

Mixed-Use Building from 1891

Individual Landmark

54-56 East 125th Street



Pythian Hall. Photo: Lorraine Colbert

Pythian Hall (formerly Madison Hall), an L-shaped building with entrances at 54 East 125th Street and 1941 Madison Avenue, that wraps around an existing corner building, was built in 1891 by Harlem businessman William A. Martin as a concert hall and meeting rooms. Martin would later be elected President of the Harlem Chamber of Commerce in 1899.

From 1891, Madison Hall served as home, meeting place, and concert venue for diverse and often controversial religious, political, musical, Masonic, and community organizations. The newly formed Harlem Philharmonic Society gave its second concert at Madison Hall on Thursday, December 3rd, 1891. Their first performance was held in the auditorium of the Young Men's Christian Association, with disastrous results. The Philharmonic would later move to the Harlem Opera House at 211 West 125th Street, which was demolished in 1959.

In 1892, Masonic Bunting Lodge No. 655. rented the top floors at 1941 Madison Avenue, where they celebrated the lodge's 25th anniversary on February 8, 1892. In November and December 1892, there were lectures on various subjects by different speakers, including "Dust and Diseases," "Empire of the Czar," "Life Bright and Dark Sides of Hospital Life," and "Some Curiosities of Music."

The *New York Times* reported on February 19, 1893, that, "Mrs. Annie Besant's lecture in Madison Hall, One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street and Madison Avenue, to-night will be a farewell one." Mrs. Besant was headed to London. Her final New York lecture would be "Modern Progress and Theosophy" and the *New York Times* promised, "Some interesting events in modern history will be touched upon, with significant Theosophical explanations."

On May 31, 1893, the *New York Times* reported, "The citizens of Harlem and the annexed district are in a state of indignation over the action of the Rapid-Transit Commissioners in refusing the offer of the Manhattan Elevated Road to extend its roads, and they will hold a mass meeting on Friday at 8 o'clock P. M. in Madison Hall...and enter a vigorous protest against what they consider to be arbitrary action."

On October 27, 1894, the auditorium was the scene of an enthusiastic anti-Tammany meeting. The next day, the *Sun* reported that the mass meeting was attended by "the anti-Tammanyites of the Twenty-sixth Assembly district, the German American Union of the Twenty-fifth district, and the Italian American Reform Club."

In November 1884, Professor E. Stone Wiggins plastered posters throughout the neighborhood announcing his upcoming appearances at Madison Hall. He promoted himself as "the Canadian astronomer and weather prophet, who has gained great renown by his weather prophecies." He booked Madison Hall to "discourse to the Harlemites on 'The Cause of the Deluge' and 'Mars, Where Man Came From,'" as reported in the *New York Times* on November 14.

In 1898, New York City rented 1941 Madison Avenue as the temporary location for Public School 24, for \$4,500 per year. The school occupied the building for at least two years, and it was here, according to M. Jordan's letter to the *New York Times*, that the school's orchestra was formed. The orchestra's first concert was held in the building, and conducted by Dr. Henry T. Fleck, who was the conductor of the Harlem Philharmonic concert in 1891.

In 1904, the Christian Catholic Church in Zion (later renamed Christian Catholic Apostolic Church) rented space at 1941 Madison Avenue. The church was founded by John Alexander Dowie, an evangelist and faith healer. Dowie also founded the City of Zion in Illinois, where he personally owned all of the land and established many businesses. The operations of the City of Zion have been characterized as "a carefully devised large-scale platform for securities fraud..." Dowie's lieutenant initiated an investigation of his business practices and deposed him from leadership in 1905. He was given an allowance until his death.

The November 22, 1904, edition of the *New York Times* reported, "Herman Warszawiak, after a brief career as an apostle for Dowie, has been expelled from the ranks of Zion. The Dowieites opened headquarters in Harlem about a month ago, and have been holding meetings in Madison Hall, at Madison Avenue and One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street. Warszawiak was a leading light and frequent speaker. But a few days ago, it was learned yesterday, George S. Mason, Vice Prophet, and overseer for the State of New York, called a meeting of the local authorities of the society and dismissed Warszawiak. Warszawiak became converted to Christianity several years ago. He was later dismissed from the Rev. Dr. John Hall's Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church." During the two-year long proceeding to expel

him from the Presbyterian Church, Warszawiak was accused of bribing Jews to convert, but the allegations were never proven. Warszawiak, a Polish Jew, Anglicized his name to Warwick.

The Ferrer School of Socialism, also known as the Modern School, founded by Spanish anarchist Francesco Ferrer, rented space in the Madison Hall building between 1910 and 1919. Ferrer was arrested at the end of August 1909, following the previous month's civil unrest and week of outright insurrection in Barcelona, known as "Tragic Week." Citizens, wary from a prior war and government corruption, demonstrated against a call for military reserves to fight a renewed colonial war in Morocco. Ferrer was charged with orchestrating the rebellion and became its most famous casualty. Although Ferrer participated in the events of the Catalan Tragic Week, he did not mastermind the events as charged. Ferrer maintained his innocence, and was barred from presenting testimony. The court case culminated in Ferrer's death by firing squad.

The street level of 1941 Madison Avenue was converted to retail space in 1910, and owner William A. Martin leased the store to Harriet Cadugan "for a number of years." By 1941, the retail store had been renovated as Matt's Bar and Restaurant. In 1911, the Consolidated Building Trades Employers' Association of New York City had its headquarters at 1941 Madison Avenue.

The December 4, 1915, edition of the *Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide* reported, "The Knights of Pythias are reported to have taken a lease from A. Schulte for two floors in the building forming an "L" around the south-east corner of Madison Avenue and 125th St, known as Madison Hall. The lease is said to be for a term of twenty-one years, at an aggregate rental of more than \$100,060. The Knights of Pythias is the first fraternal organization to receive a charter under an act of the United States Congress and have added PYTHIAN HALL to pressed metal cornices on both sides of the building." On February 4, 1918, the Knights celebrated their golden jubilee at Madison Hall.

In the early 1920's, Pythian Hall was home to the Middle Atlantic Circuit of the Locomotive Engineers, and the Odd Fellows Lodge. A ballroom opened in the latter half of the century at 1941 Madison Avenue.

In the late 1960s, Georgiana Werner, a former public-school teacher, and the widow of Ludlow Weymouth Werner, editor and publisher of the *New York Age*, established Parent Preparation Inc. at 1941 Madison Avenue. It was established for children of single mothers. One of the criteria for admittance to the school was that mothers had to take weekly parenting classes. Werner, who could pass for white, and who was emphatic about being black, received her master's degree in education from Boston University in 1935. She moved to Washington Heights in 1939, and married Ludlow Weymouth Werner in 1942. On June 19, 2002, neighbors, concerned that they had not seen the 95-year-old Ms. Werner for a few days, entered her home and found her dead. She had been strangled with an electrical cord and stuffed in a closet. Georgiana Werner's murder was never solved.

In 1992, the Pilgrim Cathedral of Harlem was established at street level. The church would later move to 15 West 126th Street, under the leadership of Bishop Charles J. Reed.

In 1997, the Reverend Al Sharpton rented the second ballroom at 1941 Madison Avenue for the headquarters of the National Action Network (NAN). On January 22, 2003, the *New York Times* reported, "The Harlem ballroom where the Rev. Al Sharpton has held court for six years, preaching civil rights and excoriating politicians who raised his ire, was destroyed yesterday morning by fire. The electrical fire began on the second floor of the building, and before it was extinguished nearly gutted the top two floors. Today the ground floor is home to shops and restaurants while upstairs is the Israelite Church of God and Jesus Christ."