

# WIDENER MANSION GIVEN A REPRIEVE

## Frick Collection Is Put Off In Demolition Effort

By MICHAEL KNIGHT

The city's Department of Buildings yesterday approved — and hours later Buildings Commissioner Joseph Stein revoked—an "alteration" permit for the contested Widener townhouse at 5 East 70th Street that called for "altering" the mansion by demolishing it and erecting in its place a 16-foot wall.

The revocation means another chance for the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission in its fight to save the 1909 Louis XV-style mansion from demolition by its owner, the Frick Collection, one of the country's most distinguished art museums. No work can now be done until a demolition permit is granted.

Ironically, the revocation came on the same day as the Landmarks Commission awarded landmark status to the Frick Collection itself. Harmon H. Goldstone, chairman of the commission, said that he now had the power to intervene to determine if razing the Widener house would change "the exterior effect" of the Frick.

He said he intended to use the delay afforded by the Buildings Department revocation to call hearing on the Widener house and perhaps block its demolition. Previously, he said, the Landmarks Commission had been powerless to halt the demolition.

### Entire Block Considered

The Landmarks Commission had been considering for landmark designation the entire blockfront of buildings on the north side of 70th Street between Fifth and Madison Avenues, including the six-story home of George D. Widener, the Philadelphia trolley-car heir, purchased by the Frick the year after Mr. Widener's death in 1971.

The controversy over demolition of the Widener house involves a charge by the Landmarks Commission that it was deceived by Frick officials into believing that the mansion was safe, at least for the time being, without landmark status.

Commissioner Stein said yesterday that a building inspector would be sent to the mansion, adjoining the Frick Collection on Fifth Avenue, this morning to make sure that demolition work did not begin, which would have been possible under the permit.

He said the application for an alteration, approved through normal channels yesterday, called for converting the cellar and sub-cellar of the building into much-needed museum storage space. The building was to be razed and, like two empty adjoining plots also owned by Frick, enclosed behind a masonry wall until the Frick could build a new wing.

### 'Calls for Demolition'

In revoking the permit, Mr. Stein said that "the job calls for a demolition of the premises and that therefore the application should have been for a demolition permit, rather than an alteration permit."

Mr. Goldstone called the application for an alteration permit a "pretty sneaky thing," but Commissioner Stein said there had been no hint of duplicity in the filing of the alteration permit since there is a "gray area" between what is a demolition and what is alteration.

In addition, he said, museum officials have clearly stated in correspondence over the past few months their intention to demolish the building and replace it with a new wing for visitor services and storage space.

Mr. Goldstone charged last week that at meeting with Frick officials March 2 he was given to understand that the fate of the majestic townhouse was still open for discussion and that plans to retain the outside of the building would be considered.

### Society Is Critical

The commission, in turn, came under fire yesterday from the Municipal Art Society, a private group that had been instrumental in getting the commission established.

David Prager, president of the society, said that the Widener episode raised serious questions about the performance of the commission.

He expressed surprise over the assertion by commission officials that they had little prior notice of the Frick's plans to raze the Widener townhouse. "Plans for a new wing have been in the works for some time and were reportedly shown to some member of the commission's staff well in advance of the March 2 meeting," Mr. Prager said.

He also said that the episode underlined the need to change the city's landmarks law, which requires a three-year wait after a six-month period of commission hearings and designations. Mr. Goldstone said yesterday that no one on his staff had heard of the Frick's plans for the Widener mansion until just before the March 2 meeting.

He agreed, however, with Mr. Prager about the need to change the present law and said that a bill had been prepared for submission to the City Council that would allow the commission to act in emergency situations. "If we had that law today, we would have declared the Widener a landmark today," he said.