Executive Director, Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation

Mark Blankenship, Variety

Mary Elizabeth Brown, Author, *From Italian Villages to Greenwich Village*

Charles Busch, actor/playwright

Michele Campo, Vice-Chair, Bowery Alliance of Neighbors

Lucy Cecere, Co-Founder, Caring Community

Linda Chapman, Associate Artistic Director, New York Theatre Workshop

David Cote, Theater Editor, Time Out New York

Tandy Cronin, Actress

Blythe Danner, Actor

Laurie M. Deredita, Curator, Sheaffer-O'Neill Collection, Connecticut College

Jay DiLorenzo, Executive Director, Preservation League of New York State

Carol Feinman, Chair, Federation to Preserve the Greenwich Village Waterfront  
& Great Port

Tom Fontana, Writer/Producer

Sharon Friedman, New York University Faculty and Susan Glaspell Society

Margaret Halsey Gardiner, Executive Director, Merchants House Museum

Christabel Gough, Preservationist

John Guare, Playwright

Leonard Jacobs, National Theater Editor, Backstage; Chief Theater Critic, New  
York Press; Theater Historian

Jerome Krase, Ph.D., Emeritus and Murray Koppelman Professor, Brooklyn  
College

James Lawson, Artistic Director, Manhattan TheatreSource and Associate  
Artistic Director, John Drew Theater at Guild Hall, East Hampton NY

John Leguizamo, actor

Marshall W. Mason, Founding Artistic Director, Circle Repertory Company

Francis Morrone, Writer/Historian

Barbara Ozieblo, President of the Susan Glaspell Society

John Pinckard, founding board member, League of Independent Theaters

Lois Rakoff, Member, South Village Advisory Board

Harold Prince. Tony Award-winning producer and director

Mercedes Ruehl, Actor

Katherine Rosin, School of Continuing and Professional Studies, NYU

Anna Sawaryn, Chair, Coalition to Save the East Village

Diane Schinnerer, Secretary/treasurer, Eugene O'Neill Society; Past president, Eugene O'Neill Foundation, Tao House; Current Library Director, Curator, and Archivist for the O'Neill Library at Tao House in Danville, CA; former Mayor, San Ramon, CA

Marian Seldes, Tony award-winning actress

Marilyn Stasio, VARIETY

Eric Stoltz, Actor/Director/Producer

Kathleen McGee Treat, chair, Hell's Kitchen Neighborhood Association

Betsy Walker, former company manager of American Theatre Arts Project, housed in the Provincetown Playhouse

Doyle Warren, Former Producing Director, American Theater Arts Project (in residence at The Provincetown Playhouse from 1978 to 1983)

Doric Wilson, Playwright

Zack Winestine and Katy Bordonaro, Co-Chairs, Greenwich Village Community Task Force



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May 19, 2008

John Sexton, President  
New York University  
70 Washington Square South, Room 1216  
New York, NY 10012

Re: NYU's Plans for Provincetown Playhouse and Apartments,  
133-139 MacDougal Street

Dear President Sexton:

I write regarding NYU's recently revised plans for the Provincetown Playhouse and Apartments at 133-139 MacDougal Street. I am glad that the University has listened to the strong concerns the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation and many others have expressed about the historic significance of this building and site and has revised its plans as they relate to the theater space within the building and the entry façade. However, we do feel strongly that the remainder of the building is also historically significant and merits preservation, and thus we urge you to consider further revisions to preserve the remainder of the building. We also have questions regarding the plans for the theater space which we feel require further clarification.

From Friday's presentation and materials NYU has provided, it is our understanding that the university has committed to preserve the four walls of the theater and the façade of the entrance to the theater, and specifically stated in response to questions that these elements would remain standing at all times, including through the demolition and new construction process. I ask that you confirm this commitment in writing. I also ask that you provide details regarding NYU's stated plans to reconstruct the theater space itself. I urge that any such reconstruction include restoration of the historic elements which were destroyed in the university's last renovation of the theater in 1997-98, which included the loss of the original dome over the stage designed by George Cram Cook, as well as the original stage. If the university were to proceed with its current plan to demolish the remainder of the building and retain the four walls and theater entrance façade, I believe that further details are needed in writing describing this commitment and exactly how the university intends to accomplish that.

It is also critical that the university commit in writing to the use of the space as a theater in perpetuity, and who the theater will be made available to and for what purposes. By all accounts and to the great consternation of many in the theater community, the theater has been dark much of the time over the last 10 years, and there is a great need for space within Greenwich Village for use by theater groups. This need has been exacerbated by the loss of many of our most historic theaters in recent years, including the Circle in the Square, Sullivan Street Playhouse, Variety Arts, Perry Street, and Actor's Playhouse; it is these losses which made the retention of the Provincetown Playhouse theater, the birthplace of Off-Broadway, all the more vital.

Additionally, the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation continues to strongly urge the university to preserve, retain, and re-use the whole building at 133-139 MacDougal Street. A recent tour of the building and inspection of the 1940 renovation plans show that behind the 70 year old façade are four joined 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings, likely built in the 1840's, a fact which is plainly apparent when viewing the rear facade of 133-139 MacDougal Street.

However, these are not just any four 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings; the four buildings which currently compose the Provincetown Playhouse and Apartments were at the epicenter of cultural and political life in Greenwich Village, and arguably in American Bohemia, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. While #133 housed the Provincetown Playhouse since 1918, #139 was the Playhouse's original home from 1916 to 1918. In between, #135 and #137 served as the home to the Liberal Club, the Washington Square Bookstore, and Polly's Restaurant, which collectively were ground zero for radical social, political, and intellectual movements in Greenwich Village in the early part of the last century. Margaret Sanger lectured on birth control, while Jack London, Upton Sinclair, Max Eastman, Theodore Dreiser, Jack Reed and Sinclair Lewis argued and debated there. Polly's Restaurant was run by Polly Holladay and Hippolyte Havel; Havel was an anarchist who refused to join even the radical Liberal Club because it was still an "organization," while Holladay was on the editorial board of *The Masses*. When the four buildings were combined in 1940, the Provincetown Apartments were created, which also attracted residents deeply connected to the arts, including actors Eli Wallach and Anne Jackson, and artist Dorothy Gillespie.

NYU has committed to "prioritize re-use before new development" in the planning principles it signed with Borough President Stringer's NYU Community Task Force, and to support the designation of the proposed South Village Historic District, of which 133-139 MacDougal Street is a key part. It would therefore seem entirely consistent for NYU to work with and preserve the existing building rather than demolishing all of it apart from the theater box and entry façade. The current building is being used by NYU as a theater, offices, and housing, while the new planned building would consist of a theater and offices, and only 17,000 more square feet of space than the current building. It is clear that the current building can continue to house uses which clearly are needed by the university, and it would seem that there would be room for reasonable and appropriate expansion of or additions to the building if necessary. I strongly urge you to consider this route rather than razing the existing building.

It is gratifying to see the university reconsidering its original plans, and we appreciate your willingness to continue to hear feedback from interested parties. I hope this will lead to further revisions to the current plan, and that the university will provide further details and specific commitments regarding the theater space so that there is a clear understanding regarding the university's plans.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andrew Berman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

Andrew Berman  
Executive Director

Cc: Borough President Stringer's NYU Community Task Force

# DETAILED DOCUMENTATION REGARDING THE HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE OF 133-139 MACDOUGAL STREET

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Statement by the Eugene O'Neill Society, May 23, 2008

The international Eugene O'Neill Society supports the most recent plan by New York University for preserving the structural walls of the Provincetown Playhouse, along with the exact volume and footprint of the theater, and for preserving the entryway/facade of the Playhouse, and relevant historical features and pieces of the existing theater, such as the seats.

**We emphasize, however, that the historical importance of the buildings at 133-139 MacDougal is not limited to the Playhouse itself. The buildings, called "the cornerstone of bohemia" by Steven Watson in his history, *Strange Bedfellows: The First American Avant-Garde*, housed not only the two versions of the Provincetown Playhouse, but the Liberal Club, the early version of the Washington Square Players, which became the Theatre Guild, and the Boni Brothers' Washington Square Bookshop (*emphasis added*).**

These places, along with Polly Holladay's restaurant, which occupied various parts of the building at different times, were the locus of cultural activity and the gathering places of all the figures associated with the Greenwich Village Little Renaissance (1912-1918) that began the era of Modernism in the U.S. Besides Eugene O'Neill, Susan Glaspell and George Cram Cook, the extraordinary list includes Charles Demuth, William Carlos Williams, Djuna Barnes, Edna St. Vincent Millay, John Reed, Theodore Dreiser, Marsden Hartley, Sinclair Lewis, Upton Sinclair, E. E. Cummings, Edmund Wilson, Max Eastman and Lincoln Steffens, among many others. It is impossible to think about any of these institutions or people in isolation from the others and do justice to the cultural phenomenon that was Greenwich Village in the 1910s. The preservation of this rich cultural history is vital to the preservation of the site.

**The Eugene O'Neill Society therefore supports the effort to preserve as much as possible of the buildings from era of the Little Renaissance in the current renovation (*emphasis added*).**

We also urge NYU to commit itself in writing to 1) the construction of a small museum or permanent exhibit that reflects the historical and cultural significance of the whole building as part of the building's renovation, not just a few photos of the Provincetown Playhouse in the new theater's lobby, as the current NYU plan indicates, and 2) continuing to host the annual O'Neill Festival and other appropriate public programming that reflects the theater's historical legacy from the Provincetown Players onward and its importance to experimental theater in the U.S.

Sincerely,

Brenda Murphy  
President, Eugene O'Neill Society

**From *Susan Glaspell: her life and times* By Linda Ben-Zvi  
(Susan Glaspell was one of the founders of the Provincetown Players).**

<http://books.google.com/books?id=pCxzsTd0DLQC&pg=PA123&lpg=PA123&dq=%22Liberal+club%22+macdougall+street&source=web&ots=XibXHkLFpd&sig=AgV15YXjPIOOiQ3Gha9N1UVC7Gg&hl=en>):

"Jenny Bilardi...along with her sister...also owned the buildings at 133, 135, and 139. These three story brownstones became the heart of cultural life for the Village...."

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**From the Museum of the City of NY's Bernice Abbott collection.**

(<http://www.mcny.org/collections/abbott/a192.htm>)

The Provincetown Playhouse first opened in 1916 in a town house at 139 MacDougal Street and after two seasons moved to no. 133, formerly a stables and bottling plant. Next door to the Liberal Club and Polly's Restaurant, the Playhouse, which launched the theatrical career of Eugene O'Neill, was at the heart of pre-World War I Greenwich Village bohemia. It had special significance for Abbott, who in 1918 left Ohio to live at 137 MacDougal Street with her college friends James Light and Sue Jenkins. They had moved to New York to join the Players, and Light later became the company's director.

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**From the Landmarks Preservation Commission's landmark designation report for adjacent 127, 129, and 131 MacDougal Street.**

(<http://www.nyc.gov/html/lpc/downloads/pdf/reports/131macdougall.pdf>)

p.4 -- "20th century History of MacDougal Street): "In 1914, the block of MacDougal Street just south of Washington Square emerged as a cultural and social center of the bohemian set. After the Liberal Club, headquarters also of the feminist Heterodoxy Club, moved into No. 137 in 1913, it was joined the following year by Polly Holladay's popular basement restaurant, also in No. 137, and Albert and Charles Boni's Washington Square Bookshop, specializing in modern literature, next door in No. 135. The Provincetown Playhouse, opened in 1916 in No. 139, relocated in No. 133 in 1918."

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**From NYU's own history of the Provincetown Playhouse.**

(<http://pages.nyu.edu/~jqk2598/provincetown.html>)

"Jenny Belardi owned a group of row houses on MacDougal Street, just south of Washington Square Park. At 137 MacDougal was the famous gathering spot for "those interested in New Ideas," the Liberal Club, and downstairs in the basement was Polly Holladay's restaurant, which seventy years earlier had been the home of Nathaniel Currier, of Currier and Ives fame. At 135 MacDougal was the Washington Square Bookshop, owned by brothers Charles and Albert Boni. In 1916, Belardi rented out the parlor floor of 139 MacDougal to George Cram Cook and John Reed for the Provincetown Players to make their New York debut on November 3rd in what they now named "The Playwright's Theatre." (note: the current Provincetown Playhouse is at #133, all currently part of the same building)

**From a letter to the Editor of the *Villager* by Brenda Murphy, Board member of the O'Neill Society and distinguished professor of English at the University of Connecticut (the Playhouse played a key role).**

([http://www.thevillager.com/villager\\_261/letterstotheeditor.html](http://www.thevillager.com/villager_261/letterstotheeditor.html))

*To The Editor:*

Re "N.Y.U. would drop curtain on O'Neill's Playhouse" (news article, April 29):

I am shocked to hear that New York University is planning to demolish the building at 133-139 Macdougall St., which includes two of the most significant Greenwich Village historic and cultural sites, the Provincetown Playhouse and the Liberal Club, both central to the Village's Little Renaissance just prior to World War I, which began the whole era of Modernism in American art and culture.

The Provincetown not only nurtured O'Neill, our first globally significant playwright and the only American playwright to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, but as the home of both the Provincetown Players and the Experimental Theatre, Inc., it and the Liberal Club were the meeting places where an extraordinary collection of writers, artists and other significant cultural figures, such as Charles Demuth, William Carlos Williams, Susan Glaspell, Djuna Barnes, Edna St. Vincent Millay, John Reed, Theodore Dreiser, Marsden Hartley, Sinclair Lewis, Upton Sinclair, e. e. cummings, Edmund Wilson, Max Eastman and Lincoln Steffens, gathered and collaborated. In the effort to preserve this important piece of Greenwich Village and American culture, N.Y.U. has been in the lead. It would be a shame for the university to abandon it now.

I'm planning to pass the link to The Villager's article on to some groups that will be very concerned to hear of the building's demise, such as the Eugene O'Neill Society, the Susan Glaspell Society and the Modernist Studies Association.

### **Brenda Murphy**

*Murphy is a board of trustees member and distinguished professor of English at the University of Connecticut*

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**From the NY Times, "When the Village Broke Free," by Christine Stansell, Published: June 2, 2000.**

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9503E1DB133CF931A35755C0A9669C8B63&sec=travel&spon=&pagewanted=all>

When the local, genteel Liberal Club in 1912 balked at admitting Goldman and the historian W. E. B. Dubois (who had come to the Village from Atlanta to edit the recently founded N.A.A.C.P.'s journal) on the grounds of politics (Goldman) and race (Dubois), the bohemian cadre bolted and set up their own insistently bohemian Liberal Club at 137 Macdougall Street in a ramshackle old row house.

The new club blossomed with conviviality, come-hither sociability, emancipated talk and liberated sex. The decor stressed the differences of this "new" club for men and women from the Victorian gentlemen's or ladies' club: no William Morris wallpaper or deep upholstered furniture. Instead, there

were bare wood floors and tables, Cubist and Fauve art on the walls, chairs painted in fiery Futurist oranges and acid yellows. The clientele included young women from the heartland who had fled their families, Jewish socialists, left-leaning lawyers, at least one Princeton dropout (the playwright Eugene O'Neill), the golden young Harvard men like Reed and Lippmann, theater people, journalists, poets -- both famous and aspiring -- "all the tin pot revolutionaries and sophomoric advanced thinkers in New York," the curmudgeonly newspaperman H. L. Mencken -- definitely not in their circle -- dubbed them.

The crowd gathered in the late afternoons and stayed on, talking, drinking, dancing to the player piano (not mannerly waltzes but the Turkey Trot and the shimmy), drifting downstairs for a meal at Polly Holladay's restaurant or a visit to the Boni Brothers' bookstore next door at No. 135, then back upstairs to listen to talks that ranged from disquisitions on the tango to reports of the latest battle on the labor front. Love affairs materialized and spouses cast off familiar roles to flirt, dance and talk as comrades, friends and colleagues.

This bohemia was in-dwelling and self-dramatizing -- literally so, since the Liberal Club's drama group put the membership's own psychosexual dilemmas onstage in amateur theatricals that coalesced into the Provincetown Playhouse, at 139 Macdougall Street, which stayed in place as a professional company after the club and its bohemian theater had folded.

In the summer of 1916, the Provincetown Players began performing on Cape Cod, where a number of Villagers were vacationing. Returning to New York, the Players set themselves up in a complex of buildings on Macdougall Street that grew out of the Liberal Club. The group would produce several of O'Neill's plays.

LIBERAL CLUB, 137 Macdougall Street. The "Meeting Place for Those Interested in New Ideas," as the letterhead read. In 1914 the walls were broken through to the Boni Brothers' bookshop at No. 135 to join the two. Polly Holladay's restaurant was also in the building.

PROVINCETOWN PLAYHOUSE, 139 Macdougall Street. The Playhouse, in the late teens, became part of the complex that grew out of the Liberal Club. Christine Ell's restaurant, considered the heir to Polly Holladay's next door, was on the second floor of No. 139. Together with the Boni Brothers' bookshop at No. 135 and the Liberal Club at 137, this formed a trio of buildings that were knocked down (NOTE: They were not actually knocked down but renovated according to 1940 plans we have reviewed) and rebuilt as an enlarged theater for the Provincetown Players.

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**From *Inside Greenwich Village: A New York City Neighborhood, 1898-1918*,  
By Gerald W. McFarland.**

[http://scholarworks.umass.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1007&context=umpress\\_igv](http://scholarworks.umass.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1007&context=umpress_igv)

The two new places, Polly's Restaurant and the rooms of a reorganized Liberal Club, shared the same MacDougall Street address, with Polly's occupying the basement and the Liberal Club just upstairs. Polly's Restaurant was a joint project among three Village anarchists— Polly Holladay, her brother Louis Holladay, and Hippolyte Havel, Polly's sometime lover. Havel claimed to have come

up with the idea for a Village bistro where radicals could eat together and talk revolution. Often cited as the purest example of the Seventh Villager type, Havel amazed and delighted his compatriots with his ability to be more outrageous than anyone else. He gained notoriety by addressing patrons of the restaurant as “bourgeois pigs,” an insult that never failed to please those in search of authentic radical ambience. Havel served as cook and waiter, and Polly handled finances and flirted with customers. When discovered by the press in early 1914, the restaurant was still called simply “The Basement,” but it went down in Village history as “Polly’s,” the first of several restaurants she was to run and, more important, the first of many Village bistros to be run by a self-identified bohemian owner for a bohemian crowd.

The Liberal Club story is more complex. Founded about 1907, the club was a debating society for socially progressive New Yorkers. Although during the 1910–1912 period its meetings were held in the Gramercy Park area, Villagers—Lincoln Steffens, Hutch Hapgood, and Percy Stickney Grant—played leading roles as officers or charter members. The club’s monthly meetings followed a format in which a member or guest speaker presented a general proposition—in February 1910 Steffens took as his theme “there is good in good people,” for example—and then defended the stated position against all challengers.

In the summer of 1913, however, various internal conflicts led these kidglove radicals to split irrevocably, a division that became public in September when the president, Reverend Percy Stickney Grant, resigned along with most of the other officers. The immediate cause seems to have been a controversy over sexual morality. One member, Henrietta Rodman, a city schoolteacher who had battled resourcefully with the city Board of Education over discrimination against married women teachers (especially those who became pregnant), secretly married a man who allegedly had a commonlaw wife. Rodman’s campaign on behalf of teachers did not trouble moderate Liberal Club members. But they objected strenuously when it seemed that Rodman and her supporters (described in newspaper reports as “ultraliberal” Greenwich Villagers, although several of them did not live in the Village) also expected the organization to take a tolerant attitude toward the practice of free love, the convention-defying lifestyle to which Rodman subscribed. Rodman’s defenders said that club officials had no business condemning her on a matter of private morality, but divisions over this point proved irreconcilable, and the Rodman faction relocated itself to club rooms on MacDougal Street, thus initiating a new era in which the Liberal Club became closely associated with the Masses crowd.

Like many women in the Masses and new Liberal Club circle, Rodman was a women’s rights activist. A Socialist, free love advocate, and feminist, she repeatedly made headlines during the 1913–1915 period. Her high profile war with the Board of Education, which finally resulted in her suspension from teaching, ultimately forced the board to relax its prohibition on women teachers returning to the job after having a baby. A radical feminist as well as an advocate of women’s suffrage, Rodman insisted that suffrage would not be a significant achievement unless women voters adopted more socially progressive views than men. By wearing sandals, smoking in public, keeping her maiden name, and campaigning for legalizing the distribution of birth control information, Rodman challenged many other conventions of her time. She founded a Feminist Alliance that advocated a radical new scheme of cooperative housing for married professional women proposed by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, another leading feminist of the day.

**From *Around Washington Square: An Illustrated History of Greenwich Village*,  
By Luther S. Harris**

[http://books.google.com/books?id=K8aMN5YOvkC&pg=RA4-PA190&lpg=RA4-PA190&dq=%22Liberal+club%22+macdougals+street&source=web&ots=1XYmLMeFW&sig=waO0kcR8lq4OhM\\_LmUMRcgs2dVc&hl=en#PRA4-PA190,M1](http://books.google.com/books?id=K8aMN5YOvkC&pg=RA4-PA190&lpg=RA4-PA190&dq=%22Liberal+club%22+macdougals+street&source=web&ots=1XYmLMeFW&sig=waO0kcR8lq4OhM_LmUMRcgs2dVc&hl=en#PRA4-PA190,M1)

In 1914, several of the independent rumblings that Kreymborg sensed came together in a row of four brownstones just below the square at 133-139 MacDougal Street. This area also had been the haunt of nonconformists since the 1890s, with Maria's restaurant across the street at No. 146 and the Café Bertolotti around the corner at 85 West Third Street. The loudest noise came from Henrietta Rodman's Liberal Club, number about 100 members, which had been the pioneer settler.

Rents were cheap in the run-down houses when Rodman located at the club's quarters in rooms at No. 137 in 1913. She let the space on alternate Saturdays to the Heterodoxy Club, a powerful feminist organization. (The membership of the group, whose goals went far beyond acquiring the vote, included Mabel Dodge, Henrietta Rodman, Crystal Eastman, and Ida Rauh.) Occupying two parlor-floor rooms, the club had two chief attractions—an upright electric pianola and a big fireplace. Furnishings were simple with only a few tables and some wooden chairs scattered about. In addition to weekly lectures and symposia covering intellectual subjects and the latest fashions, dancing enlivened the scene. On Friday nights people paid a quarter for wine and the opportunity to dance such daringly modern arrivals as the turkey trot, from San Francisco, and the tango, from the new French dance competitions, to the player piano...

Soon after the Liberal Club found quarters, Polly Hollyday and her lover, Hippolyte Havel, opened their quintessentially bohemian restaurant, an immediate neighborhood favorite, in the basement of 137 MacDougal Street. The Boni brothers' venturesome bookstore for modern literature (also known as the Washington Square Bookshop) opened in No. 135 next door. In 1914, too, a group in the Liberal Club, named the Washington Square Players, consisting of Albert Boni, Ida Rauh, Lawrence Langner (an attorney and theater buff), and Philip Moeller (a playwright and director) were making plans to convert No. 139 into a theater for American plays. The cultural core of the district had come to life.

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**From *An Eye on the Modern Century: Selected Letters of Henry McBride*,  
By Henry McBride, Steven Watson, and Catherine Morris**

<http://books.google.com/books?id=4Z77P8HM37MC&pg=PA343&lpg=PA343&dq=%22135+MacDougal%22&source=web&ots=POsZtqw4Vr&sig=X5OTLo9-SzH70uFPH3LIPCLRkrE&hl=en>

BONI, Albert (1892-1981), was a pioneering publisher and bookstore owner. He was a member of the illustrious Harvard class of 1910 (which included John Reed, Walter Lippmann, and T.S. Eliot). Boni was an instrumental figure in the rise of Greenwich Village bohemia and the dissemination of modernist trends in writings, especially Imagist poetry. With his brother Charles (1894-1969) he founded the Washington Square Bookshop at 135 MacDougal Street in 1913. The shop became a headquarters for Greenwich Village bohemians, published *Des Imagistes*, and offered a setting for the founding of the Washington Square Players, the Theatre Guild, and the Provincetown Players. The brothers joined forces with Horace Liverwright in 1917, becoming the publishing firm Boni and

Liverwright. One of the most adventurous of mainstream publishers, at one time Boni and Liverwright could claim five Nobel Prize winners on their list, including Hemingway, Faulkner, and Eliot. When Boni and Liverwright broke up, the toss of a coin left the Boni brothers without a publishing house. From 1923 to 1928, they worked under the name Boni and Boni.

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**From *Republic of Dreams: Greenwich Village: The American Bohemia, 1910-1960***

**By Ross Wetzsteon**

<http://books.google.com/books?id=o2DB77ccf9sC&pg=PA167&lpg=PA167&dq=%22Liberal+club%22+macdougall+street&source=web&ots=a7dy-48FID&sig=Kd5iaiD9J29ROzI7srQqrZMQWxs&hl=en#PPA166,M1>

[But] Henrietta [Rodman]'s chief target was a *liberal* institution—called, indeed, the Liberal Club. Founded in Gramercy Park in 1908 by the muckraker Lincoln Steffens, the Reverend Percy Stickney Grant, and other progressive-minded gentlemen to press for reform legislation, the club put particular emphasis on liberalizing the divorce laws but had few female members. Henrietta joined its ranks, and instantly began to urge expansion of its agenda. “Why aren’t you supporting my case against the Board of Education?” she asked. “Why doesn’t the club have any black members?” These questions were disconcerting enough, but when her passionate advocacy of free love so inspired one of the more prominent members that he not only took a mistress but asked her to move in with him and his wife, the leadership of the Liberal Club had heard enough about liberalism. Rallying her supporters, Henrietta discovered that what had seemed a mere splinter group consisted of the vast majority of the members, and in 1913 they moved en masse to 137 MacDougal Street above Polly [Hollyday]'s restaurant, where thanks to Henrietta the renowned Liberal Club became another of the seminal Village institutions of the teens.

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**From *It Happened on Washington Square* By Emily Kies Folpe**

<http://books.google.com/books?id=thWVcHVixF4C&pg=PA260&lpg=PA260&dq=%22Liberal+club%22+macdougall+street&source=web&ots=f-UeZ1HD6Q&sig=yRYdhYs1UEHkGF5aRjVcVLYaiVY&hl=en#PPA261,M1>

Liberal Club members were also involved with the Provincetown Playhouse, the first theater in the country to commission and produce only American plays. George Cram “Jig” Cook and his wife Susan Glaspell had been eager to start a theater that would foster American talent. During their summers in Provincetown, Massachusetts, the Cooks established the Provincetown Players with friends from Greenwich Village. Looking about for a new play in the summer of 1916, they were recommended to Eugene O’Neill, who had left his “garbage flat,” as he called his abode at 38 Washington Square, for Provincetown that season. The Cape Code production of O’Neill’s *Bound East for Cardiff* was so successful that, at Reed’s suggestion, the Cooks decided to open a theater in New York.

They found space first at 139 MacDougal Street, next door to Polly’s restaurant and the Liberal Club, and then took over an old dwelling a few doors down at 133 MacDougal. Playing to a small audience

seated on simple benches, the Provincetown Players presented the work of several playwrights and made theater history for ten years. (In 1998, NYU renovated and reopened the Playhouse.) O'Neill soon gained recognition as a major dramatist, winning the Pulitzer Prize for *Beyond the Horizon* in 1920. His controversial play *All God's Chillun Got Wings* launched Paul Robeson on his career in 1924. O'Neill's affair with Louise Bryant formed the basis of *Strange Interlude*, and the saloon setting of *The Iceman Cometh* was modeled on a Sixth Avenue tavern a block from the Square where O'Neill and his friends congregated. The willowy red-headed poet Edna St. Vincent Millay appeared in a few roles at the Playhouse, and in 1927 Bette Davis made her debut there.

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**From *The Provincetown Players and the Culture of Modernity Series: Cambridge Studies in American Theatre and Drama* (No. 23) Brenda Murphy, University of Connecticut, Published January 2006.**

<http://www.cambridge.org/us/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9780521838528&ss=exc>

The most immediate organizational precursors of the Provincetown Players were located in Greenwich Village, and were characterized by the direct participation of key figures among the founders of the Provincetown Players. The Liberal Club, "A Meeting Place for Those Interested in New Ideas," was an old New York institution which, shaken up by the new generation of Greenwich Village leftists in 1912, split apart over the issue of allowing "Negro" members and, under the leadership of Henrietta Rodman, located itself in a new headquarters at 137 Macdougall Street, off Washington Square. The new Club was "the center of much of the resurgence and renaissance associated with Greenwich Village during the flamboyant but fertile years between 1912 and 1918 ... in the five years of its turbulent existence [it] attracted most of the movers and shakers of the pre-war Village to its plays, parties, poetry readings, debates, demonstrations, dances, and art exhibitions."<sup>23</sup> The Liberal Club would come to function as the chief meeting place for the artists, writers, and leftist thinkers who were part of what has been characterized as the New York Little Renaissance, particularly those associated with *The Masses*, Alfred Stieglitz's Photo-Secession Gallery, known as 291, and the Provincetown Players. Among its members were future Provincetown Players Cook, Glaspell, Reed, Dell, Hapgood, Boyce, Eastman, Vorse, Ida Rauh, Alfred Kreymborg, Charles Demuth, Harry Kemp, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Frank Shay, and E. J. ("Teddy") and Stella Ballantine.

The dramatic wing of the Liberal Club was informally known as "The Dell Players" because it featured plays written by Dell and staged under his direction. Dell, who had been "enraptured" by the work of the Chicago Little Theatre, had begun a play with the poet Arthur Davidson Ficke in Chicago, just before he left for New York. This play, invented over lunch and "called 'St. George of the Minute,' a satire upon 'modern' ideas," reemerged when Dell was asked "to write a play to produce at the housewarming of the Liberal Club" when it moved to Greenwich Village in 1913.<sup>24</sup> Renamed "St. George in Greenwich Village" and produced, as Dell said, "'in the Chinese manner', without scenery – also without a stage, curtains or footlights," the play was produced at the Liberal Club in November. Dell wrote that "the Village enjoyed being satirized, and this was a satire upon everything in which the Village believed."<sup>25</sup> Historian Steven Watson has suggested that the play "set the tone for the new Liberal Club. Presenting the Village through the eyes of a newcomer, Dell's play satirized modern ideas and was sprinkled with topical references to anarchism, Futurism, suffragism, and Montessori schools. It was produced on a shoestring, with no costumes, no curtain, no stage, no

lights. Sherwood Anderson, Helen Westley, and other cast members improvised new lines when they forgot the ones Dell had written."<sup>26</sup>

The Club soon acquired a movable stage, curtains, and footlights, and produced a bill of three one-act plays written by Dell every few months. A group of amateur actors gradually emerged from the Club, including several who would later appear with the Provincetown Players – Kirah Markham, Justus Sheffield, and Ida Rauh. Dell's plays were written for a self-enclosed amateur group. He noted that "some were romantic and poetic, but most of them were satirical little comedies making fun of ourselves – sometimes making fun of the ideas which I was earnestly propagating in *The Masses*." He insisted "it was only in the privacy of our Liberal Club little theatre, amongst ourselves, that I made fun of the suffrage movement; I would not have thought of doing so in *Vanity Fair*; in public, I made fun of the anti-suffragists ... the Village quite understood this attitude; it wanted its most serious beliefs mocked at; it enjoyed laughing at its own convictions."<sup>27</sup> The Dell Players embodied the joyful amateurism, the group spirit, and the spontaneity that characterized the Provincetown Players at its beginning, as well as a coterie narrowness that was eventually to give way among the Provincetown Players to broader social concerns and a more serious aesthetic vision.

The most direct precursor of the Provincetown Players was a group of Liberal Club members who wanted to take their theatrical work more seriously than Dell was interested in doing. Lawrence Langner described it in his memoir as originating with Ida Rauh, the lawyer and feminist activist married to Max Eastman, whose real desire was to act. According to Langner, she thought that the dramatic wing of the Liberal Club was "absurd," as did he, and he suggested starting their own theatre along the lines of the Chicago Little Theatre, which he had come to know while working in Chicago the previous year. They planned the new theatre during the winter of 1914, and, according to Langner, "as soon as word spread around among the younger generation that we were going to start a theatre, many of the young writers in the Village began to turn out plays. As none of us had the experience or patience to get further along than one act, we limited our efforts in the beginning to one-act plays, which was wise."<sup>28</sup> After the second bill, "Ida Rauh resigned from the Washington Square Players, not caring for the parts that were offered to her."<sup>29</sup> By the winter of 1916, she and Cook had become the central figures in the organization of the Provincetown Players.