

**ADDRESS: 1810 CHESTNUT ST**

Name of Resource: Samuel T. Freeman & Co. Auction House

Proposed Action: Designation

Property Owner: Astoban Investments LLC

Nominator: Philadelphia Historical Commission staff

Staff Contact: Meredith Keller, meredith.keller@phila.gov, 215-686-7660

**OVERVIEW:** This nomination proposes to designate the property at 1810 Chestnut Street and list it on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. The nomination contends that the building satisfies Criterion for Designation D. Under Criterion D, the nomination argues that architectural firm Tilden & Register designed the Samuel T. Freeman & Co. Auction House in 1923-24 in Renaissance Revival style; the building's style offered a sense of distinction and grandeur to a company with a legacy of auctioning the exclusive collections of Philadelphia's elite.

**STAFF RECOMMENDATION:** The staff recommends that the nomination demonstrates that the property at 1810 Chestnut Street satisfies Criterion for Designation D.



**NOMINATION OF HISTORIC BUILDING, STRUCTURE, SITE, OR OBJECT**  
**PHILADELPHIA REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**  
**PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION**

SUBMIT ALL ATTACHED MATERIALS ON PAPER AND IN ELECTRONIC FORM (CD, EMAIL, FLASH DRIVE)  
ELECTRONIC FILES MUST BE WORD OR WORD COMPATIBLE

**1. ADDRESS OF HISTORIC RESOURCE** *(must comply with an Office of Property Assessment address)*

Street address: 1810 Chestnut Street

Postal code: 19103

**2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE**

Historic Name: Samuel T. Freeman & Co. Auction House

Current/Common Name: Same

**3. TYPE OF HISTORIC RESOURCE**

Building

Structure

Site

Object

**4. PROPERTY INFORMATION**

Condition:  excellent  good  fair  poor  ruins

Occupancy:  occupied  vacant  under construction  unknown

Current use: Auction house

**5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION**

*Please attach a narrative description and site/plot plan of the resource's boundaries.*

**6. DESCRIPTION**

*Please attach a narrative description and photographs of the resource's physical appearance, site, setting, and surroundings.*

**7. SIGNIFICANCE**

*Please attach a narrative Statement of Significance citing the Criteria for Designation the resource satisfies.*

Period of Significance (from year to year): from 1923-24 to Present

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: 1923-24

Architect, engineer, and/or designer: Tilden & Register

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan: R. M. Peterson & Son

Original owner: Samuel T. Freeman & Co.

Other significant persons: \_\_\_\_\_

**CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION:**

The historic resource satisfies the following criteria for designation (check all that apply):

- (a) Has significant character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth or Nation or is associated with the life of a person significant in the past; or,
- (b) Is associated with an event of importance to the history of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,
- (c) Reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style; or,
- (d) Embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style or engineering specimen; or,
- (e) Is the work of a designer, architect, landscape architect or designer, or engineer whose work has significantly influenced the historical, architectural, economic, social, or cultural development of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,
- (f) Contains elements of design, detail, materials or craftsmanship which represent a significant innovation; or,
- (g) Is part of or related to a square, park or other distinctive area which should be preserved according to an historic, cultural or architectural motif; or,
- (h) Owing to its unique location or singular physical characteristic, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community or City; or,
- (i) Has yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in pre-history or history; or
- (j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.

**8. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES**

*Please attach a bibliography.*

**9. NOMINATOR**

Organization Philadelphia Historical Commission Date March 14, 2019

Name with Title Staff of the Historical Commission Email meredith.keller@phila.gov

Street Address 1515 Arch Street, 13th Floor Telephone 215-686-7660

City, State, and Postal Code Philadelphia, PA 19102

Nominator  is  is not the property owner.

**PHC USE ONLY**

Date of Receipt: March 14, 2019

Correct-Complete  Incorrect-Incomplete Date: March 15, 2019

Date of Notice Issuance: March 15, 2019

Property Owner at Time of Notice:

Name: The Business Known as "C"

Address: 1810 Chestnut Street

City: Philadelphia State: PA Postal Code: 19103

Date(s) Reviewed by the Committee on Historic Designation: \_\_\_\_\_

Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Final Action: \_\_\_\_\_

Designated  Rejected

## 5. Boundary Description

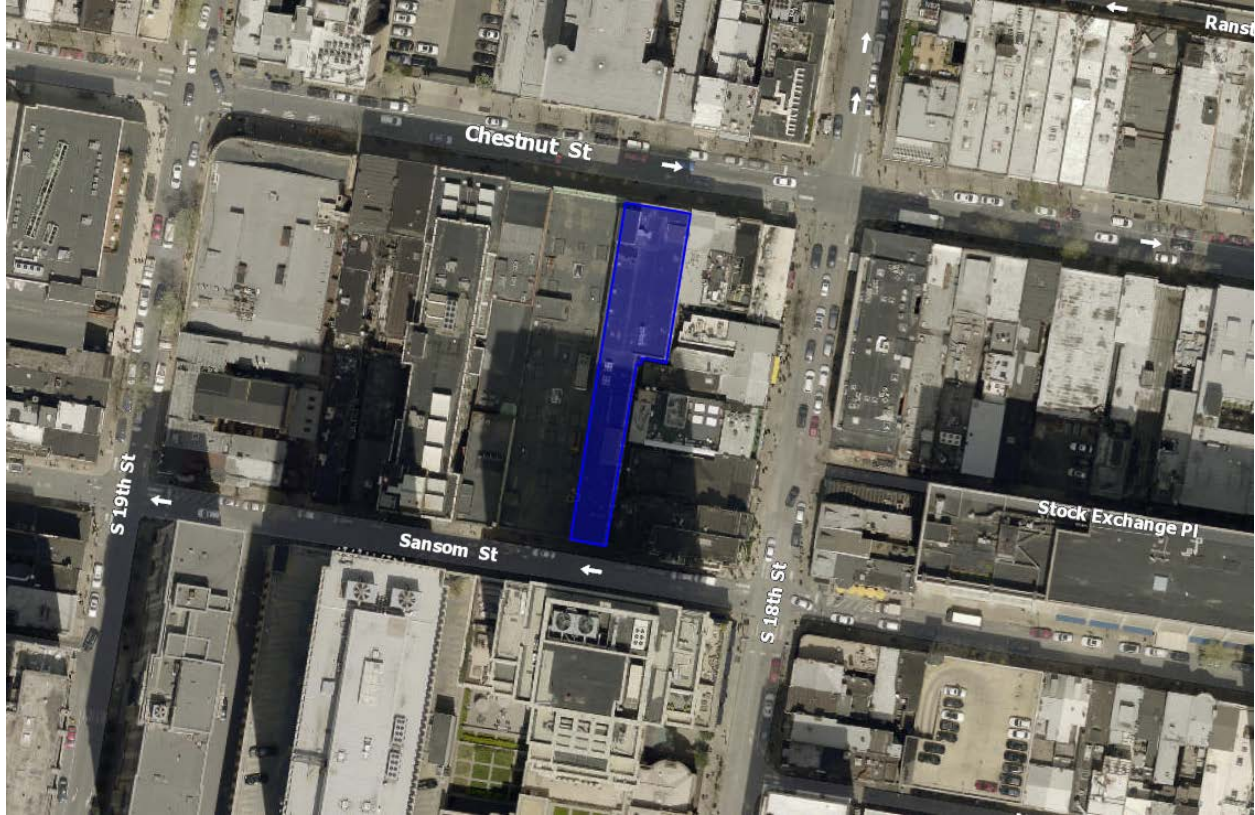


Figure 1. The boundary identifying the parcel at 1810 Chestnut Street. (Source: Atlas)

Situate on the south side of Chestnut Street, beginning at a distance of 70 feet westward from the west side of 18<sup>th</sup> Street, in the 8<sup>th</sup> Ward of the City of Philadelphia; and extending thence southward 106 feet to a point; thence westward 17 feet to a point; thence southward 4 feet to a point; thence westward 3 feet to a point; thence southward along the west side of a three feet wide alley, leading into Sansom Street 125 feet to the north side of said Sansom Street; thence westward along the north side of said Sansom Street 25 feet to a point, and thence extending northward 235 feet to the south side of the said Chestnut Street; and thence along the same eastward 45 feet to the first mentioned point and place of beginning.

## 6. Architectural Description



Figure 2. Chestnut Street façade, 2018. (Source: Philadelphia Historical Commission)

Located on the south side of Chestnut Street two blocks north of Rittenhouse Square, the six-story Renaissance Revival structure has afforded the Samuel T. Freeman & Co. a powerful presence on one of Philadelphia's main commercial strips since its 1923-24 construction. With its front façade consisting of concrete cast in classical forms, the secondary facades consist largely of brick. The flat-roofed building occupies the width of two parcels along Chestnut Street and narrows at the rear where it fronts onto Sansom Street.

### *North Elevation*

A shallow granite water table extends across the base of the façade, and the elongated base, containing the first and second stories, consists of rusticated cast stone, shaped around the three openings to appear as voussoirs (Figure 2). Two large display windows with inset decorative ironwork flank a central doorway. Each window contains a Greek key iron spandrel panel and radial ironwork at arched transoms. The central entry is recessed behind elaborate iron gates with a similar Greek key spandrel

panel and radial ironwork at an arched transom. Two bronze plaques flank either side of the doorway and identify the original owners, “Samuel T. Freeman & Co. Auctioneers, Established 1805.” Within the recessed space, the rusticated cast stone is carried to the interior, and a door is centered under a flat arch. The ground story projects slightly from the upper stories and is topped by a simple granite cornice.

To balance the elongated base, the building’s verticality is emphasized at the third through fifth stories through the incorporation of four Ionic pilasters that span all three stories. At the third story, three openings each contain a pair of French doors that open onto Juliet balconies with decorative iron railings. Pairs of casement windows add height above the doors, and each opening is capped by pediments to create further emphasis and differentiate the third story from those above. The fourth and fifth stories remain relatively unadorned, containing simple double-hung windows below an entablature that separates the sixth story from the rest of the façade. The sixth story maintains the rhythm of the openings with three equally spaced windows below a simple cornice.



Figure 3. The south, or Sansom Street, elevation of the auction house, 2018. (Source: Cyclomedia)

#### *South Elevation*

The building’s Sansom Street elevation lacks the Renaissance Revival pomp of its Chestnut Street façade and instead projects an industrial appearance (Figure 3). Aside from its structural supports, the first story is open to function as the auction house’s loading space, with a roll-down door to enclose the area. The upper stories contain punched openings with metal industrial windows, though the sixth-story windows have been replaced. The façade is comprised of brick with visible concrete supports.

#### *East Elevation*

The east elevation extends well above its eastern neighbors, and its brick walls contain many punched window openings, particularly at the rear ell (Figures 4 and 5). However, much of the elevation is not visible from the public right-of-way.

#### *West Elevation*

The building’s west elevation functions as a party wall with no openings, though three stories of the structure are visible above the adjacent building at 1812-14 Chestnut Street (Figure 6).



Figure 4. The east elevation of Samuel T. Freeman & Co.'s auction house, 2018. (Source: Pictometry)



Figure 5. The north and east elevations of the building, 2018. (Source: Pictometry)



Figure 6. The west elevation of the Samuel T. Freeman & Co.'s auction house, 2018 (Source: Pictometry)



## 7. Statement of Significance

The Samuel T. Freeman & Co. Auction House, located at 1810 Chestnut Street, holds significant value to the City of Philadelphia and should be listed individually on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. The property satisfies Criterion for Designation D as defined in Section 14-4000(1) of the Philadelphia Code. The purpose-built auction house stands as an imposing example of Renaissance Revival architecture along the Chestnut Street commercial corridor, offering Old World distinction to a company that historically sold the collections of Philadelphia's elite.

### *A Brief History of the Auction House*

Tristram B. Freeman established the auction company on November 12, 1805 when he was appointed to the office of auctioneer by Pennsylvania Governor Thomas McKean. Originally a printer, Freeman found little success in the trade when he immigrated to Philadelphia from Devonshire, England.<sup>1</sup> The earliest years of the auction house were focused on the sale of wholesale goods. By the late 1820s, the company, known as T. B. Freeman & Son, maintained its auction house at 8 S. 3<sup>rd</sup> Street and frequently advertised sales of horses and carts, books, stationary, hardware, cutlery, furniture, and other household items in *The National Gazette*.<sup>2</sup> Within a few years, the auction company moved into real estate and estate sales.<sup>3</sup>

During the 1840s, two branches of the Freeman's auction legacy operated within the city: James A. Freeman's Sons, Auctioneers, and T. William L. Freeman. James A. Freeman's Sons, Auctioneers, first staked claim to the company's 1805 founding date and established an auction house at 422 Walnut Street, where it remained for several decades (Figure 7).<sup>4</sup> Both branches continued in the auction business into the turn of the century, though with several name changes. By 1898, T. William L. Freeman began identifying itself more generally as Freeman's Auction and ultimately adopted its founder's name, calling itself Samuel T. Freeman & Co. At this time, the auction company relocated to a new building at the southwest corner of 12<sup>th</sup> and Walnut Streets (Figure 8), while James A. Freeman's Sons remained at 422 Walnut Street for several more years.<sup>5</sup> Within a decade, however, Samuel T. Freeman & Co. began auctioning goods out of 1519-21 Chestnut Street, though the family business continued under James A. Freeman at its 1229 Walnut Street location.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wendy Moonan, "Going, Going Strong: An Auction House Turns 200," *The New York Times*, December 30, 2005, accessed March 8, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/30/arts/design/going-going-strong-an-auction-house-turns-200.html>.

<sup>2</sup> *The National Gazette*, various issues published throughout the 1820s and 1830s, accessed March 8, 2019, newspapers.com.

<sup>3</sup> *The National Gazette*, Thursday, December 1, 1936, page 4, newspapers.com, accessed March 8, 2019; the company sold a range of real estate, from private residences to club buildings, as numerous National Gazette advertisements attest.

<sup>4</sup> *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 6, 1898, page 9, accessed March 8, 2019, newspapers.com; *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, January 13, 1900, page 13, accessed March 8, 2019, newspapers.com.

<sup>5</sup> *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 24, 1908, page 15, accessed March 11, 2019, newspapers.com.

<sup>6</sup> *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 6, 1924, page 40, newspapers.com, accessed March 8, 2019; *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 24, 1908, page 15, accessed March 11, 2019, newspapers.com.

In 1923, Samuel T., George, and A. B. Freeman sought to push their business west and commissioned a purpose-built, stately new home to meet the needs of their business (Figure 9).<sup>7</sup> The building at 1810 Chestnut Street would provide the company with office space, storage room, and auction halls well into the twenty-first century.



Figure 7. James A. Freeman's Sons, Auctioneers, 422 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, c. 1859. Sources identify the building as being located on the 300 block of Walnut Street; however, Baxter's Panoramic Street-Views (1856-80) of the south side of the 400 block of Walnut Street clearly depict the building, though half of it had been demolished at the time the illustration was made. (Source: Free Library of Philadelphia)



Figure 8. Samuel T. Freeman & Co.'s location at 1229 Walnut Street, c. 1898-1908. (Source: Free Library of Philadelphia)

<sup>7</sup> Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide, v. 38 (April 18, 1923): 251, accessed March 8, 2019, philageohistory.org/buildersguide.



Figure 9. 1810 Chestnut Street, the Samuel T. Freeman & Company auction house, is shown at left 15 years after its construction in 1939. (Source: Department of Records, City of Philadelphia)

**Criterion D: Embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style or engineering specimen.**

Reintroduced around the turn of the twentieth century, the Second Renaissance Revival gained popularity as an outward expression of wealth that hearkened back to Italian (and sometimes French, German, or Spanish) Renaissance architecture. At a time when architects were trained at the E'cole des Beaux-Arts, the Renaissance Revival style allowed architects to inject their aesthetic into landmark metropolitan buildings that drew on a classically Italian vocabulary. In some of its grander permutations, the style signaled the Italian palazzo through an incorporation of a large rusticated base and smooth piano nobile, often paired with a shallow hipped or flat roof. Other defining characteristics include masonry construction, a symmetrical façade, and classical details such as columns and pilasters, round arches at the entrance and windows, and a roof line parapet or balustrade. Certain variations incorporate arcades, porticos, quoins, belt courses, molded cornices, clay tiles at the roof, and broadly overhanging, bracketed eaves.<sup>8</sup>

Because of its formality and grandeur, the style was more often adopted by financial institutions and various levels of government to signal the vitality of the company or administration. America's elite also employed the style for their private residences to command presence. Some of the most notable

<sup>8</sup> Virginia McAlester, and Lee McAlester, "Italian Renaissance," *A Field Guide to American Houses* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997): 396-407.

examples of residences designed in the Renaissance Revival style include the Villard Houses in New York City, designed by McKim, Mead & White and opened in 1885, and Vizcaya, James Deering's Coconut Grove mansion constructed between 1910 and 1922. In Philadelphia, one of the most prominent and centrally located Renaissance Revival buildings is the Reading Terminal Headhouse, opened in 1893 at 11<sup>th</sup> and Market Streets. As the style gained popularity, it transitioned from architect-designed urban landmarks to vernacular interpretations following the perfection of masonry veneering techniques. Many of these more vernacular incarnations of the style date to the 1920s.<sup>9</sup>

Though comparatively smaller in scale than the Reading Terminal Headhouse, the Samuel T. Freeman & Co. building elicits its own presence on the 1800 block of Chestnut Street where its six stories project well above the neighboring properties. In 1923 the Freemans commissioned the architecture firm of Tilden & Register, which later became Tilden, Register & Pepper, to design a cast stone Renaissance Revival auction house. The original partners of the firm were Ecole-trained, and while their public work typically reflected the Beaux-Arts principles of their training, they held numerous residential commissions, many of which drew from a less formal and more whimsical vocabulary. One of the earlier, and perhaps most notable, of their private commissions included William Elkins's estate in Isleboro Dark Harbor, Maine, a sprawling Colonial Revival retreat that paid homage to the ubiquitous New England Cape Cod. The firm often paired with Samuel Yellin in the design of residences along the Main Line, just outside Philadelphia, and in the suburbs northwest of the city.

At the same time Tilden & Register were commissioned by Samuel T. Freeman & Co. to construct a new auction house, the firm transformed the Brinton residence at 2031 Delancey Street from a grand four-and-a-half-story Second Empire row house into a hybrid Colonial/Renaissance Revival structure by adopting classical elements at the lower two stories and incorporating the expert ironwork of Samuel Yellin (Figure 10).<sup>10</sup> The alterations elevated focus to the second story and created a piano nobile effect over a smooth cast concrete or stone base. At the center of the second story, French doors opened to a Juliet balcony with Yellin railings flanked by Corinthian columns under a sunburst pediment. Classically-themed cartouches flanked the opening. The modifications introduced formal classical elements to an otherwise Romantic Victorian vocabulary. While several elements of the Brinton residence were repeated in the Samuel T. Freeman & Co. commission, Tilden & Register were presented with the opportunity to thoroughly explore and develop a pure Renaissance Revival design at 1810 Chestnut Street that differed drastically from the restrained adaptation of the Brinton property (Figure 11).

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 398.

<sup>10</sup> "Brinton Residence," Philadelphia Architects and Buildings, accessed March 8, 2019, [www.philadelphiabuildings.org](http://www.philadelphiabuildings.org).



Figure 10. 2031 Delancey Place, altered by Tilden & Register, 2018. (Source: Cyclomedia)

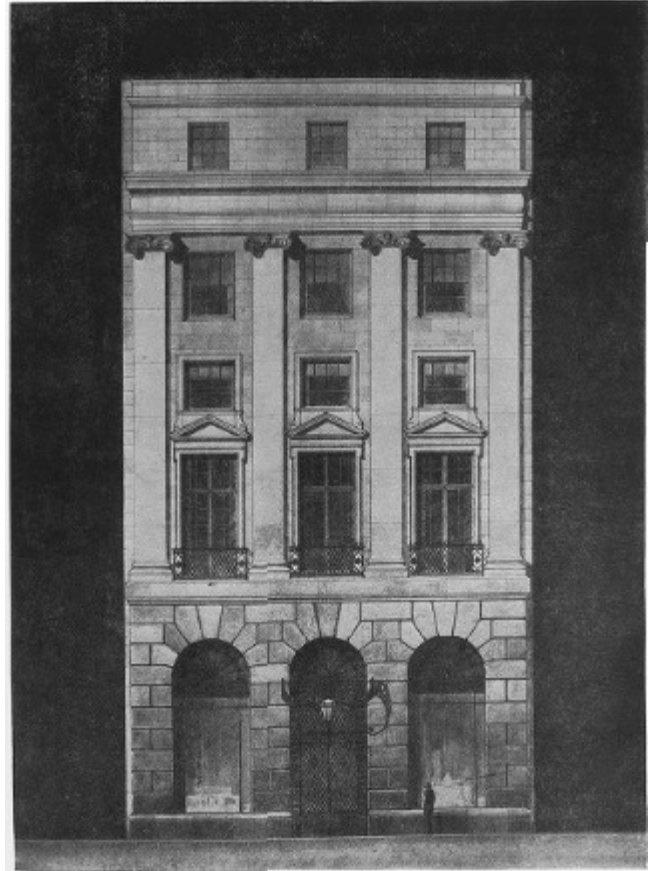


Figure 11. Architectural rendering of the Samuel T. Freeman & Co. building by Tilden & Register, 1923. (Source: AIA T-Square Yearbook)

For the Samuel T. Freeman & Co. building, Tilden & Register composed the Chestnut Street façade of conventional classical elements representative of the Renaissance Revival style, leaving the three remaining facades relatively unadorned and with an industrial appearance. The building's main façade achieves symmetry through the repetition of three bays throughout its six stories. The design emulates the style's typical configuration, which includes a large rusticated base, smooth piano nobile, and flat roof. Though the building lacks a parapet or balustrade, the architects alluded to the feature by creating a strong division through the insertion of an entablature at the top of the building, which differentiates the sixth story from the lower levels. The lack of a true parapet, in addition to the secondary industrial facades and use of cast stone, likely results from the need for economy and usable space when establishing an auction house at a premium location within the city's commercial core.

At street level, the public interacts with an imposing arched entrance flanked by two equally-sized, arched windows that offer the auction house a stately showcase for its goods (Figure 12). Above the two-story rusticated base, the scored concrete façade becomes smooth and incorporates Ionic pilasters to lend verticality and balance. The third story is heightened through the combination of French doors with casement windows above, and a triangular pediment tops the window and door pairings. The building's lower three stories also incorporate decorative ironwork at the entryway, display windows, and Juliet balconies. The ironwork, attributed to Samuel Yellin, is reminiscent of the work Yellin completed for the Brinton's Delancey Street residence. Though the central light fixture depicted in Tilden & Register's 1923 rendering of the Samuel T. Freeman & Co. building seems never to have been

realized, it closely resembles the Brinton fixture Yellin designed to span the main entrance. That fixture, in addition to the detailing at the balconies, transoms, and entry gate, suggest that the Freeman commission offered yet another opportunity for the architecture firm and iron worker to collaborate, as was common in Tilden & Register's suburban residences.



Figure 12. The entrance and ground-story windows of the Samuel T. Freeman & Co. building, 2019. (Source: Philadelphia Historical Commission)

## Conclusion

With its long history of auctioning the estates of some of Philadelphia's wealthiest individuals, Samuel T. Freeman & Co. slowly migrated from its 1805 beginnings in Old City to several comfortable locations in Washington Square West to its latest seat in the Rittenhouse Square neighborhood. Drawing on a classical Italian vocabulary that incorporates rusticated masonry, arches, decorative ironwork, Ionic pediments, pilasters, architraves, and symmetry, Tilden & Register gave presence to the auction house through the design of the 1923-24 Renaissance Revival building that to this day elicits a sense of grandeur.

## 8. Bibliography

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