

FREDERICK AYER MANSION

INTERIOR

BOSTON LANDMARKS COMMISSION STUDY REPORT



Petition # 275.21
Boston Landmarks Commission
Environment Department
City of Boston

Report on the Potential Designation of

**The Interior of the
Frederick Ayer Mansion
395 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts**

As a Landmark under Chapter 772 of the Acts of 1975, as amended

Approved by:



Rosanne Foley, Executive Director

August 23, 2022

Date

Approved by:



Lynn Smiledge, Chair

August 23, 2022

Date

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INTRODUCTION

The designation of the interior Tiffany-designed spaces of the Frederick Ayer Mansion at 395 Commonwealth Avenue (Frederick Ayer Mansion Interior) was initiated in 2021 after a petition was submitted by registered voters to the Boston Landmarks Commission asking that the Commission designate the property under the provisions of Chapter 772 of the Acts of 1975, as amended. The purpose of such a designation is to recognize and protect a physical feature or improvement which in whole or part has historical, cultural, social, architectural, or aesthetic significance.

Summary

The Frederick Ayer Mansion is architecturally significant at the local, state, regional, and national levels as the last surviving example of a complete and *in situ* residential commission by the famed American artist, designer, and craftsman Louis Comfort Tiffany. It is one of only three remaining examples of a Tiffany-designed interior and the only known example of Tiffany's exterior stone mosaics on a residential building in the United States. Visitors to the Ayer Mansion are surrounded by what Alice Cooney Frelinghuysen, Curator of American Decorative Arts at the Metropolitan Museum, has described as "a visual feast of color, light and texture." The New York architect Alfred J. Manning worked in concert with Tiffany to design the building and its decorative scheme with masterful integration of exterior and interior artwork and architecture. It has further significance at the local level as a unique example of Moorish and Byzantine eclectic architecture in Boston. The Frederick Ayer Mansion is historically significant at the local level for its connection with the successful entrepreneur and art collector, Frederick Ayer and his wife Ellen Banning Ayer and as a component of the major residential development of Boston's Back Bay neighborhood in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

The Boston Landmark petition for the Tiffany-designed interior spaces of the Ayer Mansion was initiated by Jeanne Pelletier, who served as Preservation Advisor to the Campaign for the Ayer Mansion, and Scott Steward, an Ayer descendant and President of the Campaign for the Ayer Mansion, which since 1998 has spearheaded efforts to fund and undertake restoration, education, and programming. While the exterior of the mansion is protected by the landmark district guidelines of the Back Bay Architectural District, the interior remains vulnerable to change. Although a Massachusetts Historical Commission Preservation Restriction exists for the property covering both exterior and interior features, Landmark designation would provide additional protection and guidance and would acknowledge the importance of this interior and this singular property's outstanding historical, architectural, and artistic significance. This study report contains Standards and Criteria which have been prepared to guide future physical changes to the property in order to protect its integrity and character.

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1.0 LOCATION

1.1 Address

395 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts 02215.

1.2 Assessor's Parcel Number

0503829000

1.3 Area in which Property is Located

The Frederick Ayer Mansion at 395 Commonwealth Avenue is an attached townhouse in the Back Bay neighborhood in Boston. It is within the Back Bay Architectural District (MACRIS BOS.BW), a local historic district designated in 1966 and in the Back Bay Historic District (MACRIS BOS.BT), which was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1973. The narrow rectangular parcel of 4,898 square feet extends between Commonwealth Avenue (south) and Marlborough Street (north). The property is located about midway in the block bounded by Massachusetts Avenue (east) and Charlesgate East (west). The building spans the width of the lot and shares party walls with the buildings on either side. A small garden area in front and a parking area at the rear complete the site layout.

1.4 Map Showing Location

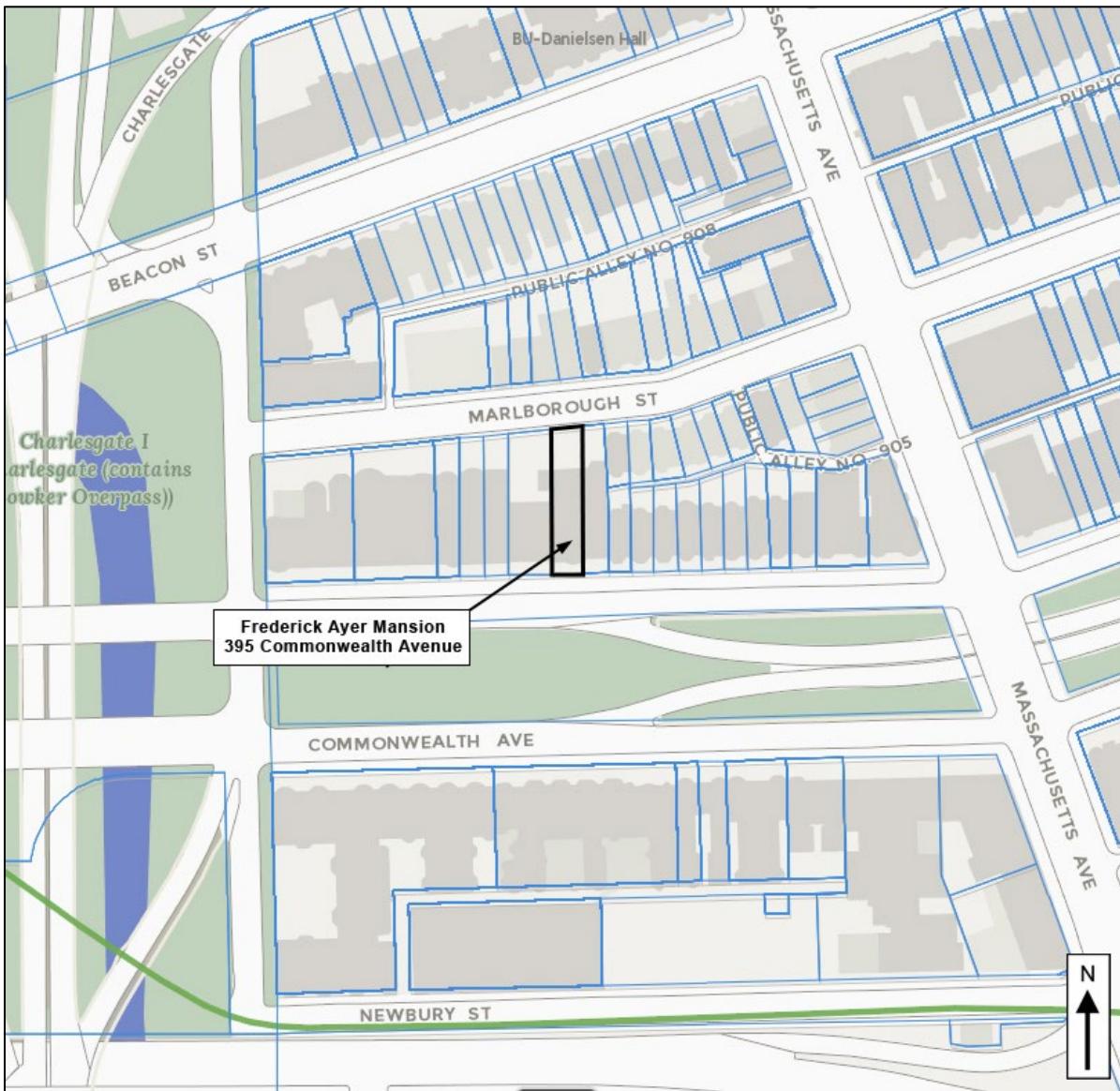


Figure 1. Map showing the boundaries of parcel # 0503829000 (Boston Tax Parcel Viewer 2021).

2.0 DESCRIPTION

2.1 Type and Use

When completed in 1901, the Frederick Ayer Mansion was first used as a private residence for Frederick Ayer and his second wife, Ellen Banning Ayer, until their deaths in 1918. In 1923, the Estate of Frederick Ayer sold the property to Ethel Josephine Abbott, and further deeds and business guides indicate that the property was used as office space, a medical clinic, and the headquarters of an insurance company until the 1960s. In 1964, the Association of Cultural Interchange, Inc., now known as the Trimount Foundation, Inc., purchased the property, and used the property as a female students' dormitory until December 2021, when it was sold to the current owner, 395-399 Commonwealth Avenue LLC. The property is in the Boston Proper zoning district, subdistrict H-3-65, Apartment Residential. It is in a Groundwater Conservation Overlay District and the Back Bay Architectural District.

2.2 Physical Description of the Resource

Note: The following description draws from three sources. It is adapted from the 2005 National Historic Landmark nomination by Leslie Donovan and Bernard Zirnheld of Tremont Preservation Services, which provides a thorough recitation of the building's exterior and interior attributes at that time, with updates and modifications reflecting restoration work and research since that time, provided by Jeanne M. Pelletier, preservation advisor.^{1,2} It also incorporates information from the original landmark petition and current site visit observations by the study report project team. As the interior features of the house are the focus of this proposed designation and report, the exterior is only briefly discussed.

Exterior

The Frederick Ayer Mansion (Ayer Mansion) occupies a typical rectangular lot in Boston's Back Bay neighborhood set toward the middle of the block between Massachusetts Avenue and Charlesgate East on the north side of Commonwealth Avenue. A 1901 photograph published in *American Architect and Building News* shows the building much as it appears today and indicates the stained-glass windows that have been removed (Figure 2).

The attached five-story townhouse faces south and is set back approximately 12 feet from the sidewalk (Photos 1 and 2). The front of the lot is enclosed by an iron fence and gate that are not original. A paved walk leads from the sidewalk to the entrance steps. Steep granite steps lead down on the east side to an excavated basement-level areaway. This lower area is fronted by a retaining wall, which forms a planting bed on the sidewalk level above. The rear elevation sits back

¹ Leslie Donovan and Bernard Zirnheld, *National Historic Landmark Nomination: Frederick Ayer Mansion*. Tremont Preservation Services, accepted by the National Park Service, April 8, 2005.

² Jeanne M. Pelletier, Preservation Advisor. "The Interior of the Frederick Ayer Mansion, Draft Report", 2021; Jeanne M. Pelletier, Preservation Advisor. "Landmark Petition Form for The Interior of the Frederick Ayer Mansion," 2021.

approximately 25 feet from Marlborough Street with a paved parking area between (Photo 3). A set of concrete stairs on the west side leads down to an excavated basement entrance.

Front Facade

Designed in the Classical Revival style, the south (facade) is constructed of large, dressed granite blocks with limestone trim at the belt courses and balcony parapet. The four-bay facade has the main entrance on the west side and features an off-center, two-story bow on the east side, which is surmounted by a parapet forming a balcony at the third story (Photos 4 and 5). Mosaic panels and banding are set into limestone at the main entrance surround, in the surround of a single round window at the second story, within the molding of the belt courses, at the third story balcony, at the spandrels between the windows at the fifth story, and at the frieze and underside of the modillions at the cornice. Four of the original seven mosaic panels set in the balcony parapet are reproductions modeled after the three surviving originals and were installed in 2014. All of the mosaics on the building's facade are constructed of limestone and granite tesserae. As noted in the National Historic Landmark nomination, these mosaics "constitute the only known examples of exterior ornament designed by Louis Comfort Tiffany to remain *in situ*" on a residential building.³

The stone mosaic panels on the building are composed of red, black, white, and yellow limestone and granite tesserae set in limestone bases and trim. The square panels set into the balcony and spandrels feature geometric patterns, with alternating designs. The mosaic banding of the round window surround, the balcony parapet edges, the building cornice, and the belt courses are also geometric in design (Photo 6). Many of these patterns recur in mosaics and other decorative features on the interior of the mansion. Elements of the mosaic panels set into the main door surround also reappear in the building's interior and the stained-glass screens on the first story, including the two repeating geometric designs and the lotus flower motif. As stated in the National Historic Landmark nomination, "the geometric patterns found in the mosaics of 395 Commonwealth Avenue reflect the influence of Byzantine mosaics claimed by Tiffany Studios in an early twentieth century promotional brochure."⁴

Seven slab granite steps with unadorned granite knee walls lead up to the entrance (see Photo 4). Double copper-clad doors at the main entrance have large brass ring handles and two rows of four green Tiffany "turtleback" glass lights set high on each door. The metal copper panels are secured to the doors' wooden core by round-headed bronze nails, a detail that is repeated on the interior Library fireplace. The doors are framed by engaged black stone columns inset with triangular-cut foil-backed Tiffany glass forming a mosaic pattern and are topped by glass-mosaic capitals of stylized acanthus leaves.

Window openings are unadorned, punched through the granite cladding (see Photos 1, 2, 5, and 6). The primary windows contain 1/1 wood sash at the first and second floors. The first floor also contains false "transom" openings through which the operable sash are raised behind stained glass 'screens'. Only one of the original three stained glass transom 'screens' remains, and it has been removed from the center window in the first story bow, and is stored in the basement of the house,

³ Donovan and Zirnheld, National Historic Landmark Nomination, 4.

⁴ Ibid.

according to Jeanne M. Pelletier, staff at Lyn Hovey Studios and Julie L. Sloan, LLC, and the current owner. As noted in Boston Landmark Commission files on the structure, three temporary lexan panels, created by Julie L. Sloan, LLC, were placed in the original “transom” openings as a temporary measure in 2011, and are printed with images of the original windows, based on historic images of the house.

The sole surviving original window ‘screen’ from the first story replicates in glass the patterns of the neighboring stone mosaic panels (see Photos 1 and 2). As seen from the interior, the glass is jewel-toned green, gold, and red glass, but appears from the outside to be stone in muted red and gold tones to match the adjacent stone mosaics. The window ‘screens’ were installed to sit flush with the building facade, further mimicking the stone panels and allowing for the window sash behind to rise unobstructed. An intricate stained-glass fanlight, dominated by blue, green, and gold glass with a repeating pattern of lotus flowers, sits above the main entrance. The three stained glass exterior window screens at the second story (in front of the operable windows of the Library as described below) are original and were restored in 1999 (see Photo 5). Set in steel frames, the clear and opalescent amber glass screens are of simple geometric design. The wood primary windows are deeply recessed in the masonry opening, while the stained-glass screens are set forward of the primary window, in the plane of the facade, again allowing for the sash behind them to operate unobstructed. Additional stained-glass windows, which can be seen in the historic photograph (see Figure 2), at the second-story round window and the fifth-story primary windows, are no longer in place.

Rear Elevation

The rear elevation of the building, facing north, and the exposed portions of the party walls are built of red brick and have no Tiffany-designed features (see Photo 3), but are articulated by original decorative brick work. The regular fenestration pattern is composed of two asymmetrical grouped windows on the first floor and 1/1 sash windows on the second through fifth floors. All windows are set in punched openings with simple limestone sills and splayed brick lintels.

Interior

As stated above, the focus of this report and the proposed landmark designation is the interior spaces of the Ayer Mansion designed by Louis Comfort Tiffany. Tiffany viewed his complete residential commissions as comprehensive masterworks, with the exterior and interior design and decoration working in concert. As with many residences of the period, however, funds were lavished primarily on “public” and “transitional” spaces, such as entryways, main stairs, parlors, libraries, and billiard, smoking, and dining rooms, where visitors were likely to be invited and entertained. Private spaces, by contrast, tended to be less opulent and more traditional, and probably in keeping with Victorian sensibilities. Although a 1903 inventory for insurance purposes indicates that the Ayers did incorporate Tiffany-designed objects in their day-to-day lives, their private spaces were not Tiffany-designed.⁵ As noted in the National Historic Landmark nomination, “the two original family living areas that remain on the second and third floors are treated in a Classical Revival style with

⁵ Jean Carroon Architects, Inc., Ayer Mansion Comprehensive Assessment, April 1999, Appendix A: 1903 Inventory (partial).

typical Bostonian restraint.⁶ The six Tiffany-designed spaces echo much of what is seen on the outside of the building in different media and color palates, and are described below.

Outer and Inner Vestibules

The copper-clad main entrance doors, flanked by inset stone columns with inlaid glass mosaic and topped by a stained-glass fanlight, lead from the exterior stoop into a rectangular, barrel-vaulted Outer Vestibule (Photos 7, 8, and 9). The original mosaic floor of the Outer Vestibule is constructed of glass and stone mosaic tiles in white, green, and light ochre. The original green marble walls of the Outer Vestibule are in place but concealed behind an applied sand and resin parging, which was likely applied in the 1950s by a commercial owner. In 2015, Daedalus Conservation removed several small areas of parging to reveal the original green-veined marble beneath, which matches the green marble in the vestibule's floor (Photo 10). Plans for the house, dating from 1961, indicate that the small window in the west wall, which opens to the neighboring building, was added at a later date and is not original to the house. The barrel-vault ceiling is white-painted plaster.

Three black slate steps, which were likely originally green-veined marble to match the walls, lead up from the Outer Vestibule to a pair of oak and glass panel doors with a clear-glass round-arched fanlight (see Photo 9). These doors open into a smaller Inner Vestibule, which has a cross-vaulted ceiling, and a mosaic floor of light ochre and white marble. Areas where the parging has been removed also reveal original marble walls in a light ochre-colored marble, which matches the mosaic floor (Photo 11). An eight-panel wood door with six panels of clear glass connects the Inner Vestibule to the Marble Hall. A preliminary investigation of this area undertaken by Building Conservation Associates in 2016 indicated that the ceilings in both vestibules were originally stenciled.

Marble Hall

The Inner Vestibule opens to a large roughly square hall, described in the 1903 Inventory as the Marble Hall. On the eastern wall, an apsidal arch is set over five semi-circular stairs that culminate in a small semi-circular landing (Photo 12). Directly across from the landing, on the western wall, sits a fireplace with a white marble mantle inlaid with Tiffany glass (Photo 13). Square arches, with rounded corners, frame entrances to the former Dining Room to the north, and to the Drawing Room and Inner Vestibule to the south. The Drawing Room and the original Dining Room retain their original sliding wood doors, with original hardware. An elliptical opening in the ceiling contains a stair that runs between the second and fifth floors topped with a skylight and a five-stage brass and glass chandelier with the lowest stage globe hanging in the Marble Hall (Photo 14; see Photo 13); the Elliptical Stair and chandelier are described below under Main Stairs.

The Marble Hall walls are clad in simple slabs of white marble wainscoting, approximately 6 feet in height, running the perimeter of the Hall. Above the wainscoting, set directly into the plaster walls, is a glass mosaic border of blue, green, white opalescent, and foil-backed glass. The plaster throughout the room is painted a dull yellowish-ivory and coated with shellac, in accordance with a paint study conducted by Susan Buck, ostensibly to replicate the feeling of polished stone (Photo 15). The mosaic banding also accentuates the plasterwork openings to the Dining Room, Vestibule, and

⁶ Donovan and Zirnheld, *National Historic Landmark Nomination*, 5.

Drawing Room, as well as the columns that run from the floor to the ceiling, and then continue across the hall as beams to the opposite side. The white marble mosaic floor incorporates a pattern of ochre tesserae scattered throughout, and a geometric mosaic band on the perimeter of green, white, and ochre marble, repeating the patterns, colors, and materials found in the Outer and Inner Vestibules. Decorative brass grilles for the heating system are set in the mosaic (Photo 16).

The west wall of the Marble Hall is dominated by a white marble mantelpiece set in a projecting chimneybreast (Photo 17). As noted in the National Historic Landmark nomination, “the mantelpiece is inset with mosaic medallions and a mosaic border. Both medallions and border feature gold-foil backed tracery in-filled with opalescent green, blue, and white tesserae.”⁷ A door on the west wall, leading to the neighboring building, appears in the plans for the 1961 renovations and is not original.

The north end of the Marble Hall contains the entrance to the original dining room (Photo 18). As stated in the National Historic Landmark nomination, this room entrance is marked by a “series of receding square arches...the first arch incorporates a beam. The rounded corners of each arch are accentuated by an outline of mosaic banding set into the face of the plaster wall. Below the second arch, three marble steps with mosaic risers lead to a recessed dining room entrance consisting of [original] wood paneled pocket doors flanked by niches set above the wainscoting.”⁸ Each of the two niches flanking the original dining room are lined with Tiffany mosaic glass backed with gold foil and framed by mosaic bands (Photo 19). In each of the niches sit the original Tiffany vase light fixtures designed for the space and described in the 1903 Inventory as “Tiffany Favrlie glass jars ...over Electric bulbs...Shaded bronze, green and gold coloring.” While the 1903 Inventory describes three such vases in the hallway, the third niche, which is located on the south side of the Marble Hall between the entryways to the Drawing Room and the Inner Vestibule, sits vacant. As noted in the National Historic Landmark nomination, the former Dining Room was removed prior to acquisition of the building by the then-owners in 1964, and has since been substantially altered to serve as a chapel. No visible traces of the Tiffany-designed interior remain in this space, with the exception of the original doors, potentially original butler’s pantry access, and presumably, the original flooring, which was not visible due to added carpeting and linoleum by later owners.

The east wall of the Marble Hall is dominated by projecting semi-circular stairs and a proscenium archway accentuated by mosaic banding (Photos 20 and 21, see Photo 12). As noted in the National Historic Landmark nomination, “[b]lue, green, white and gold tesserae are set into the plaster of the intrado and the face of the arch. A ring of electric sockets is hidden behind the arch, suggesting their use as proscenium lighting for amateur theatricals. The entire half dome beyond the arch is sheathed with gold foil-backed glass mosaic above the marble wainscoting. The tesserae are laid in a radial pattern following the curvature of the dome. The molded cap at the top of the wainscot broadens to form a shelf at the rear of the apse where a smaller, round arch opens on an imperial stair to the second floor Hall. The arch frames a spectacular trompe-l’oeil peristyle mosaic at the rear wall of the double stair.”⁹ The trompe-l’oeil mosaic is described below under Main Stair. The semi-circular stairs are white marble faced with blue and green mosaic (Photo 22). The wainscoting in the curved archway contains two concealed doors, constructed of matching white marble. The doors originally accessed a “flower room” and a “coat room,” both described in the 1903 Inventory.

⁷ Donovan and Zirnheld, National Historic Landmark Nomination, 6.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, 7.

Recent removal of gypsum board in the flower room, which is now a bathroom, revealed the original curved wood panel door faced with marble (Photo 23). It is likely that these doors also served a role in theatrical performances held within the Marble Hall.

The South wall of the Marble Hall contains two square arches, one leading into the Drawing Room on the east and the other into the Inner Vestibule on the west (Photo 24). The Drawing Room is entered through a single large original wooden pocket door with its original hardware, similar in design to those of the Dining Room. Both doorways are outlined by round-cornered mosaic banding. As mentioned above, a niche, identical to those flanking the entrance of the former Dining Room, sits between the Drawing Room and Inner Vestibule doors, although the Tiffany vase that was designed for the niche is no longer present.

Adjacent to the dining room on the east wall is the original entrance to the servant's stair hall, leading down to the original service spaces in the basement level and upstairs to all the upper floors (Photo 25). The intact stairway is steel with wood handrail on steel balusters and is original to the building. A doorway off this stairway on the first floor leads to the former butler's pantry in the former dining room, allowing the servants to serve directly into the dining room from the kitchen level below. The basement level spaces, butler's pantry, and dining room have all been altered.

Between the east wall proscenium arch and the entryway to the Drawing Room is an elevator shaft, which appears to be original to the structure, though a modern elevator has been added.

Drawing Room

The Drawing Room lies to the south of the Marble Hall. The room, which according to the 1903 Inventory originally contained Louis XVI décor, is largely square, with a three-bay bow window looking out onto Commonwealth Avenue (Photos 26 and 27). Restored in 1999 with the aid of an historic photograph taken in the room circa 1910 (see Historic Figure 7), the Drawing Room is paneled with low, wooden, white-painted wainscoting (Photo 28), above which gold fabric panels (a conjectural material choice based on the 1910 photograph) meet a decorative plaster frieze and ceiling in the “eclectic” Moorish style. The ceiling and frieze repeat the lotus flower motif found in the mosaics on the exterior of the house (Photos 29 and 30). Five narrow pilasters set between the larger wall panels were originally decorated with applied raised plaster filigree, and as shown in the 1910 photograph and described in the 1903 Inventory, sported five elaborate Tiffany-designed thirteen-armed brass wall sconces with Favrlie shades. These sconces, which were presumably lost during a 1950s redecoration of the room, were replaced by modern reproduction fixtures during the 1999 rehabilitation. The original mantelpiece in the room has been lost and was replaced in 1999 by a simple chimney breast and wooden mantle. The firebox and hearth are original. The original parquet floor made of quarter-sawn oak and maple detailing remains intact (Photo 31).

The three “transom” areas above the bow windows currently contain Lexan panels, printed with an image of the original stained-glass screens which Tiffany designed for these openings (Photo 32). In preparation for work on the building's façade in 2009, the Campaign for the Ayer Mansion hired Lyn Hovey Studios to remove and crate the sole surviving Tiffany-designed stained glass ‘screen’ from the center transom. Lyn Hovey Studios and Jeanne Pelletier report that the window is currently stored in the basement of the house. Images of the window *in situ*, used to create the Lexan panels,

show a remarkable masterpiece of red, ochre, green, and white glass, in a Byzantine pattern that mimics the neighboring stone mosaics on the exterior of the building. With these “transparent mosaics,” Tiffany masterfully pulled the exterior patterns into the building’s interior design.¹⁰ The two side ‘transom screens’ were removed from the building before the 1950s, but an historic photograph of the exterior of the house from circa 1920 clearly indicates that the other two ‘screens’ were smaller versions of the center extant window, which would enable their future re-creation.

Main Stairs: Stair Landing, Stair Hall, and Elliptical Stairs

The Main Stairs is composed of the semi-circular stairs in the Marble Hall described above and the Stair Landing, Stair Hall, and Elliptical Stairs described in this section.

On the east wall of the Marble Hall, five stairs lead from the landing of the Marble Hall’s semi-circular stairs to a large rectangular Stair Landing and white marble imperial or split stair, which also incorporates white marble wainscoting, and above which is an edging wide band of sycamore wood and plasterwork painted a dull ivory with a shellac finish (Photo 33).

Directly above the landing is a 20 x 4-foot stained-glass Tiffany laylight, which Lyn Hovey Studios restored in 2003, using replacement glass where necessary from the Neustadt Collection in New York City (Photo 34). During the day, the laylight is illuminated by natural light, which enters the shaft above the laylight through a clear glass and metal skylight on the roof that is integral to the original design. During evening hours, six light fixtures above the laylight -- which were original to the house and restored in 2003 -- illuminate the space. As described in the National Historic Landmark nomination, “[t]he eight-panel laylight incorporates a wide variety of glasses in a lead matrix and employs the same color scheme found in the Marble Hall mosaics as well as the clouded and corrugated glass of the pendant globe. The design consists of “[a] series of alternating squares-within-circles and diamonds-within-squares . . . cut from a milky semi-opalescent glass with ‘mottles and freckling’ set in a field of clear ripple glass. Glittering gold ripple glass is used in the borders and crisscross lattice pattern, while an inner border of 2-inch-round opal cast glass jewels frames the Moorish-style geometric composition. The outer border and parts of the inner design are highlighted with diamonds and half-circles of blue and green opalescent glass.”¹¹ In 2019, Lyn Hovey Studios fabricated and installed additional steel support bars to the structure of the laylight to arrest deflection of the laylight, which is sagging along the edges of the composition and in areas of the pattern where the lead caming is particularly intricate.

In the center of the Stair Landing wall is a magnificent tromp l’oeil glass mosaic, largely of blue tones, representing a Greek or Roman temple or a garden folly, with columns topped by a semi-circular dome (Photo 35). As stated in the National Historic Landmark nomination, “[t]his architectural illusion presents a tour de force of Tiffany’s mosaic technique.”¹² The glass columns, constructed of semi-opaque glass backed with gold foil, curve slightly outward. Furthering the illusion of depth, between the columns are inset glass blocks backed on five sides by highly polished nickel. As noted in the National Historic Landmark nomination, “subtle gradations of color [in the

¹⁰ Donovan and Zirnheld, National Historic Landmark Nomination, 8.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

dome] create the illusion of a receding peristyle surmounted by a hemispherical half dome. Set flush with the wall, the mosaic exploits the slight projection of the white marble wainscot to create a receding perspective.... Engaged columns of opalescent glass affixed to the surface of the wainscoting continue the effect.”¹³

From the Stair Landing and mosaic wall, the stairs branch north and south on either side, and lead up to the spacious second floor Stair Hall (Photo 36). As noted in the National Historic Landmark nomination, “[t]he top stair is gently curved and the banister terminates in an open columned newel with knob. Designed as a portrait gallery, the Stair Hall features a central seating and viewing area surrounded by a delicate, fluted wooden balustrade. Two square wood columns [constructed of sycamore wood] rise to the ceiling at the east corners of the viewing area...Paintings were hung high on the wall above the stair. The 1903 Inventory lists the family portraits, landscapes, and genre scenes originally displayed by the Ayers in this space.”¹⁴ The original oak floor, with a simple patterned edge detail, is still present.

The Elliptical Stairs rise along the west wall of the Stair Hall from the second floor to the fifth floor, forming the elliptical opening seen from the Marble Hall (Photos 37–40). As noted in the National Historic Landmark nomination, “[t]he same fluted balustrade continues up the staircase with a transition to a simplified design at the third floor” (Photos 41 and 42).¹⁵ The original stair treads, which have been restored, are of oak, now protected by sheet vinyl on the upper floors. The elliptical opening of the stair is treated with a paneled soffit at each landing above the second floor, and the elliptical stair hall has raised plaster chair rail and doorway molding (see Photos 39 and 42). Where the four-story staircase reaches the top floor, an elliptical clear glass skylight is set in the roof in what is presumably the original opening for what the 1903 Inventory describes as a “stained glass window.” It is lit by a raised skylight on the roof that is part of the original design (Photos 43 and 44).

A Tiffany-designed, five-stage brass chandelier hangs down from the center of the skylight through the elliptical stairwell and features a different branching fixture at each landing (Photos 45–48, see Photos 37–41, 43). The fixture terminates in what the 1903 Inventory describes as a yellow “clouded and corrugated glass” mosaic globe inset with glass “jewel” accents which protrude from the fixture. The Inventory also indicates that each individual branching fixture originally held “Favrile glass globes; melon-shaped; cream and green shading.”¹⁶ These Favrile globes are no longer in existence, replaced with plain round bulbs, though the originally round-headed screws that secured these shades are in many places still present.

As noted in the National Historic Landmark nomination, “[t]he curious geometry, impressive five-story chandelier, and crowning stained glass skylight (now lost) insist on the stairwell’s inclusion as an integral part of Tiffany’s design....At each floor, a Tiffany-designed fixture branches out from the main shaft of the light fixture suspended in the stairwell.”¹⁷

¹³ Donovan and Zirnheld, *National Historic Landmark Nomination*, 8.

¹⁴ Donovan and Zirnheld, 9.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Jean Carroon Architects, Inc., *Comprehensive Assessment*, Appendix A.

¹⁷ Donovan and Zirnheld, *National Historic Landmark Nomination*, 10.

Library

On the second floor off the Stair Hall on the south wall is the entrance to what is described in the 1903 Inventory as the Library (Photo 49). Two dark wood paneled doors are set in a doorway to the room (Photo 50). Only one is hinged and operational. Existing sliding door hardware on the hinged side suggests that the door was originally sliding and was altered to be hinged. The adjacent door, which is stationary, matches one of the doors in the library itself, and was either sliding as well and leading to an adjoining “alcove” to the west listed in the 1903 Inventory, or may have been removed from within the Library and reset in this opening as part of renovations by earlier commercial owners. As noted in the National Historic Landmark nomination, “[t]he surround is formed of carved engaged wood columns supporting an entablature. While the surround has been slightly altered with a built-out frame, the original carpentry appears to be intact beneath.... The four-panel doors feature a raised cross motif with central panel and the original lock plates survive.”¹⁸

The Library is approximately square, with a mantle and fireplace on the east wall, built-in glass-front bookshelves on the north wall and the east wall to either side of the fireplace, and three windows located in the bow facing south onto Commonwealth Avenue (Photos 51–54). A frieze of hand-carved oak dark-stained panels runs around the perimeter of the room. As noted in the National Historic Landmark nomination, “[a] Tuscan surround consisting of pilasters set on tall pedestals and supporting an entablature frames the oak door to the Hall in the north wall”, as well as a closet on that wall, and is matched by two doorways on the west wall.¹⁹

In 1977, the former owners converted the room into a chapel and installed the drop ceiling and carpeting, which covers an original oak floor with maple and quarter-sawn oak detail on the perimeter that remains intact beneath the carpet. According to Pelletier, minor investigations in 2020, which included removal of several ceiling tiles from the modern drop ceiling, revealed little evidence of the original ceiling as added electrical conduit apparently required removal of the original ceiling. The 1903 Inventory indicates that there were many Tiffany light fixtures in the room, including nine “ceiling electric fixtures” with “Tiffany Favrite Globes” in green and gold, and six Tiffany table lamps described as “wrought iron lamps, 26-1/2” high, fitted to electricity” each with “Tiffany Favrite glass shades, 9” diameter, dull blue and gold.” The 1903 Inventory also describes four bookcases, of which only three currently remain in the room.²⁰ The fourth appears to have been moved in later renovations to the alcove room, where it currently exists.

As described in the National Historic Landmark nomination, “[a]n elaborate 11-inch deep, carved wooden frieze embellishes the entire perimeter of the room [Photo 55, see Photos 49, 51–53]. Each panel is a unique composition featuring the bookplates of famous men. An elaborate carved wood chimney piece and overmantel are centered on the east wall and project deeply into the room. The features are framed by two fluted columns with egg and dart capitals set on tall pedestals to support

¹⁸ Donovan and Zirnheld, *National Historic Landmark Nomination*, 9; Jean Carroon Architects, Inc., *Comprehensive Assessment*, Appendix A.

¹⁹ Donovan and Zirnheld, *National Historic Landmark Nomination*, 10.

²⁰ Jean Carroon Architects, Inc., *Comprehensive Assessment*, Appendix A.

a lower architrave. The architrave is embellished with a carved frieze of repeating stylized cruciform paterae.”²¹

The current owner has removed the added altar to reveal the original Tiffany-designed fireplace and surround, which is composed of a jewel-toned glass mosaic of flowers and medieval lettering of the words “Peace be to this Home,” and glazed brick surrounding a hammered-copper hood with hammered nail details similar to those found on the exterior doors. An historic image of the fireplace, recently discovered in a family collection, shows the fireplace, bookcases, original crushed-velvet wall treatment, and one of the Tiffany table lamps, which sat on the bookcases.²² The top surfaces of the bookcases still exhibit electrical conduit to allow for the lamps.²³

As noted in the National Historic Landmark nomination, “[t]he original double hung curved sash windows with curved glass remain intact (see Photos 53 and 54). The windows are set in dark stained paneled recesses. Hinged shutters were installed during the 1977 renovation. The original stained glass exterior screens are described in the exterior description [above]. Two doors in the west wall of the library lead to the [Alcove]; the south door having been fixed closed. The [Alcove] is a narrow, rectangular room. It terminates to the south at a round, clear glass window with wood surround that is set above the main entrance on the exterior. The original stained-glass window has been lost.”²⁴ The Alcove room also now contains the original fourth bookcase missing from the Library as discussed earlier.

Sky Parlor

The 1903 Inventory indicates that fifth floor front room was a “Sky Parlor,” and describes a myriad of exotic items from the Ayer’s travels in Europe and the Middle East.²⁵ The room occupied the entire width of the house and exhibited three stained glass windows, which opened on pivots (now lost but shown in the historic photograph of the facade). As noted in the National Historic Landmark nomination, a “large skylight that has been capped at the roof, located toward the south end of the roof suggests that this notable feature of the Ayer Mansion-- almost certainly of Tiffany’s design” may still be present in the cavity.²⁶ At some point, the skylight was boarded up from below, as was the case with the laylight in the stair hall, suggesting that it may still be intact in the space. Recent exploratory removal of part of the dropped ceiling reveals a wood trimmed opening that is covered (Photo 56). A watercolor of the room, signed by Rene de Quelin, Tiffany’s lead designer for residential work, also shows a skylight and many of the exotic elements listed in the 1903 Inventory (Figure 3).²⁷ As noted in the National Historic Landmark nomination, “[t]he identically smooth arches of the fifth floor landing and Marble Hall, as well as the lost Tiffany skylight that crowned the chandelier, suggest that the fifth story was considered part of the Mansion’s public space. The Mansion was originally equipped with an elevator, which permitted guests to bypass the Ayer

²¹ Donovan and Zirnheld, National Historic Landmark Nomination, 9-10.

²² Pelletier, Personal Communication.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Donovan and Zirnheld, National Historic Landmark Nomination, 10.

²⁵ Jean Carroon Architects, Inc., Comprehensive Assessment, Appendix A.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Pelletier, Personal Communication; Jean Carroon Architects, Inc. Comprehensive Assessment, Appendix A.

family's private chambers while accessing the fifth floor. One can imagine the effect of riding a passenger elevator to the very height of the house where the glass-ceilinged Sky Parlor offered an exotic setting for entertainment beneath the stars. Tiffany's exploitation of the building's height and vertical circulation within the design of this room speaks of his designs for Manhattan penthouses, including his own residence.”²⁸

Other Spaces

Except for the central Elliptical Stair hall and Library, spaces and finishes on the second through fifth floors have been substantially altered. On floors two through five there are a few scattered original wood doors and chair rails, and fireplaces remain in both Mrs. Ayer's Chamber on the second floor and the Breakfast Room on the third floor. However, other than the fifth floor Sky Parlor described above, none of these spaces were included in the Tiffany designs.²⁹

²⁸ Donovan and Zirnheld, *National Historic Landmark Nomination* 10, 11.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 9, 11.

2.3 Contemporary Images

All photographs were taken by PAL staff on May 17 and 24, 2022.



Photo 1. Front facade, view northeast.



Photo 2. Front facade, view northwest.



Photo 3. Rear elevation, view south.



Photo 4. Facade, main entrance, view north.



Photo 5. Facade, bow, view north.



Photo 6. Facade, upper floors and cornice, view north.



Photo 7. Outer Vestibule, main entrance doors, view south.

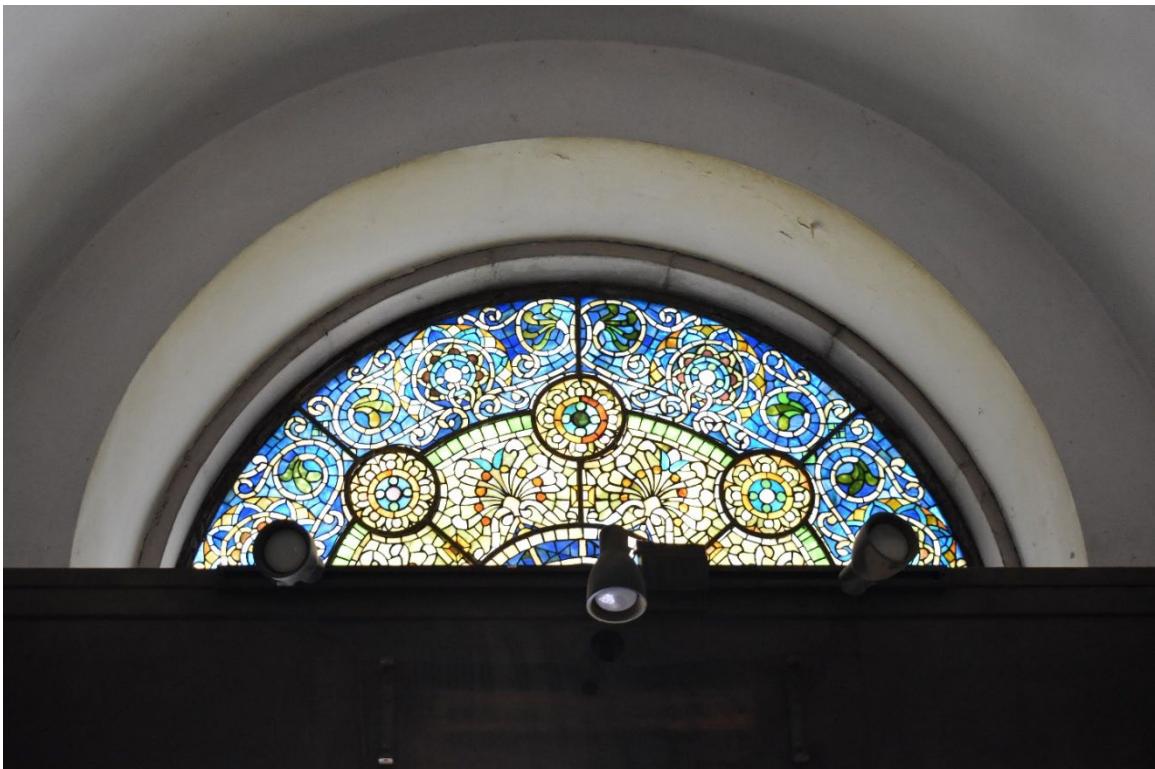


Photo 8. Outer Vestibule, stained-glass window over main entrance, view south.

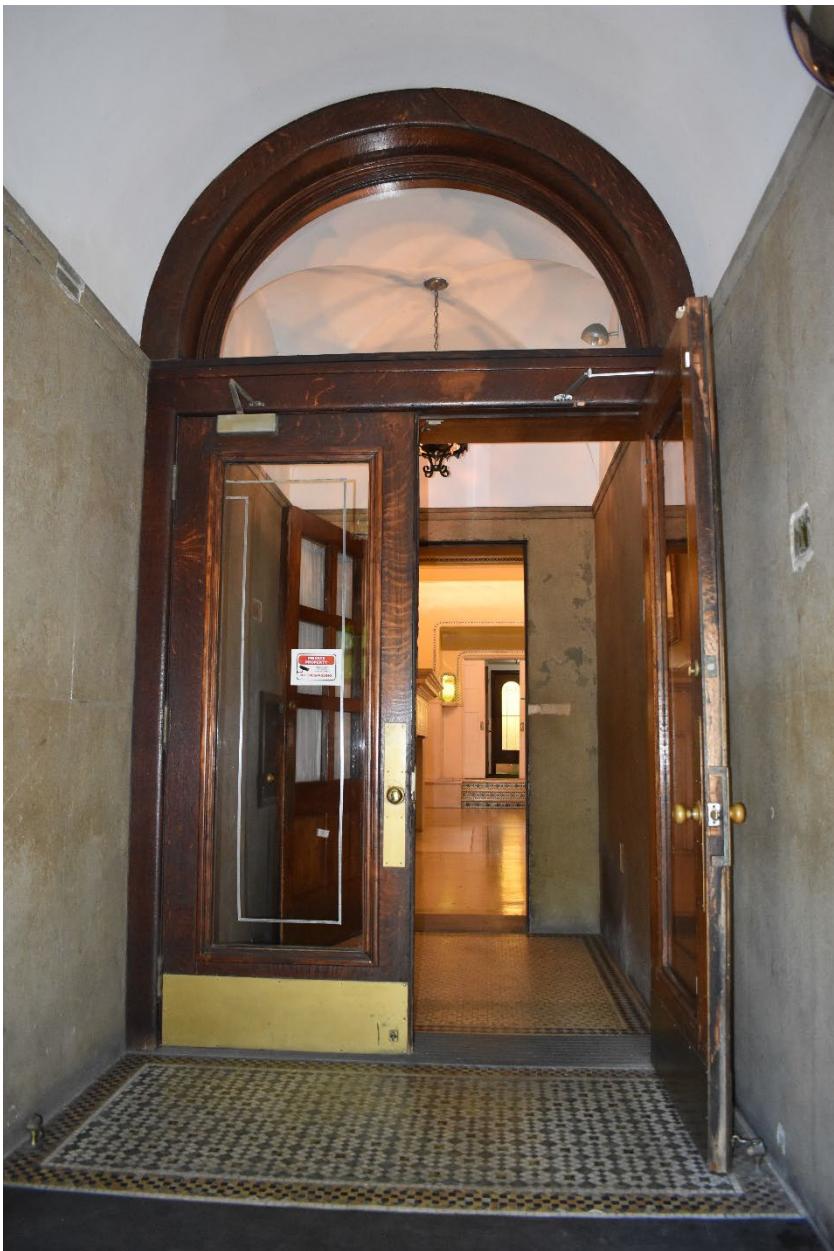


Photo 9. Outer Vestibule, view to Inner Vestibule and Marble Hall, view north.



Photo 10. Outer Vestibule, wall detail showing original marble under covering, view east.



Photo 11. Inner Vestibule, wall detail showing original marble under covering, view east.



Photo 12. Marble Hall, east wall, proscenium arch and semi-circular stairs, view east.



Photo 13. Marble Hall, west wall, fireplace and elliptical opening in ceiling, view west.



Photo 14. Marble Hall, elliptical opening in ceiling, view up.



Photo 15. Marble Hall, wall mosaic and plaster detail, view west.

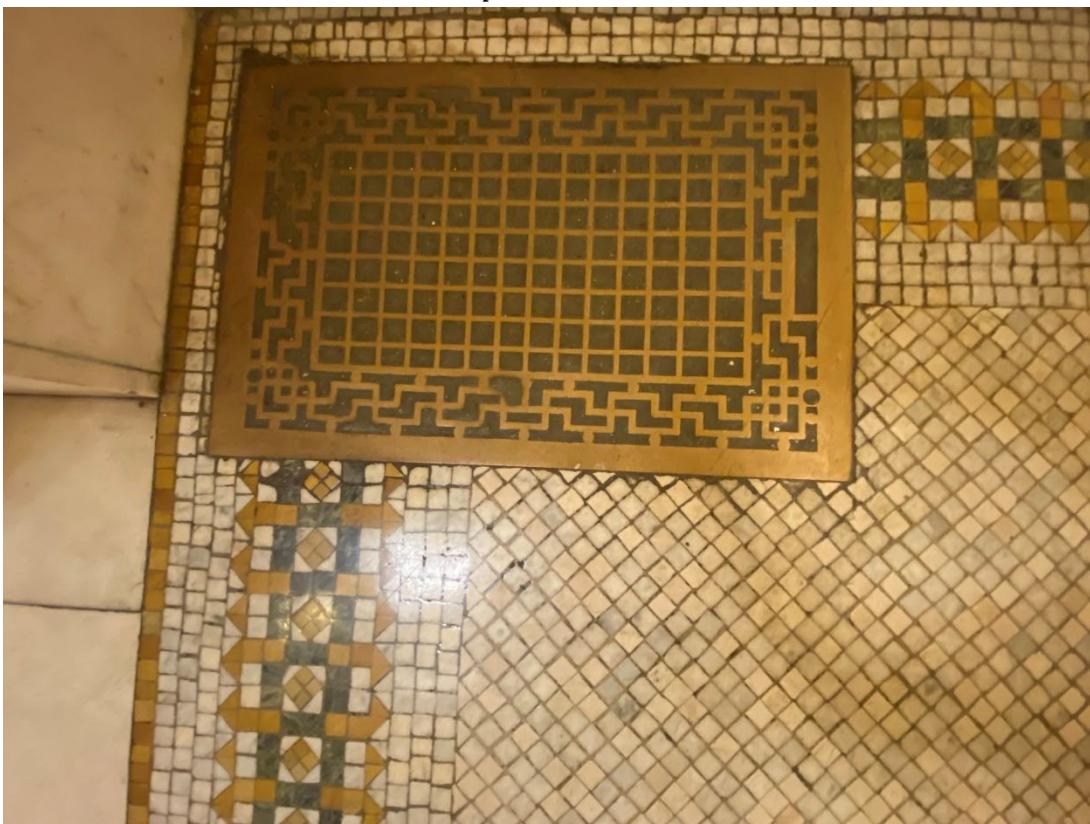


Photo 16. Marble Hall, floor detail, view down.



Photo 17. Marble Hall, fireplace, view west.

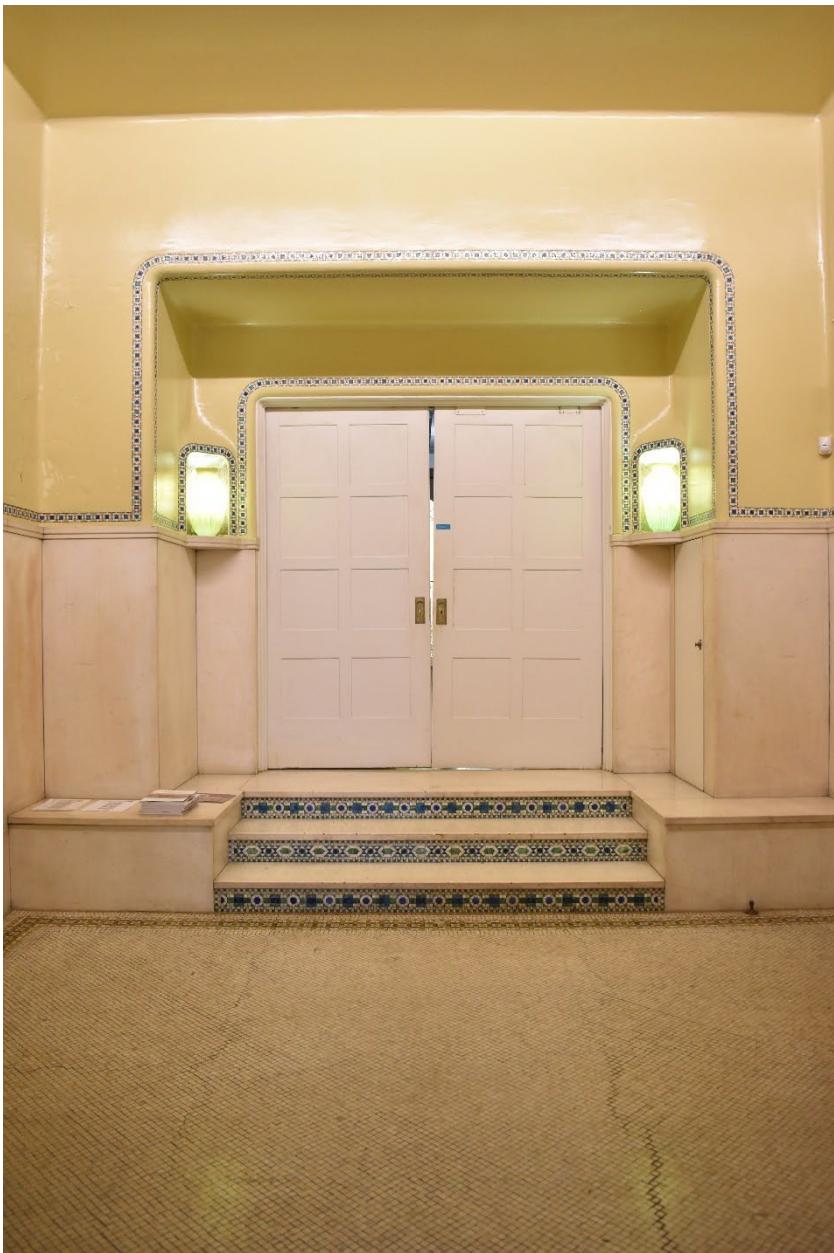


Photo 18. Marble Hall, north wall, entrance to former Dining Room, view north.



Photo 19. Marble Hall, Favreille glass jar and niche detail, view north.

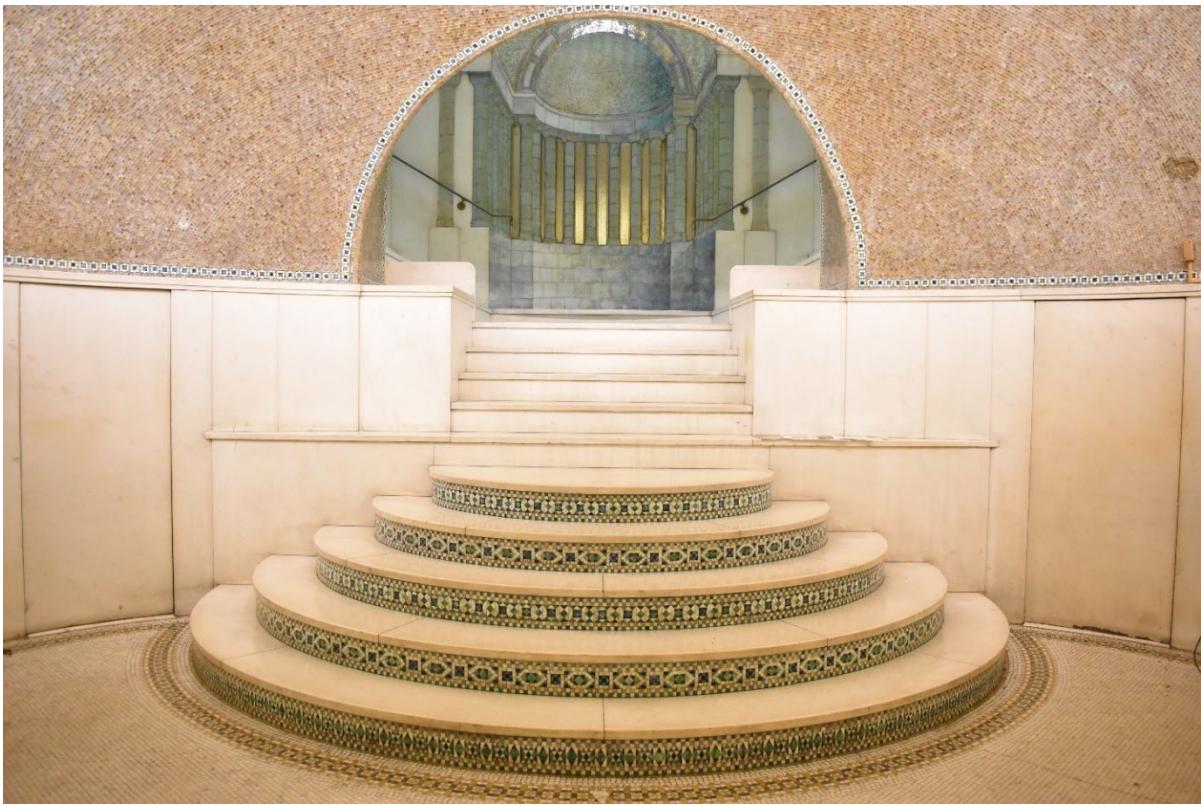


Photo 20. Marble Hall, proscenium arch and semi-circular stairs detail, view east.



Photo 21. Marble Hall, proscenium arch wall detail, view northeast.

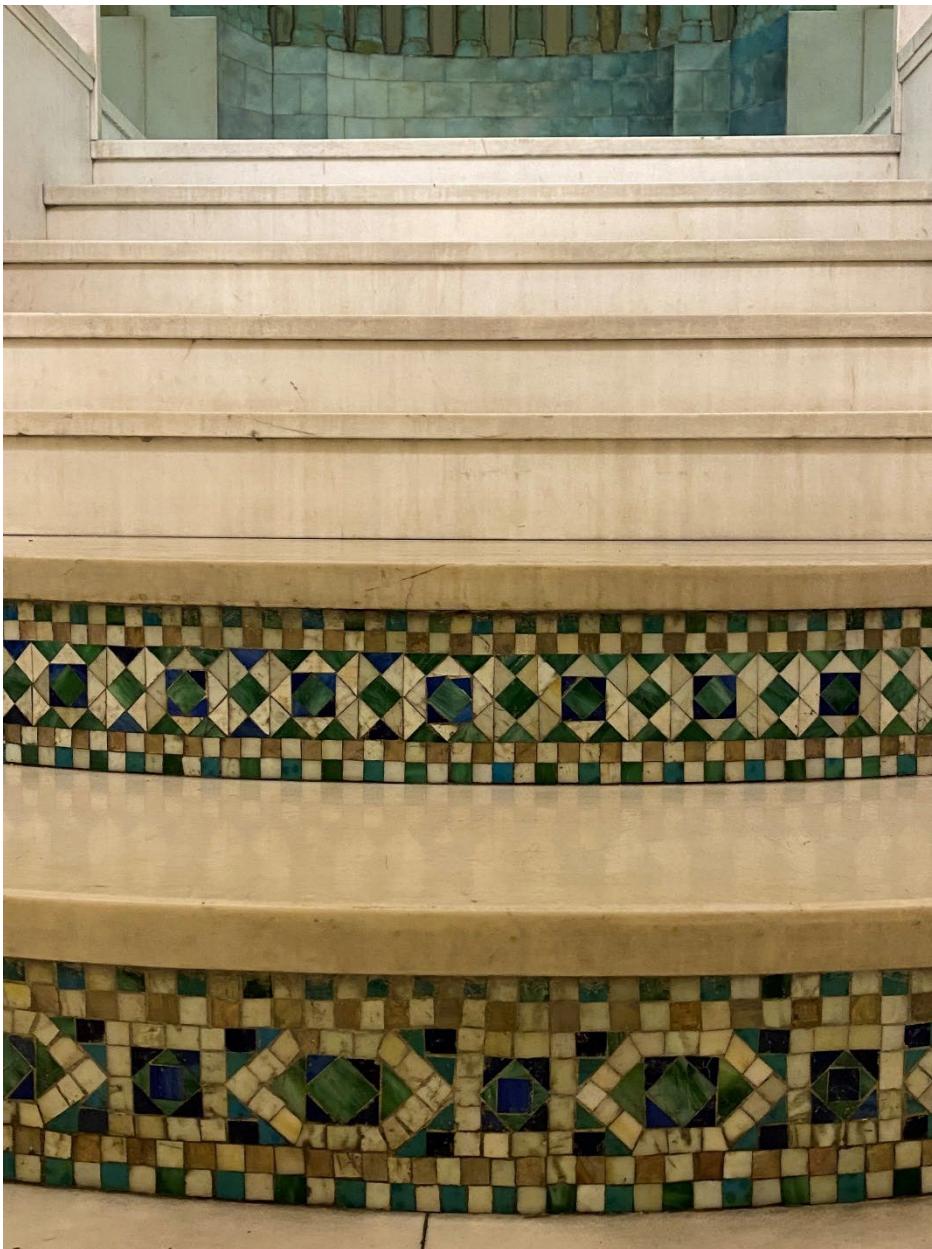


Photo 22. Marble Hall, semi-circular stairs detail, view east.



Photo 23. Marble Hall, curved, marble-faced wood door detail, view northwest.



Photo 24. Marble Hall, south wall, entrances to Drawing Room and Inner Vestibule, view south.



Photo 25. Service stair, view east.



Photo 26. Drawing Room, fireplace, view east.



Photo 27. Drawing Room, bow window, view south.



Photo 28. Drawing Room, wainscot detail, view west.



Photo 29. Drawing Room, frieze detail, view west.



Photo 30. Drawing Room, ceiling detail, view south.



Photo 31. Drawing Room, floor detail, view down.



Photo 32. Drawing Room, stained-glass window plastic sheet reproduction detail, view south.



Photo 33. Main Stairs, tromp l'oeil mosaic and split stairs, view east.

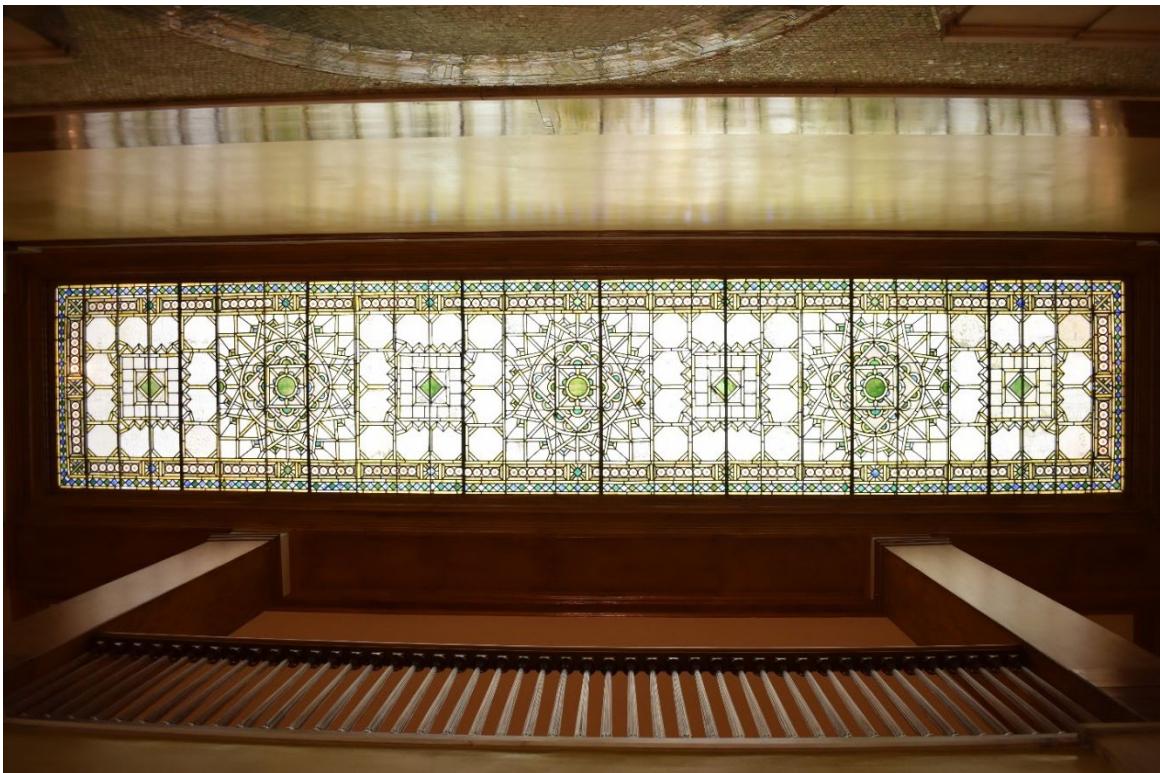


Photo 34. Main Stairs stained-glass laylight, view up.

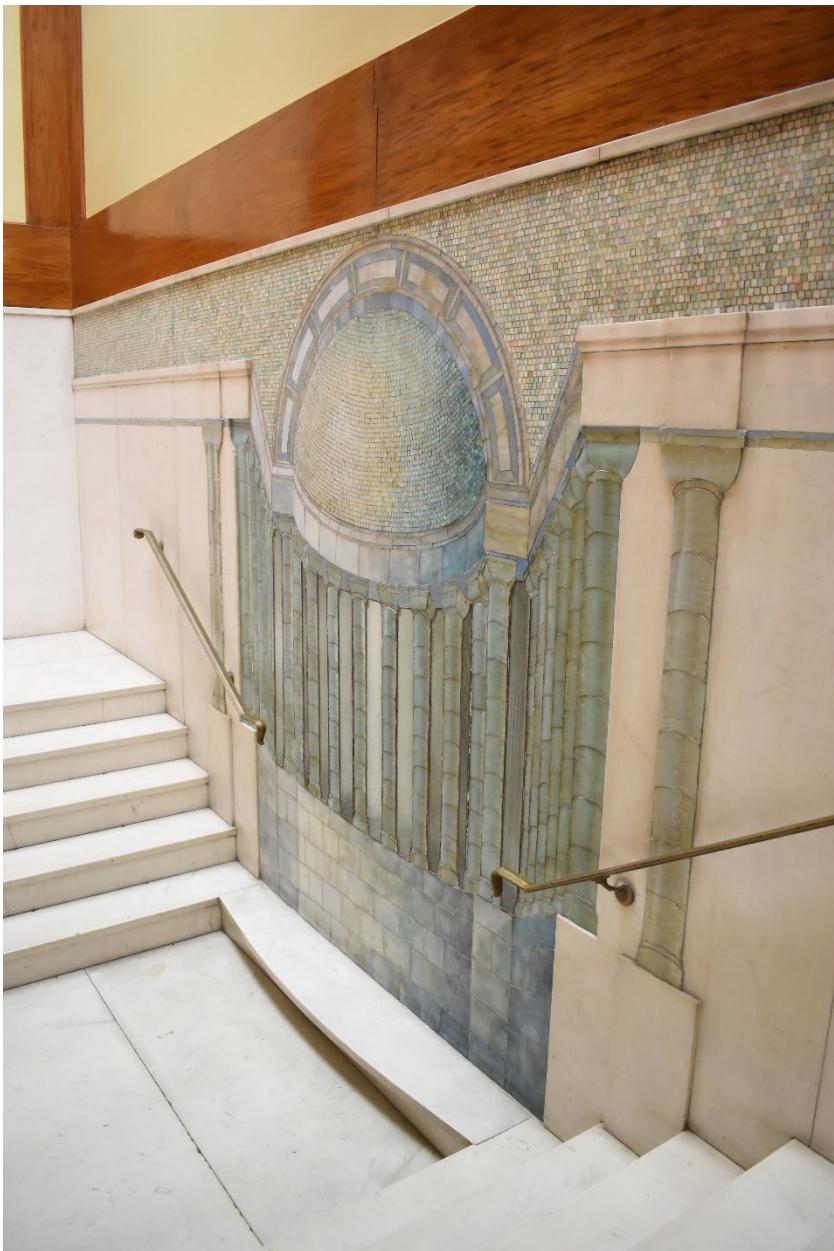


Photo 35. Main Stairs, tromp l'oeil mosaic and split stairs showing part of wall above, view northeast.



Photo 36. Stair Hall, view northeast.



Photo 37. Stair Hall with Elliptical Stair, view west.



Photo 38. Elliptical Stair, third floor, view south.



Photo 39. Elliptical Stair, fourth floor, view south.



Photo 40. Elliptical Stair, fifth floor, view north.

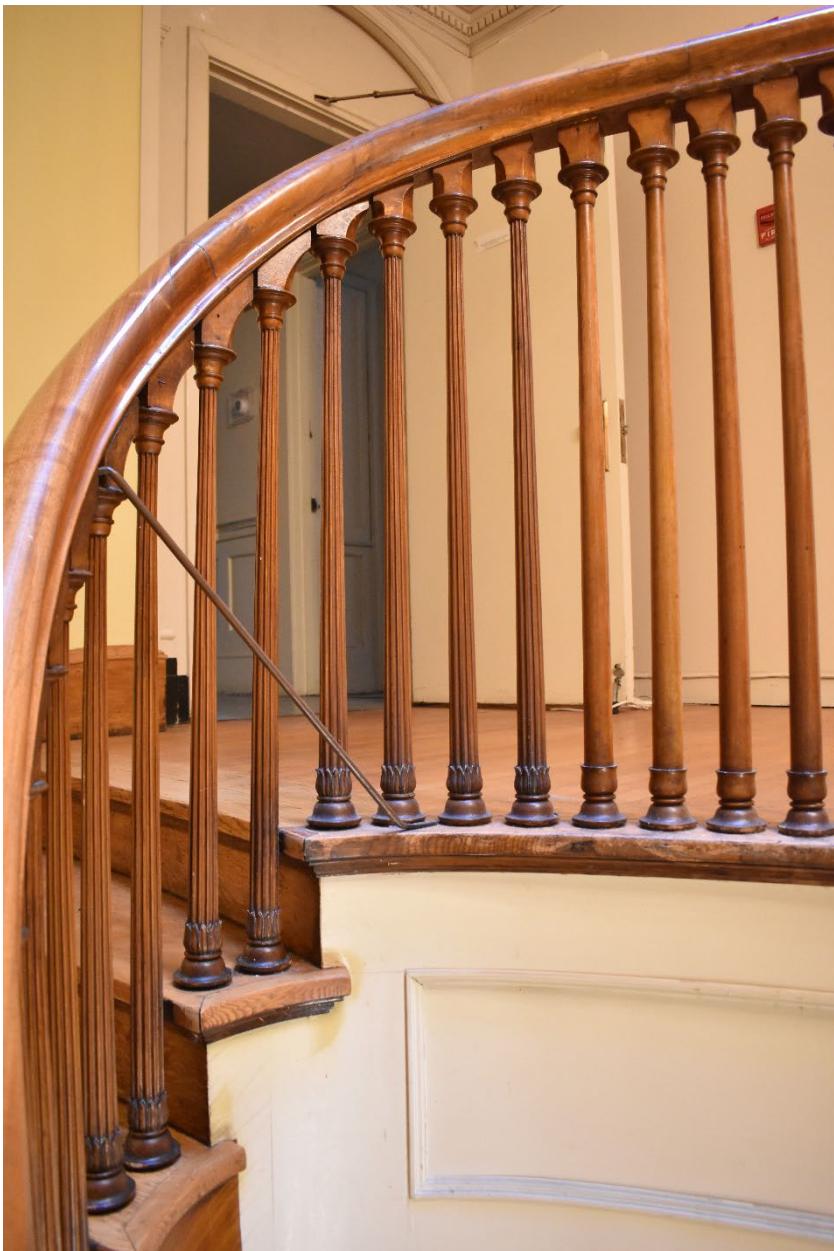


Photo 41. Elliptical Stair, view down.

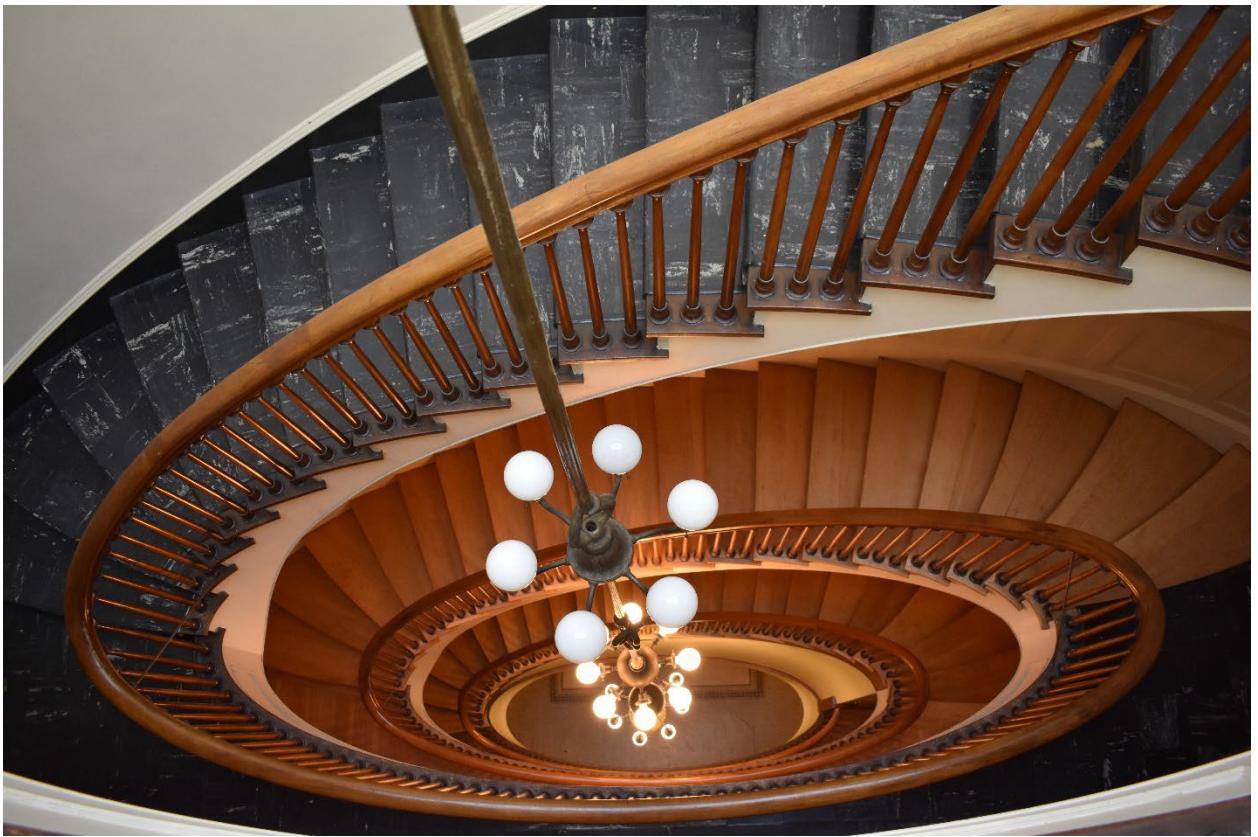


Photo 42. Elliptical Stair baluster detail, third floor, view northeast.



Photo 43. Elliptical Stair, elliptical skylight, fifth floor, view up.



Photo 44. Elliptical Stair, rooftop structure, view southeast.



Photo 45. Chandelier, mount at fifth floor skylight, view up.



Photo 46. Chandelier, third floor, view west.



Photo 47. Chandelier, second floor, view west.

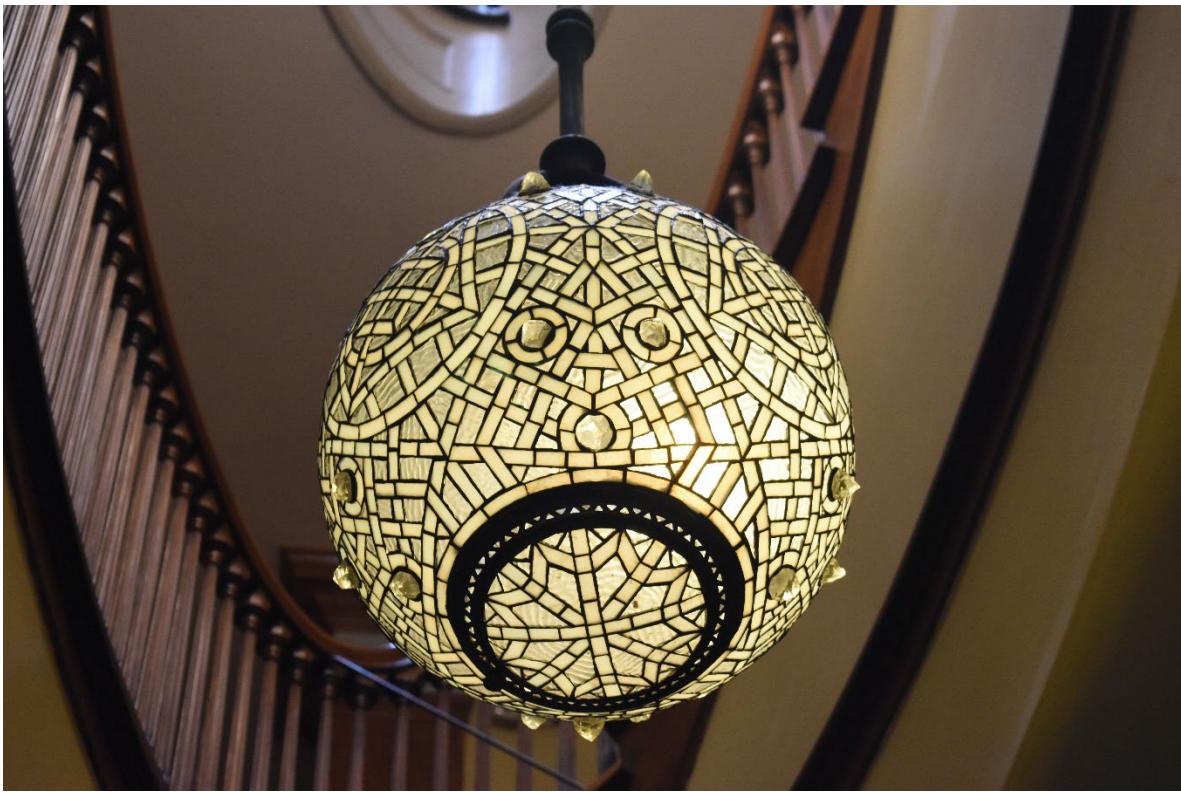


Photo 48. Chandelier, globe in Marble Hall, view north.



Photo 49. Library, fireplace and part of adjacent walls, view northeast.



Photo 50. Library, entrance door, view southwest.



Photo 51. Library, fireplace, view east.



Photo 52. Library, north wall, view into Stair Hall, view north.



Photo 53. Library, bow windows, view south.



Photo 54. Library, curved window detail showing stained glass, view south.



Photo 55. Library, frieze, view north.



Photo 56. Sky Parlor, covered skylight, view up.

2.4 Historic Maps and Images



Figure 2. Photograph of 395 Commonwealth Avenue, south facade, 1901.
Source: *American Architect and Building News* 74 (December 21, 1901): 94.

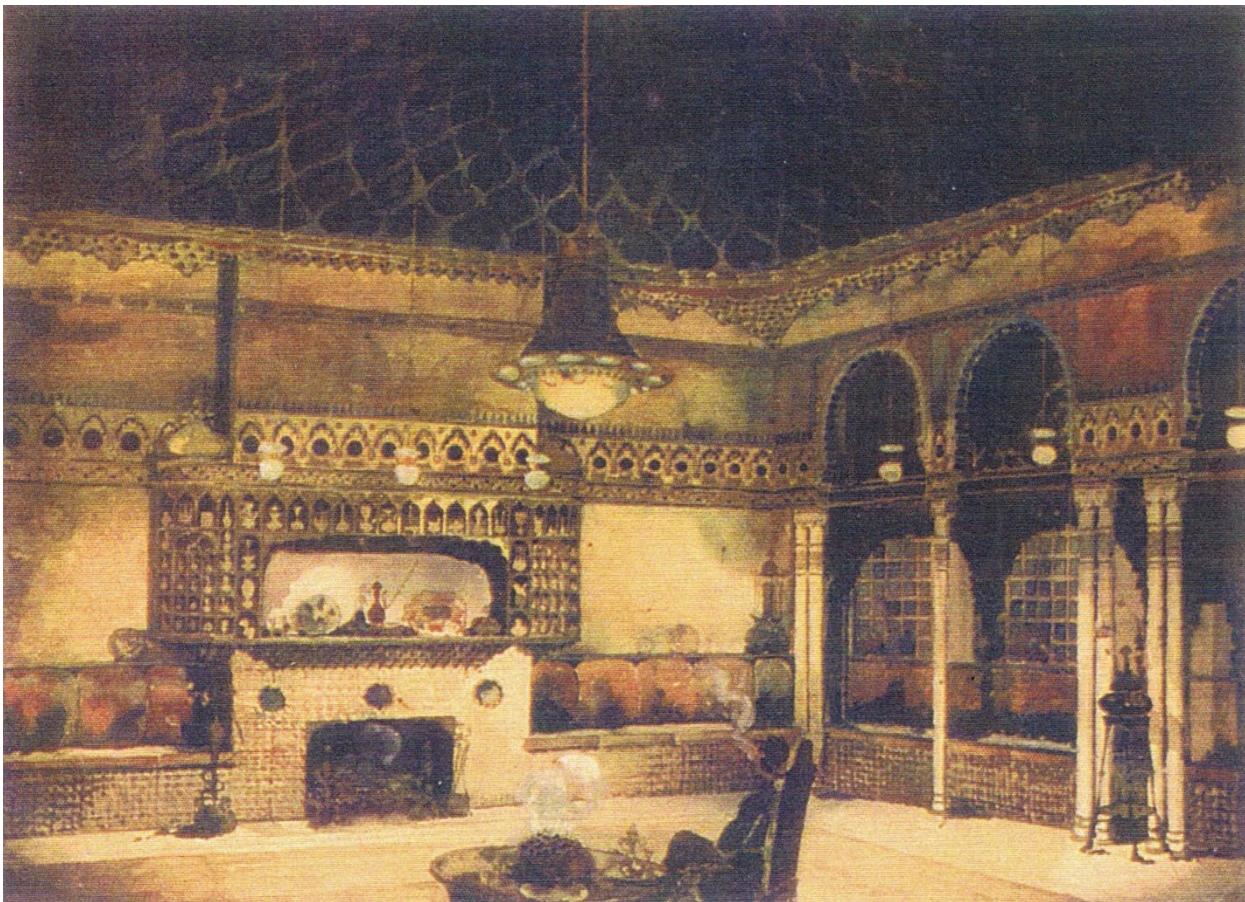


Figure 3. "Sketch of a Smoking Room at the Ayer Mansion, Boston" attributed Rene de Quelin, Tiffany's head designer (Painting owned by James C. Ayer, Jr.).

Source: Jean Carroon Architects, Inc., Ayer Mansion Comprehensive Assessment, April 1999.

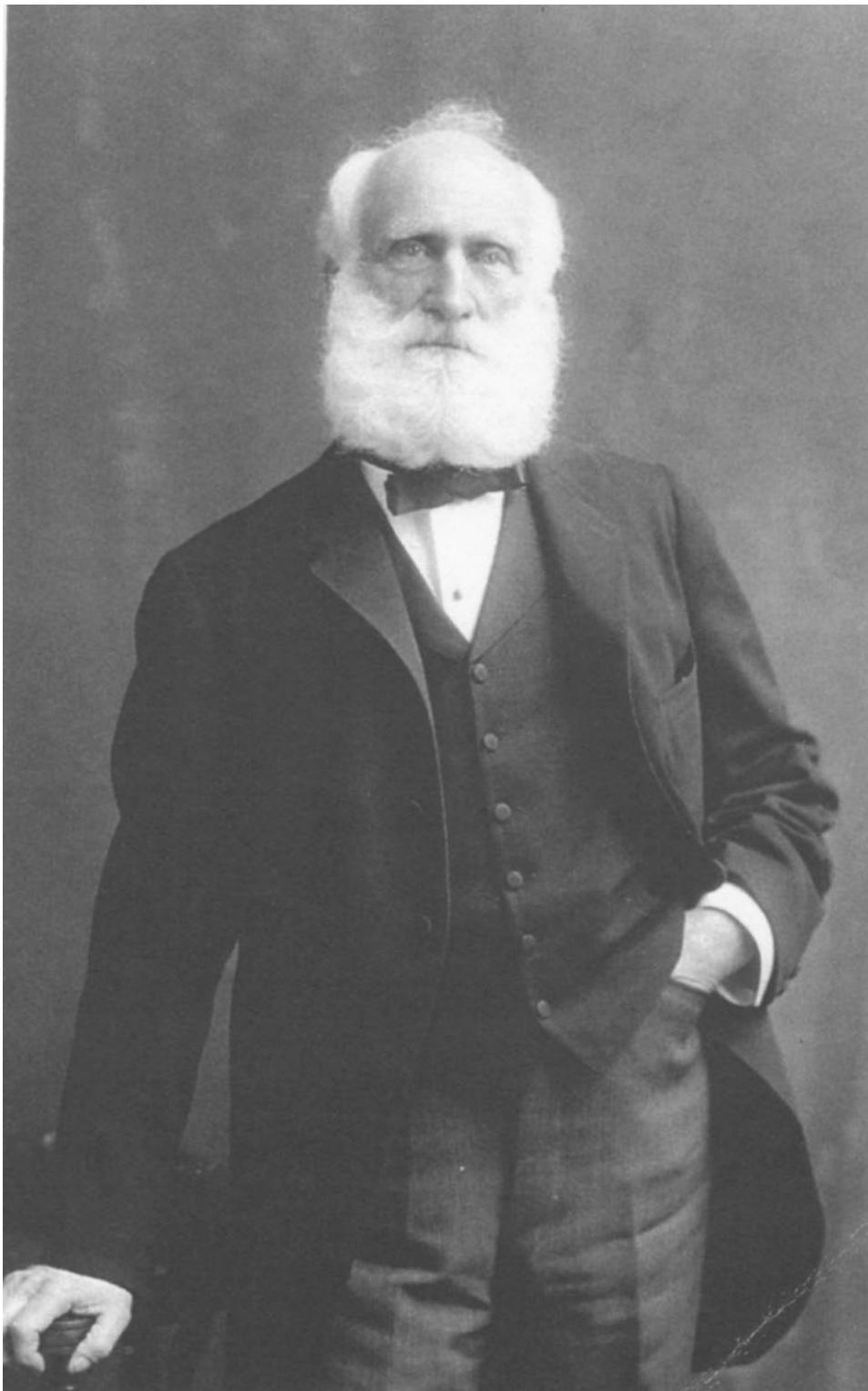


Figure 4. Frederick Ayer, undated photograph.

Source: Steward, Scott C. *The Sarsaparilla Kings: A Biography of Dr. James Cook Ayer and Frederick Ayer with a Record of their Family*. Cambridge, MA, 1993.



Figure 5. Ellen Barrows Banning Ayer, undated photograph.

Source: Steward, Scott C. *The Sarsaparilla Kings: A Biography of Dr. James Cook Ayer and Frederick Ayer with a Record of their Family*. Cambridge, MA, 1993.

Plans must be filed and approved by this Department before
a permit for erection will be granted.

Application for Permit to Build.

(1st and 2d CLASS BUILDING)

Boston, DEC 9, 1899.

To the

BUILDING COMMISSIONER:

The undersigned hereby applies for a permit to build, according to the following
specifications:

Location, ownership and detail must be complete and legible.
Separate application required for every building.



DEC 9
1899

BOSTON
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Figure 7. Beatrice Ayer Patton and Katharine Ayer Merrill in the Drawing Room ca. 1910.
Source: From the collection of Katharine Merrill Reeve.

3.0 SIGNIFICANCE

3.1 Historic Significance

Note: The following statement of historic significance is adapted in part from the 2005 National Historic Landmark nomination by Leslie Donovan and Bernard Zirnheld of Tremont Preservation Services, the 1998 Comprehensive Assessment by Jean Carroon Architects, Inc., and the 2021 landmark petition and draft preliminary study report, provided by Jeanne M. Pelletier, preservation advisor.³⁰ It also incorporates other sources and collected information.

The Frederick Ayer Mansion is historically significant at the local level for its connection with the local entrepreneur and art collector, Frederick Ayer and his wife Ellen Banning Ayer and as a component of the major residential development of Boston's Back Bay neighborhood in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Frederick Ayer and Ellen Banning Ayer, Owners

When they embarked on the design and building of 395 Commonwealth Avenue, the clients and original owners, Frederick Ayer and Ellen Barrows Banning Ayer, were prominent residents of Lowell, Massachusetts, residing in a large Second Empire Mansion that Frederick built on Pawtucket Street. Frederick Ayer (1822–1918) and his brother Dr. James C. Ayer were raised in a family of modest means north of Boston and developed a successful patent medicine business, Ayer Brothers', with international markets, and amassed a considerable fortune (Figure 4). Frederick also had investments in textiles, including founding the American Woolen Company, and in real estate in Massachusetts and New York. Widower Frederick married his second wife, Ellen Barrows Banning (1853–1918) in 1884, and the couple and four children traveled to Europe, North Africa, and the Near East in 1896–1898 (Figure 5).³¹ While there they appear to have collected furnishings and decorative arts and were likely exposed to "Oriental" and exotic aesthetics that influenced their design choices. In addition, Frederick had visited the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 and would have seen Tiffany's acclaimed chapel installation that was later installed for a time in St. John the Divine Cathedral in New York City and then at Tiffany's summer home, Laurelton Hall (1905).

Upon return from the extended travels, Frederick purchased three recently platted lots on Commonwealth Avenue in April 1899. By December of that year, while residing at 232 Beacon Street in Boston and at the Ayers' home in Lowell during the winter 1899–1900 season, he had engaged Alfred J. Manning as architect and filed for a building permit to build 395 Commonwealth Avenue on the east portion of his lots (Figure 6).³² In his reminiscences, Frederick reported that he personally devoted considerable time to the planning of details and that "[a]s a result the construction and equipment of the house was practically perfect, though the architectural results were a

³⁰ Donovan, Leslie and Bernard Zirnheld. National Historic Landmark Nomination: Frederick Ayer Mansion. Tremont Preservation Services, accepted by the National Park Service, April 8, 2005.

³¹ Carlo D'Este, *A Genius for War*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1996, 52–53; Donovan and Zirnheld, National Historic Landmark Nomination, 18; Frederick Ayer. *The Reminiscences of Frederick Ayer*, Boston: Privately Published, 1923, 78.

³² City of Boston, Inspectional Services Department Records (ISDS), Building Permit and Inspection Files for 395 Commonwealth Avenue. Application for Permit to Build, December 9, 1899.

disappointment to him.”³³ The reason for disappointment is not known. Ellen Ayer, who had been an actress before their marriage and was younger than Frederick, also influenced design decisions.³⁴

When Frederick and Ellen Ayer purchased the Commonwealth Avenue property overlooking the broad central mall, the neighborhood was firmly established as a fashionable residential district of the wealthy upper class and high culture. The creation of the Back Bay, which reclaimed 450 acres of marsh for development over several decades, was an outstanding achievement in American urban planning in the second half of the nineteenth century. The land was filled from the east at Arlington Street starting in 1857, with the section near Charlesgate, where the Ayer Mansion is sited, being the last filled in the 1880s. The Ayers choice of location and the architectural statement they created with their new house by artist and designer Louis Comfort Tiffany and architect Alfred J. Manning reflected their stature in society and world-travelled sophistication.³⁵

Following completion of the house, Frederick Ayer sold the remaining vacant western portion of his lots to Alexander Agassiz in 1901.³⁶ The lot remained vacant until 1924 when it was developed by the Moorland Company with a five-story brick and cast-stone building for use as a dental surgery.³⁷ The Ayers occupied the house at 395 Commonwealth Avenue and maintained the original Tiffany interior intact until the deaths of Frederick and Ellen, several months apart, in 1918. In 1923, James C. Ayer, Charles F. Ayer, and the Trustees under the Will of Frederick Ayer sold the property to Ethel Josephine Abbott.³⁸ The property was leased as commercial space and changed hands several times between 1923 and 1953 when Hearthstone Insurance Company of Boston (Hearthstone) purchased it from Massachusetts Properties, Inc. for use as insurance offices.³⁹ In 1964, Hearthstone sold the property to the Association for Cultural Interchange, Inc., later Trimount Foundation, Inc., which also purchased the adjacent 397-399 Commonwealth Avenue to the west.⁴⁰ Trimount Foundation Inc. and its subsidiary Bayridge Residence and Cultural Center used the two buildings as female dormitories and joined them in 1971–1972. In December 2021, Trimount Foundation, Inc. sold the two properties to the current owners, 395-399 Commonwealth Avenue LLC.⁴¹

³³ Frederick Ayer. *The Reminiscences of Frederick Ayer*. Boston: Privately Published, 1923.

³⁴ Donovan and Zirnheld, National Historic Landmark Nomination, 18–19.

³⁵ Alexander Cassie and Elizabeth R. Amadon. National Register of Historic Places Nomination: Back Bay Historic District. Boston: Massachusetts Historical Commission, 1973.

³⁶ Backbayhouses.org. 395 Commonwealth. <https://backbayhouses.org/395%20commonwealth/>, accessed June 2022.

³⁷ Jean Carroon Architects Inc. Ayer Mansion Comprehensive Assessment, April 1999, II-4.

³⁸ Suffolk County Deeds, Trustees under the Will of Frederick Ayer to Ethel Josephine Abbott, Book 4507 Page 25, December 30, 1923.

³⁹ Suffolk County Deeds, Massachusetts Properties, Inc. to Hearthstone Insurance Company of Massachusetts, B 6839 P 569, 09Jan 1953.

⁴⁰ Suffolk County Deeds, Hearthstone Insurance Company of Massachusetts to Association for Cultural Interchange, Inc., B 7916 P 285, 28Dec 1964.

⁴¹ Suffolk County Deeds, The Trimount Foundation, Inc. (formerly Association for Cultural Interchange, Inc.) to 395-399 Commonwealth Avenue LLC, B 66798 P 111, 06Dec 2021.

3.2 Architectural (or Other) Significance

The Frederick Ayer Mansion is architecturally significant at the local, state, regional, and national levels as the last surviving example of a complete and *in situ* residential commission by the famed American artist, designer, and craftsman Louis Comfort Tiffany. It is one of only three remaining examples of a Tiffany-designed interior and the only known example of Tiffany's exterior stone mosaics on a residential building in the United States. The New York architect Alfred J. Manning worked in concert with Tiffany to design the building and its decorative scheme with masterful integration of exterior and interior artwork and architecture. It has further significance at the local level as a unique example of Moorish and Byzantine eclectic architecture in Boston.

Louis Comfort Tiffany, Residential Work

Throughout his career, Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848–1933) was a highly prolific artist and craftsman, designing and overseeing the production of a wide array of decorative objects, including stained glass, ceramics, metalwork, mosaics, light fixtures, furniture, and glass vases. His designs in these media, associated primarily with the Art Nouveau and Aesthetic movements, were groundbreaking. His complete residential compositions for wealthy Americans, in which he integrated all of these elements as well as unique architectural features, established him as an early pioneer in the field of interior design. He was the "most fashionable purveyor of taste" during America's Gilded Age at the turn of the twentieth century and was praised widely for his "dumbfounding versatility."⁴²

Born into a wealthy and prominent New York business family, Tiffany began his career as a painter, traveling extensively through Europe and Northern Africa, and studying with masters in Paris. His early paintings reveal his interest in the architecture, design, colors, and light that he encountered in Europe and Northern Africa and would later use in his residential commissions. Upon returning home to New York City, he began to collaborate with other artisans, such as textile designer Candace Wheeler, painter Samuel Coleman, and painter, collector, and designer Lockwood de Forest, and ultimately formed a series of his own companies focusing on the decorative arts.

Some of Tiffany's earliest residential commissions were for his family in New York City, where his interest in 'exotic' designs and innovative materials was first expressed. His earliest commission, his own unit in the Bella Apartments on 48 East 26th Street, revealed an interest not only in the novel use of exotic items, but also a far-eastern aesthetic of unified design.⁴³ At the Bella Apartments, instead of slavishly imitating Japanese style, Tiffany integrated Japanese and far eastern textiles, ceramics, woodwork, and other materials in an otherwise Victorian structure "in unconventional ways, endeavoring to produce a new kind of space, ruled by beauty alone."⁴⁴ He opposed bending to imitative trends and strove to create a new aesthetic, stating "[s]tyles are merely the copying of what others have done...God has given us our talents, not to copy the talents of others, but rather to use our brains and imagination in order to obtain the Revelation of True Beauty."⁴⁵

⁴² Donovan and Zirnheld, National Historic Landmark Nomination, 13.

⁴³ Ellen E. Roberts, "A Marriage of 'the Extreme East and the Extreme West': Japanism and Aestheticism in Louis Comfort Tiffany's Rooms in the Bella Apartments." *Studies in Decorative Arts* 13 (Spring/Summer, 2006): 2–51.

⁴⁴ Roberts, "A Marriage," 27.

⁴⁵ Roberts, "A Marriage."

After Louis's first wife died, Tiffany's father Charles, the founder of Tiffany & Company jewelers, commissioned the young designer to create a new multifamily home to house the extended family at the corner of 72nd Street and Madison Avenue in New York. The massive house, ultimately designed by the architectural firm of McKim, Mead & White, and completed in 1885 (demolished ca. 1936), was based on drawings first produced by Tiffany himself. In addition to masterminding the overall structure, Tiffany designed the exterior cladding, creating a new yellow-fired brick that was to become known as Tiffany brick, as well as the interiors. The building housed three apartments, each exhibiting an eclectic mix of the exotic and the traditional in their design. Tiffany's own unit on the top floor dramatically displayed such features as exposed steel structural beams with medieval lettering, a wooden dining room table painted enamel white and supported by legs reminiscent of sawhorses, and a massive free-standing, two-story fireplace in concrete that replicated an ancient tree.

Tiffany's success with his own early homes led to residential commissions from private individuals in New York, elsewhere in the United States, and abroad. His early firm collaboration, Associated Artists (1879–1883), re-decorated the Samuel L. Clements (Mark Twain) House in Hartford, Connecticut, (NHL, 1962) in 1881, making lavish use of gold stenciling in dramatic geometric designs to lend a more 'exotic' feel to the existing Queen Anne-style structure. President Chester Arthur, a New Yorker, hired Tiffany to redecorate three rooms in the White House, including a large stained-glass screen that stood in the entrance hall from 1883 until 1902 when it was removed during renovations and sold.⁴⁶ Tiffany's use of nascent mass media and new photographic technologies, and his design collaborations with notable architects and window designers, helped extend his exposure and influence. His innovations in glass making and interior design brought him national and international recognition.⁴⁷ He undertook the Pierre Ferry House project in Seattle, Washington, best known for the peacock-motif art glass windows in the main hall, in 1903–1906. Perhaps Tiffany's most famous residential composition was his large summer home Laurelton Hall in Laurel Hollow, Long Island, New York, completed in 1905. Like the Ayer Mansion, Laurelton Hall was unusual in Tiffany's work in that it featured exterior mosaics. The elaborate house was destroyed by fire in 1957, and only individual components survive in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum in New York City and the Morse Museum in Winter Park, Florida. Both the Pierre Ferry house and Laurelton Hall work took place a few years after the Ayer Mansion.

Alfred J. Manning, Architect

The Ayers selected New York-based architect Alfred John Manning (1851–1919) who is identified on the building permit No. 635 and mentioned as the architect in the December 21, 1901, issue of *American Architect and Building News*. Manning was born in Kensington England and immigrated to the United States in 1775. He married Elizabeth (Bessie) Pollock Rutter (b. 1861) of New York in 1885.⁴⁸ He died in New York City. In his career, he was an artist and designer, and from about 1884, worked

⁴⁶ Peter Waddell. "Essay on 'The Grand Illumination,' Sunset of the Gaslight Age, 1891." White House Historical Association. <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/the-grand-illumination-sunset-of-the-gaslight-age-1891-by-peter-waddell>, accessed June 6, 2022.

⁴⁷ Donovan and Zirnheld, National Historic Landmark Nomination, 13.

⁴⁸ Backbayhouses.org. Alfred John Manning. <https://backbayhouses.org/alfred-john-manning/>, accessed June 2022.

with architect Robert Henderson Robertson, becoming a partner, head draftsman, and office manager in 1887. Among Robertson and Manning's notable collaborations were the New York Central and Hudson River Railroad station at Mott Haven (1885–1887), the renovation of the New York Club at 370 Fifth Avenue (1893), and a row of housing in Brooklyn's Clinton Hill district (1891). Manning may have become associated with Tiffany during this time. Robertson worked with architects who often collaborated with Tiffany; Manning's and Tiffany's offices were close to each other in New York City, and Manning was a resident of Irvington-on-Hudson, New York, where the Tiffany family had a summer home.⁴⁹

About 1900, Manning established an independent office, which continued until 1914. Concurrent with the house at 395 Commonwealth Avenue, Manning collaborated with Tiffany in 1901 on a reading room for the Public Library in Irvington Town Hall, Irvington-on-Hudson, New York (1901–1902; NR 1984).⁵⁰ Also in 1901, Manning designed two commercial office and loft buildings on Broadway in New York City for Frederick Ayer. 395 Commonwealth is Manning's only known work in the Back Bay neighborhood of Boston. Manning's other notable independent commissions included the stone castle "Rochroane," with a Tiffany landscape window, in Irvington, New York, for Melchior S. Belthoover (1902–1905; demolished 1977 after a fire); the window is in the Corning Museum of Glass. He designed the Washington Irving High School in Tarrytown, New York (1897; NR 1984) and the summer home of E. J. Nathan at Elberon, New Jersey.⁵¹

Ayer Mansion Design and Construction; a Rare Survival

Louis Comfort Tiffany designed dozens of interiors during his 50-year career. The Ayer Mansion is one of just three known residential interiors he designed that still survives *in situ*. The others are the Samuel L. Clements (Mark Twain) House and Pierre Ferry House, discussed above. The Ayer Mansion is rare among this small group of interiors in that the Tiffany designs are integral to the finishes and features of Alfred J. Manning's architecture, whereas, in the other buildings, the Tiffany-designed elements are secondary decorative elements within an architect's independent design.⁵² In addition, with the loss of Laurelton Hall, the Ayer Mansion is likely the only surviving building with *in situ* exterior ornamentation by Tiffany.⁵³

In the December 21, 1901, issue of *American Architect and Building News*, the Manning and Tiffany collaboration on the exterior and interior of the house was reported as follows: "In carrying out his design the architect had the benefit of association with Mr. Louis C. Tiffany, who designed the exterior mosaic-work, which makes the house so notable on a Boston street, as well as decorated the interesting main staircase...."⁵⁴

As documented in the National Historic Landmark nomination, the Ayer Mansion design and execution exemplifies several of Tiffany's key contributions to American design history. The exterior

⁴⁹ Donovan and Zirnheld, National Historic Landmark Nomination, 17.

⁵⁰ Donovan and Zirnheld, National Historic Landmark Nomination, 17.

⁵¹ Donovan and Zirnheld, National Historic Landmark Nomination, 17.

⁵² Ibid, 18.

⁵³ Ibid, 14.

⁵⁴ *American Architect and Building News*, 94.

facade and interior Outer and Inner Vestibules and Marble Hall join a variety of interrelated media and motifs to create a unified work of art, which was considered a hallmark of Tiffany's work. The stained-glass and mosaic techniques used in the Ayer Mansion derived from pioneering approaches and methods developed in Tiffany's studios, including the signature opalescent glass and semi-transparent glass backed by metallic foil, and "plated" surfaces he invented starting in the 1870s.⁵⁵ Tiffany's choice of design inspiration sources from the East and Asia rather than Europe reflected his travel experiences and preferences for the arts of Persia, India, Byzantium, Japan and North Africa. His successes influenced the general trend of American design aesthetic. He successfully balanced the use of rich color and pattern with the more austere light-toned surfaces of the granite exterior facade masonry and white marble in the Marble Hall. The exterior and interior designs are acclaimed as unusually progressive for the time in Boston and favorably comparable to early Art Nouveau buildings of Europe that combine complex ornament and austere form.⁵⁶

The Marble Hall displays the sumptuous entrance hall characteristics notable in many Tiffany designs for residences and also used in churches. The mosaic and glass finishes of the Marble Hall and Main Stair are particularly reminiscent of Tiffany's chapel for the 1893 Chicago World Columbian Exposition, which he considered his greatest artistic work in these media. His innovations are considered to have been among the most important advances in decorative windows since the Middle Ages. His inventive techniques are captured in the peristyle mosaic on the Main Stair Landing. The use of plating, or layered clear and opaque glass, reflective metallic foil backing, varied surface plane depths and textures, and painted shadowing establishes a convincing three-dimensional optical illusion tour de force.⁵⁷

The blown Favrite glass jars that flank the former Dining Room (and the now-missing one at the Drawing Room door) in the Marble Hall represent another Tiffany innovation and his astute business and marketing practice. He recognized the value of combining industrial production and art to meet the growing demand for decorative accent items, and cultivated production of lamps, vases, and other small items. The ornate blown glass globe in the Marble Hall marking the lower end of the five-story brass chandelier represents another example of this glass making technique.⁵⁸

Tiffany's remarkable stained-glass and mosaic designs with simple geometric Byzantine motifs are present in many areas of the Ayer Mansion. On the south facade, windows with stained glass are present at the main entrance fanlight, an ornate three-part transom screen at the first floor of the bow at the Drawing Room (only one is extant and stored in the basement), and the three-part ribbon grid transom screen at the second floor of the bow at the Library (all extant). In the interior, the significance of the large laylight over the mid-floor main Stair Landing, whose geometric design and color is related to the mosaics in the Marble Hall, is "underscored by the Neustadt Museum of Tiffany Art's decision to permit rare pieces of original Tiffany glass to be used in its restoration."⁵⁹

The mosaic designs in the Marble Hall contain colored stone and glass tesserae, in blue, green, and gold, in circular and diamond patterns. The mosaics and a repeating Islamic star motif on the

⁵⁵ Donovan and Zirnheld, *National Historic Landmark Nomination*, 14.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 14.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 15.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 16.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 16.

mantelpiece, the wall edge above the high wainscoting, and the front of stair risers weave the different sections together. They also relate to the exterior mosaics, for a consistent decorative scheme.⁶⁰

The sweeping natural wood Elliptical Stairs with the five-story chandelier; the light colored, ornate plaster pilasters, frieze, and ceiling and the patterned parquet floor in the Drawing Room; and the dark carved wood paneling and carved frieze, and deep colored mosaic at the fireplace in the Library all expand the tone palate and underline the versatility of Tiffany's design aesthetic working in conjunction with the architect, Alfred J. Manning. Unfortunately, Tiffany's lighting fixtures originally installed in the Drawing Room and Library are not extant.

The design and fabrication of the Tiffany elements in the Ayer Mansion, including stone and glass mosaics, blown glass, metal, and plaster, originated from the Tiffany Studios in New York City. A drawing by Rene de Quelin, Tiffany's lead residential designer, links the designers to the Ayer mansion and shows this was an important project for Tiffany Studios (see Figure 3). At the time the Ayer Mansion was built, Clara Wolcott Driscoll (1881–1945) was the director of the Tiffany Studio mosaic (glass cutting) department in New York, and the shop employed about 20 women. However, no evidence has been found of specific glass artisans who worked on the house.

Post-Ayer-Family Changes to the Building

In 1964, when the Trimount Foundation, Inc. purchased the building, the Drawing Room had a dropped ceiling and burlap on the walls, the Dining Room finishes were removed, the Tiffany laylight in the Main Stair was covered, and only 5 of 11 exterior stained-glass windows remained. In 1971–1972, the 395 and 397–399 Commonwealth Avenue buildings were connected with openings created in the shared party wall for use as a women's dormitory. In 1977, the Library was renovated as a chapel, and in the early 1990s, additional space was added at the basement level in the rear of the building for a second chapel. In 1996, all of the double-hung sash on the top three floors were removed and replaced with modern sash not sympathetic to the originals. Stained glass windows on the top floor (located in the Sky Parlor) and two of the stained glass windows on the first floor parlor level were removed and have not been located. As noted earlier, the third matching vase designed for the house's Marble Hall was lost or stolen.

Restoration⁶¹

Since 1998, the restoration of the Ayer Mansion has been entrusted by the owners, the Trimount Foundation, to the Campaign for the Ayer Mansion, Inc. ("CAM"). Over these past 23 years, the Campaign has undertaken major renovations, and perhaps more importantly, brought the public inside to view these magnificent interiors through monthly tours, free public events, community activities, and lecture and performance series.

To date, CAM has undertaken nearly \$3 million of restoration work on both the interior and exterior, with over 75% of those funds coming from public sources and foundations, including a \$400,000

⁶⁰ Donovan and Zirnheld, 16.

⁶¹ Pelletier, "Landmark Petition."

grant in 2009 from the federal Save America's Treasures grant program; three grants from the Massachusetts Historical Commission totaling more than \$110,000; grants from the City of Boston's Edward Ingersoll Browne Fund and the George B. Henderson Foundation; as well as a \$100,000 challenge grant from Boston's Lynch Foundation and countless other local foundations that do not permit publicity. Ayer family descendants and other generous individuals have also contributed substantial amounts towards the restoration.

In 1998, CAM undertook a comprehensive assessment of the building, funded in part by the Massachusetts Historical Commission and by Bayridge Residence and Cultural Center.⁶² The assessment addressed existing conditions, history, and significance, and included multi-disciplinary technical studies of paint, mosaic, stained glass, structure, and mechanical and electrical systems. It focused on the exterior, the Vestibules, the Marble Hall, the Drawing Room and the Library. The Assessment included a preservation and maintenance plan with treatment recommendations that informed the subsequent phased restoration program. The study identified all the Tiffany features of the building, and prioritizing the repairs over a 20-year timeframe. Since that time, CAM has, in accordance with that study, undertaken a number of exterior and interior preservation projects including:

- 1999: Restoration of the Library Stained-Glass Screens
- 2000: Restoration of the Drawing Room
- 2002: Restoration of the Laylight
- 2003: Upgrade of Laylight Electrical Lighting
- 2004: Restoration of the Original Paint Scheme to the Marble Hall and the Hall at the Landing
- 2006: Analyzing and Mapping Damage to the Trompe L'oeil Mosaic
- 2006: Addition of the Fabric Treatment to the Drawing Room Walls
- 2009: Removal of Linoleum in the Hall and on the Stairs, and Refinishing of Original Wood Floors
- 2009: Comprehensive Study of the Façade Elements
- 2010: Removal of First Floor Stained-Glass Front Parlor Screen to Storage
- 2011: Installation of Lexan Panels with Stained Glass Image
- 2014: Façade Restoration Phase I: Restoration of the Balcony and Upper Mosaics
- 2018: Façade Restoration Phase II: Restoration of the Entryway and Round Window Mosaics
- 2019: Further Stabilization of the Laylight
- 2020: Restoration Plan for the Parlor Stained-Glass Screen
- 2020: Library Restoration Study
- 2021: Façade Restoration Phase III: Inset Columns and Copper Clad Doors

3.3 Archaeological Sensitivity

Back Bay is archaeologically sensitive for ancient Native American archaeological sites, specifically ancient fishweirs, and may contain significant historical archaeological deposits dating to after 1850. When the neighborhood was a tidal mudflat for the Charles River, Massachusetts Native people constructed the ancient fishweirs, a fence-like fishing structure used to capture spawning fish in the spring, approximately 3,000-5,200 years ago. Many of the stakes and wooden elements used to

⁶² Jean Carroon Architects Inc., *Comprehensive Assessment*.

build these weirs are preserved within the clay of Back Bay, approximately 30-40 feet below the present ground surface. Weir elements have been encountered throughout the 20th century in multiple locations across most of the eastern portion of the neighborhood and many thousands of weir elements likely remain preserved under the neighborhood. Any proposed project whose work will disturb the original clay deposits approximately 30-40 feet deep under the historic fill deposits of the neighborhood may disturb significant Native fishweirs. Because the filling of Back Bay did not begin until the 1840s, and because the fill is a mixed deposit of materials from multiple locations, the fills of Back Bay and most of the properties built there after filling are not archaeologically sensitive. However, there may be particularly unique deposits associated with the dams used to originally define the edges of the neighborhood and unique historical archaeological sites at the periphery of the neighborhood whose survey may provide significant archaeological data.

3.4 Relationship to Criteria for Designation

The Ayer Mansion interior meets the following criteria for designation as a Boston Landmark as established in Section 4 of Chapter 772 of the Acts of 1975, as amended:

- A. Inclusion in National Register of Historic Places as provided in the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966.

The Frederick Ayer Mansion at 395 Commonwealth Avenue was listed in the State Register of Historic Places on September 3, 1966, as a contributing resource to the Back Bay Architectural District; was listed in the State and National Registers of Historic Places on August 14, 1974, as a contributing resource to the Back Bay Historic District; and was listed in the State and National Registers of Historic Places on April 5, 2005, as a National Historic Landmark.

- B. Structures, sites, objects, man-made or natural, at which events occurred that have made an outstanding contribution to, and are identified prominently with, or which best represent some important aspect of the cultural, political, economic, military, or social history of the city, the commonwealth, the New England region or the nation.

The Frederick Ayer Mansion is historically significant at the local level for its connection with the local entrepreneur and art collector Frederick Ayer and his wife Ellen Banning Ayer, and as a component of the major residential development of Boston's Back Bay neighborhood in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

- D. Structures, sites, objects, man-made or natural, representative of elements of architectural or landscape design or craftsmanship which embody distinctive characteristics of a type inherently valuable for study of a period, style or method of construction or development, or a notable work of an architect, landscape architect, designer, or builder whose work influenced the development of the city, the commonwealth, the New England region, or the nation.

The Frederick Ayer Mansion is architecturally significant at the local, state, regional, and national levels as the last surviving example of a complete and *in situ* residential commission by the famed American artist, designer, and craftsman Louis Comfort Tiffany. It is one of only three remaining examples of a Tiffany-designed interior and the only known example of Tiffany's exterior stone mosaics on a residential building in the United States. The New York architect Alfred J. Manning worked in concert with Tiffany to design the building and its decorative scheme with masterful integration of exterior and interior artwork and architecture. It has further significance at the local level as a unique example of Moorish and Byzantine eclectic architecture in Boston.

4.0 ECONOMIC STATUS

4.1 Current Assessed Value

According to the City of Boston's Assessor's Records, the property at 395 Commonwealth Avenue (parcel 0503829000) where the Frederick Ayer Mansion is located has a total assessed value of \$17,492,900.00, with the land valued at \$4,353,100.00 and the building valued at \$13,139,800.00 for fiscal year 2022.

4.2 Current Ownership

The Frederick Ayer Mansion is owned by 395-399 Commonwealth Avenue LLC as of December 2021.

5.0 PLANNING CONTEXT

5.1 Background

Built and used originally as a single-family residence, the property has also been used as office space, a medical clinic, the headquarters of an insurance company, and a dormitory for women students. In 1971–1972, the building was linked with the adjacent building to the west at 399 Commonwealth Avenue. In 2021, the building changed ownership for the first time since 1964. The new owner plans to again separate the two buildings and sell 395 Commonwealth Avenue as a single-family residence.⁶³

5.2 Zoning

The property is in the Boston Proper zoning district, subdistrict H-3-65, Apartment Residential. It is in a Groundwater Conservation Overlay District and the Back Bay Architectural District.

5.3 Planning Issues

The Landmark Petition was filed with the Boston Landmarks Commission on May 14, 2021, and a preliminary hearing was held May 25, 2021, when the Commission voted to accept the resource for further study.

The Massachusetts Historical Commission holds a Preservation Restriction on the building established on June 27, 2013, in relation to a restoration grant. The Restriction includes the exterior and interior spaces for any proposed alterations that are not clearly minor in nature and that may affect the characteristics that contribute to the architectural, archaeological, or historical integrity of the property.⁶⁴ The obligation to report to the Massachusetts Historical Commission is voluntary in nature, making this easement “self-policing.”

The owner of the building between 1964 and 2022, the non-profit Trimount Foundation Inc., later Bayridge Residence and Cultural Center, took care to ensure the survival of most of the Tiffany-designed features. The Campaign for the Ayer Mansion (Campaign) is a non-profit organization formed in 1998 and dedicated to preserving and restoring the Ayer Mansion and educating the public about Louis Comfort Tiffany. Through the cooperative efforts of the owner, the Campaign, and others, nearly \$3 million has been raised from grants from the Commonwealth, the City of Boston, and private foundations and used to conduct studies, offer programming, and restore the building. As the Ayer Mansion is no longer in non-profit ownership, the Campaign is in the process of dissolution and will no longer have any oversight over the building’s interiors.

⁶³ Charles V. Reed, personal communication.

⁶⁴ Massachusetts Historical Commission. “Preservation Restriction Agreement between the Commonwealth of Massachusetts by and through the Massachusetts Historical Commission and the Trimount Foundation, Inc.” Boston, 2013.

6.0 ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

6.1 Alternatives available to the Boston Landmarks Commission

A. Designation

The Commission retains the option of designating the Frederick Ayer Mansion Tiffany-designed Interior as a Landmark. Designation shall correspond to Assessor's parcel 0503829000 and shall address the following elements hereinafter referred to as the "Specified Features":

- Interior spaces and elements designed, and many items fabricated, by Louis Comfort Tiffany including but not limited to:
 - **Outer and Inner Vestibules:** stone and glass mosaic floors; marble wainscoting; plaster upper walls and ceiling; and three sets of double-leaf doors.
 - **Marble Hall:** white marble walls, stairs risers, and mantelpiece, and mosaic proscenium arch, inset with glass mosaic of different colors and geometry, many backed with gold foil, repeating in glass the patterns found on the exterior in stone mosaic; plaster walls with glass mosaic; plaster ceiling; tesserae stone mosaic floor; five-story metal chandelier with an art-glass central globe hanging through elliptical stair opening in the ceiling; two Favrlle glass vases in original condition in original niches; two concealed doors in the marble walls; main semi-circular stairs and stairs to former Dining Room.
 - **Drawing Room:** Fully restored elements of decorative plaster wainscoting, wall pilasters, frieze, and ceiling; mantelpiece; original firebox and hearth; wood parquet floor; wood trim around doors and windows; pocket door.
 - **Main Stair Landing:** split marble stair and landing; tromp l'oeil mosaic of gold and nickel-backed glass representing an ancient temple or garden folly; 20-foot-long stained-glass laylight, with a four-story atrium and roof skylight above it to let in natural light, restored in 2003. Sycamore panels and plaster walls.
 - **Stair Hall:** stair risers, balustrades, and newels of main stair from first to second floors; original sycamore woodwork; plaster walls where color analysis was used to restore the original paint treatment on these walls where the Ayer family displayed artwork; wood floor.
 - **Elliptical Stair:** stair risers, balustrades, and newels of elliptical staircase from second to fifth floors; elliptical halls with door moldings on each floor; five-story chandelier hanging through the elliptical stair well (see Marble Hall); elliptical skylight at fifth floor.
 - **Library:** hand-carved oak frieze with 32-two panels depicting bookplates from famous individuals; fireplace and surround; glass mosaic mantelpiece with hammered copper hood; original wood and glass-front display shelves; three stained-glass screens on the exterior of the

- windows, restored in 1998; wood paneling, doors, and trim; wood floor; plaster ceiling; bookcase in adjacent Alcove.
- **Other:** intact steel servants' stair with wood handrail off Marble Hall.

B. Denial of Designation

The Commission retains the option of not designating any or all of the Specified Features.

C. National Register Listing

The Commission could recommend that the property be listed on the National Register of Historic Places, if it is not already.

D. Preservation Plan

The Commission could recommend development and implementation of a preservation plan for the property.

E. Site Interpretation

The Commission could recommend that the owner develop and install historical interpretive materials at the site.

6.2 Impact of alternatives

A. Designation

Designation under Chapter 772 would require review of physical changes to the Frederick Ayer Mansion Interior in accordance with the Standards and Criteria adopted as part of the designation.

B. Denial of Designation

Without designation, the City would be unable to offer protection to the Specified Features, or extend guidance to the owners under Chapter 772.

C. National Register Listing

The Frederick Ayer Mansion is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is an individual National Historic Landmark. Listing on the National Register provides an honorary designation and limited protection from federal, federally-funded or federally assisted activities. It creates incentives for preservation, notably the federal investment tax credits and grants through the Massachusetts 19 Preservation Projects Fund (MPPF) from the Massachusetts Historical Commission. National Register listing provides listing on the State Register affording parallel protection for projects with state involvement and also the availability of state tax credits. National Register listing does not provide any design review for changes undertaken by private owners at their own expense.

D. Preservation Plan

A preservation plan allows an owner to work with interested parties to investigate various adaptive use scenarios, analyze investment costs and rates of return, and provide recommendations for subsequent development. It does not carry regulatory oversight.

E. Site Interpretation

A comprehensive interpretation of the history and significance of the Frederick Ayer Mansion could be introduced at the site.

7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The staff of the Boston Landmarks Commission makes the following recommendations:

1. That the Interior of the Frederick Ayer Mansion be designated by the Boston Landmarks Commission as a Landmark, under Chapter 772 of the Acts of 1975, as amended (see Section 3.4 of this report for Relationship to Criteria for Designation);
2. That the boundaries corresponding to the Assessor's parcel 0503829000 be adopted without modification;
3. And that the Standards and Criteria recommended by the staff of the Boston Landmarks Commission be accepted.

8.0 STANDARDS AND CRITERIA, WITH LIST OF CHARACTER-DEFINING FEATURES

8.1 Introduction

Per sections 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 of the enabling statute (Chapter 772 of the Acts of 1975 of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, as amended) Standards and Criteria must be adopted for each Designation which shall be applied by the Commission in evaluating proposed changes to the historic resource. The Standards and Criteria both identify and establish guidelines for those features which must be preserved and/or enhanced to maintain the viability of the Designation. The Standards and Criteria are based on the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties.⁶⁵ Before a Certificate of Design Approval or Certificate of Exemption can be issued for such changes, the changes must be reviewed by the Commission with regard to their conformance to the purpose of the statute.

The intent of these guidelines is to help local officials, designers and individual property owners to identify the characteristics that have led to designation, and thus to identify the limitation to the changes that can be made to them. It should be emphasized that conformance to the Standards and Criteria alone does not necessarily ensure approval, nor are they absolute, but any request for variance from them must demonstrate the reason for, and advantages gained by, such variance. The Commission's Certificate of Design Approval is only granted after careful review of each application and public hearing, in accordance with the statute.

Proposed alterations related to zoning, building code, accessibility, safety, or other regulatory requirements do not supersede the Standards and Criteria or take precedence over Commission decisions.

In these standards and criteria, the verb **Should** indicates a recommended course of action; the verb **Shall** indicates those actions which are specifically required.

8.2 Levels of Review

The Commission has no desire to interfere with the normal maintenance procedures for the property. In order to provide some guidance for property owners, managers or developers, and the Commission, the activities which might be construed as causing an alteration to the physical character of the interior have been categorized to indicate the level of review required, based on the potential impact of the proposed work. Note: the examples for each category are not intended to act as a comprehensive list; see Section 8.2.D.

- A. Routine activities which are not subject to review by the Commission:

⁶⁵ U.S. Department of the Interior, et al. *THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR'S STANDARDS FOR THE TREATMENT OF HISTORIC PROPERTIES WITH GUIDELINES FOR PRESERVING, REHABILITATING, RESTORING & RECONSTRUCTING HISTORIC BUILDINGS*, Secretary of the Interior, 2017, www.nps.gov/tps/standards/treatment-guidelines-2017.pdf.

1. Activities associated with normal cleaning and routine maintenance as described below:
 - a. For building cleaning and maintenance, such activities might include the following: normal cleaning (no power washing above 700 PSI, no chemical or abrasive cleaning), non-invasive inspections, in-kind repair of caulking, in-kind repainting, light bulb replacements.
 2. Routine activities associated with special events or seasonal decorations which do not disturb the interior surfaces, are to remain in place for less than six weeks, and do not result in any permanent alteration or attached fixtures.

B. Activities which may be determined by the staff to be eligible for a Certificate of Exemption or Administrative Review, requiring an application to the Commission:

 1. Maintenance and repairs involving no change in design, material, color, or outward appearance.
 2. In-kind replacement or repair.
 3. Staining or refinishing of wood or metal elements.
 4. Repair or replacement of glass or mosaics.
 5. Phased restoration programs will require an application to the Commission and may require full Commission review of the entire project plan and specifications; subsequent detailed review of individual construction phases may be eligible for Administrative Review by BLC staff.
 6. Repair projects of a repetitive nature will require an application to the Commission and may require full Commission review; subsequent review of these projects may be eligible for Administrative Review by BLC staff, where design, details, and specifications do not vary from those previously approved.
 7. Temporary installations or alterations that are to remain in place for longer than six weeks.
 8. Emergency repairs that require temporary tarps, board-ups, etc. may be eligible for Certificate of Exemption or Administrative Review; permanent repairs will require review as outlined in Section 8.2. In the case of emergencies, BLC staff should be notified as soon as possible to assist in evaluating the damage and to help expedite repair permits as necessary.

C. Activities requiring an application and full Commission review:

Reconstruction, restoration, replacement, demolition, or alteration involving change in design, material, color, location, or outward appearance, such as: New construction of any type, removal of existing features or elements, alterations of

existing features or elements; restoration of missing, removed, and/or stored elements.

D. Activities not explicitly listed above:

In the case of any activity not explicitly covered in these Standards and Criteria, the Landmarks staff shall determine whether an application is required and if so, whether it shall be an application for a Certificate of Design Approval or Certificate of Exemption.

E. Concurrent Jurisdiction

In some cases, issues which fall under the jurisdiction of the Landmarks Commission may also fall under the jurisdiction of other city, state and federal boards and commissions such as the Boston Art Commission, the Massachusetts Historical Commission, the National Park Service and others. All efforts will be made to expedite the review process. Whenever possible and appropriate, a joint staff review or joint hearing will be arranged.

8.3 Standards and Criteria

The following Standards and Criteria are based on the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties.⁶⁶

8.3.1 General Standards

1. Items not anticipated in the Standards and Criteria may be subject to review, refer to Section 8.2 and Section 9.
2. The historic character of a property shall be retained and preserved. The removal of distinctive materials or alterations of features, spaces and spatial relationships that characterize a property shall be avoided. See Section 8.4, List of Character-defining Features.
3. Each property shall be recognized as a physical record of its time, place and use. Changes that create a false sense of historical development, such as adding conjectural features or elements from other historic properties, shall not be undertaken.
4. Changes to a property that have acquired historic significance in their own right shall be retained and preserved. (The term "later contributing features" will be used to convey this concept.)
5. Distinctive materials, features, finishes and construction techniques or examples of craftsmanship that characterize a property shall be preserved.

⁶⁶ U.S. Department of the Interior, et al. *THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR'S STANDARDS FOR THE TREATMENT OF HISTORIC PROPERTIES WITH GUIDELINES FOR PRESERVING, REHABILITATING, RESTORING & RECONSTRUCTING HISTORIC BUILDINGS*, Secretary of the Interior, 2017, www.nps.gov/tps/standards/treatment-guidelines-2017.pdf.

6. Deteriorated historic features shall be repaired rather than replaced. Where the severity of deterioration requires replacement of a distinctive feature, the new material shall match the old in design, color, texture and, where possible, materials. Replacement of missing features will be substantiated by documentary and physical evidence.
7. Chemical or physical treatments, if appropriate, shall be undertaken using the gentlest means possible. Treatments that cause damage to historic materials shall not be used.
8. Staff archaeologists shall review proposed changes to a property that may impact known and potential archaeological sites. Archaeological surveys may be required to determine if significant archaeological deposits are present within the area of proposed work. Significant archaeological resources shall be protected and preserved in place. If such resources must be disturbed, mitigation measures will be required before the proposed work can commence. See section 9.0 Archaeology.
9. New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction shall not destroy historic materials, features, and spatial relationships that characterize the interior of the property.
10. New additions and adjacent or related new construction shall be undertaken in such a manner that, if removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the interior of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired.
11. Property owners shall take necessary precautions to prevent demolition by neglect of maintenance and repairs. Demolition of protected buildings in violation of Chapter 772 of the Acts of 1975, as amended, is subject to penalty as cited in Section 10 of Chapter 772 of the Acts of 1975, as amended.

8.3.2 Interior Spaces, Features, and Finishes

1. The floor plan and interior spaces, features, and finishes that are important in defining the overall historic character of the building shall be retained and preserved.
2. Original or later contributing interior materials, features, details, surfaces and ornamentation shall be repaired, if necessary, by patching, splicing, consolidating, or otherwise reinforcing the materials using recognized preservation methods.
3. Deteriorated or missing interior materials, features, details, surfaces, and ornamentation shall be replaced with materials and elements which match the original in material, color, texture, size, shape, profile, and detail of installation.
4. When replacement of materials or elements is necessary, it should be based on physical or documentary evidence.
5. If the same material is not technically or economically feasible, then compatible substitute materials may be considered.

6. When necessary, appropriate surface treatments such as cleaning, paint removal, and reapplication of protective coating systems shall be applied to historic materials (including plaster, masonry, wood, and metals) which comprise interior spaces.
7. Damaged or deteriorated paint and finishes shall be removed only to the next sound layer using the gentlest method possible prior to repainting or refinishing using compatible paint or other coating systems.
8. New material that is installed shall not obscure or damage character-defining interior features or finishes.
9. New or additional systems required for a new use for the building, such as bathrooms and mechanical equipment, should be installed in secondary spaces to preserve the historic character of the most significant interior spaces.
10. New mechanical and electrical wiring, ducts, pipes, and cables shall be installed in closets, service areas, and wall cavities to preserve the historic character of interior spaces, features, and finishes.
11. New, code-required stairways or elevators should be located in secondary and service areas of the historic building.

8.3.3 Guidelines

The following are additional Guidelines for the treatment of the historic property:

1. Should any major restoration or construction activity be considered for a property, the Boston Landmarks Commission recommends that the proponents prepare a historic building conservation study and/or consult a materials conservator early in the planning process.

8.4 List of Character-defining Features

Character-defining features are the significant observable and experiential aspects of a historic resource, whether a single building, landscape, or multi-property historic district, that define its architectural power and personality. These are the features that should be identified, retained, and preserved in any restoration or rehabilitation scheme in order to protect the resource's integrity. They are critically important considerations whenever preservation work is contemplated.

Inappropriate changes to historic features can undermine the historical and architectural significance of the resource, sometimes irreparably.

Below is a list that identifies the physical elements that contribute to the unique character of the historic resource. The items listed in this section should be considered important aspects of the historic resource and changes to them should be approved by commissioners only after careful consideration.

The character-defining features associated with Louis Comfort Tiffany's designs for this historic resource include:

1. Architectural style: comprised of eclectic elements including Byzantine, Moorish, and Neo-Classical influences.
2. Floorplan: first and second floor of primary rooms, elliptical stair hall, servant stair hall.
3. Volume of spaces: ceiling shapes, ceiling heights, niches.
4. Circulation: doors and halls, horizontal and vertical, stairs
5. Ornamentation: wall mosaics, especially trompe l'oeil, proscenium arch, and trim around Marble Hall. Fireplace mantels in Marble Hall and Library; original firebox and hearth in Drawing Room. See also Floors, Walls, Ceilings, Wood Trim and Cabinetry, Stained-Glass, and Lighting.
6. Floors: design and materials, including stone tesserae mosaic, parquet, hardwood narrow plank.
7. Walls: design and materials, including white, green, and yellow slab marble; paneled and carved wood frieze in Library; decorative plaster and fabric finish in Drawing Room; plain and colored shellacked plaster; glass mosaic inlay.
8. Ceilings: form and materials, including plain plaster, decorative plaster, flat and arched shape, skylight and stairwell openings.
9. Wood Trim and Cabinetry: window and door casings, doors and original window sash, glass-front bookcases in Library and the bookcase in the Alcove adjacent to the Library (this bookcase is original to the Library).
10. Stained-glass: exterior windows in Outer Vestibule, Drawing Room, and Library; long laylight over Main Stair landing; possible stained-glass skylight in fifth floor Sky Parlor space; the original stained glass 'screen' from the center transom of the bow window in the Drawing Room, which is currently stored in the basement of the house.
11. Stairs: Main Stair, first floor semi-circular stairs in white marble with mosaic on risers, landing and split stair between floors and the second floor. Elliptical stair with wood risers and treads, wood baluster, newels, and handrail on second through fifth floors.
12. Lighting: five-story metal chandelier with branching fixtures at each floor and art glass globe at first floor; two of the three original Favrlie jars, all in Marble Hall.
13. Skylights and Laylights: long stained glass lay light and four-story light well in Main Stair landing; elliptical skylight at fifth floor stair hall; potential stained glass skylight in Sky Parlor, fifth floor; related light well roof top structures for long laylight, stair skylight, and potential sky parlor skylight.

9.0 ARCHAEOLOGY

All below-ground work within the property shall be reviewed by the Boston Landmarks Commission and City Archaeologist to determine if work may impact known or potential archaeological resources. An archaeological survey shall be conducted if archaeological sensitivity exists and if impacts to known or potential archaeological resources cannot be mitigated after consultation with the City Archaeologist. All archaeological mitigation (monitoring, survey, excavation, etc.) shall be conducted by a professional archaeologist. The professional archaeologist should meet the Secretary of the Interior's Professional Qualifications Standards for Archaeology.

Refer to Section 8.3 for any additional Standards and Criteria that may apply.

10.0 SEVERABILITY

The provisions of these Standards and Criteria (Design Guidelines) are severable and if any of their provisions shall be held invalid in any circumstances, such invalidity shall not affect any other provisions or circumstances.

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