Storm Jeopardizes Building's Survival After Two Centuries

The invalid known as 502 Canal Street is nearly two centuries old, which is practically antediluvian for anything man-made in Man-hattan. Even before Hurricane Sandy swamped the neighbor-hood, 502 Canal was visibly ailing. The three-story building was already embraced by scaffolding and defaced by graffiti-swabbed roll-up gates and a yellow poster promoting a recent Phil Lesh

The hurricane just made mat-

"Do Not Enter or Occupy," a from the front door. A handwrit-ten addendum corroborates the obvious: the third-floor facade and the ground-floor gates are listing menacingly toward the sidewalk. Perched on the north ern border of TriBeCa, 502 Canal is among nine downtown proper-ties "red-tagged" by the Build-ings Department as unsafe after

If an obituary for this unprepossessing derelict seems premature, then call this a biogra-phy. An inanimate building pul-sates, after all, through its occupants - the succession of people who owned it, who lived or worked in it and whose origins and careers mirrored the city's metamorphosis. Today, 502 Canal stands va-

cant, but what distinguishes the building, and makes its present condition all the more poignant, is that it was home to a family that produced five generations of physicians and pharmacists, men charged with preserving life. It was also designated a landmark in 1996 by the city as "part of a rare surviving cluster" of structures that endured "because they remained viable for commercial and residential use." Similarly, many occupants of

City Room News and conversa-

tion from the

five boroughs: nytimes.com/cityroom five other red-tagged buildings on South Street depended on the river that now threatens them. Among them were M. Slavin & Sons, the fish wholesaler, and an oysterman, Michael Murray, who, it was reported in 1873 with-out elaboration, entered his resi-dence eating a piece of pineapple and "when he reached his room he fell dead."

The building at 502 Canal survived an evolution in the area. from the pastoral Lispenard Meadows to the elegant St. John's Park, to a largely commer cial district developed with ground-level shops and apartments upstairs, and finally to trendy TriBeCa, in the triangle below Canal Street.

Much of the land that became TriBeCa was given to Trinity Church in 1705 by Queen Anne of Britain. A portion was granted by the city to Anthony Rutgers, who promised to drain the fetid Collect Pond (where the Criminal Courts Building now stands). The land was later leased to his

son-in-law, Leonard Lispenard, and was inherited by his son, An-thony, who owned five slaves. The swampy Lispenard Mead-ows was famous for what a con-temporary writer described as "succulent grass, wild berries, cattails, malaria and mosqui-

By 1818, New York was boom ing, bursting its borders as its population swelled past 120,000. One impediment was an open culvert that drained Collect Pond. A canal following the path of a natural stream west to the Hud-son River (at high tide, the stream could be navigated by ca-noe) and spanned mostly by makeshift bridges was finally being replaced by a covered sewer beneath a 100-foot-wide road called Canal Street.

"What was an offensive open kennel which constantly emitted disagreeable and perhaps noxious effluvia," a Common Council mittee concluded at the time, will be made one of the handsomest streets in the city."

Development was further spurred as the street grid was imposed north of Canal Street





Hurricane Sandy aggravated pysical problems of 502 Canal Street, a designated landmark.



The Hayunga family, which poduced generations of doctors and pharmacists, was linked to be building from 1872 to 1966.

and Trinity began to sell its properties. The rounded 502 Canal-Street corner was inherited by Alexander L. Stewart, Leonard Lispenard's son-in-law. In August 1818, by one count 1,959 structures were being built below Spring Street, among them a Flemish brick Federal-style double building at 502 Canal, also known as 480 Greenwich Street. The first occupant was John Y.

Smith, who manufactured and dispensed cosmetic powders from a first-floor shop. He lived above with his family. Among others who lived or worked there, according to Megan Smolenyak, a genealogist, were Daniel G. Kahrs, a grocer; Robert Burns,

William B. Burns, a deputy sher-iff; Patrick O'Shea, who ran a liq-uor store; James Collins, a cigarmaker; and Frederick Pfeiffer, a arber, who lived there with his vife, three children and three

By far, though, the Hayunga ily had the longest connection the block. The first Hayunga harmacy there dates from the sid-19th century. George A. Hayiga, who was born in Canada ad was a surgeon in the Union vy in the Civil War era, was sted at 500 Canal as early as 572. By 1902, his son, Dr. George Hayunga, was practicing at 02 while living next door with

his wife, three children, a brother, a cousin and a servant. The Hayungas bought the

building in 1920 and owned it for nearly 50 years. Dr. George E. Hayunga, who became a founder of Lutheran Hospital farther up-town "for care and relief of ill and indigent poor," died in 1956. After his son George Jr.'s widow died a decade later, the family sold the

George E. Hayunga III, a fourth-generation doctor, con-cerned that New York had become a cold war target emigrated to Australia in 1972.

Helen Hayunga, his daughter and a lawyer in Australia, vividly recounted last week an incident during the Depression, when her great-grandfather made house calls often without charge

"One night, on a mercy mission, walking alone, he was set upon by some young men and beaten up quite badly," Ms. Hay-unga said. "As the story goes, the young men thought he was a rent collector. While in the hospital, he was visited by 'The Godfather.' He was furious at what had happened in his neighborhood, apolo gized to my great-grandfather and said something to the effect of 'fixing it.' The young men, numbering about five, handed themselves in to the police the next day."

Profiling the wife of a long-shoreman for Cosmopolitan in 1954, Budd Schulberg wrote that "the doctor Hayunga is a house-

Tracing a landmark's history from Queen Anne of Britain to a 'Do Not Enter' sign.

hold institution throughout the hold institution turbugues and neighborhood" who provided free care for poor families and whose father, over 50 years, "is said to have delivered at least 70 percent of all the babies in this

"A lot of people down here would be dead without 'em," Helen Mullins, the longshoreman's wife, was quoted as saying.

Geraldine Seylaz, 72, who was raised at 502 Canal, interrupted hurricane repairs to her summer home in New Jersey last week to recall life there in the 1940s. Her father was a longshoreman; her mother worked across the street for Tetley Tea. She remembered the pass-through the family built to her grandmother's apartment next door, and Dr. Hayunga and his pharmacist brother, and the rent bill in 1950: \$62.50 a month.

"It was not a classy place," she said. "The bathroom was in the hall."

According to First American Title Insurance, the Hayunga family, as Alcan Holding Company, deeded the building in 1966 to Desbrosses Garage Corporation, a company connected to the Ponte family, which conveyed it, along with 504 and 506 Canal, to Ponte Equities in 1990.

The building appears to have been bought for over \$3 million in 2003 by another owner connected to the Ponte family, which is also affiliated with the restaurant, F. Illi Ponte, around the corner (a yellow sign on the second floor of 502 Canal beckons prospective dincrs there).

Today the site's most lucrative feature might be a rooftop bill-board. But residential prospects in the neighborhood have im-proved (a two-bedroom, one-bath apartment in a six-story building next door is being advertised at \$2 million) and the owners say they still liope to salvage the building and begin reviving it as

soon as this week,
"It's a handsome 194-year-old landmark that is down on its luck," said John M. Weiss, the deputy counsel of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, "but with some work we should be able to celebrate its 200th birth-