

The History of 101 Avenue A



Submitted by the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation
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The building located at 101 Avenue A¹ was built in 1876 by Prussian-born architect William Jose. Like many of Jose's designs, the façade of 101 Avenue A is especially ornate for the tenement and saloon that occupied the building behind it [Cover Photo]. Neo-Grec window lintels with incised floral motifs, black brick and stone courses, and an elaborate Neo-Grec cornice make the building stand out among the many other tenements in the area [Figure 1]. Even the building's fire escape is unusually ornate, featuring elaborate wrought iron railings and floral attachments to the side of the ladder [Figure 2]. The ground floor's four-bay configuration, segmental arches, and cornice are all still remarkably intact for a neighborhood that has undergone so many changes over the last 130 years.

Further research into the history of 101 Avenue A proves that the building has long been an extraordinary East Village tenement and is deeply rooted in the German immigrant heritage of the East Village, labor organizing, and the subsequent Downtown scene that emerged in the 1960s. Although the owner of the building is listed as A. Kern (or A. Kerr) on the new building permit,² it is probable that Kern was just the proprietor of the saloon, Kern's Hall, on the ground floor.³ According to Tax Records and 20th century *New York Times* articles, in 1876, 101 Avenue A was under the ownership of the Peter Doelger Brewery, which had formerly occupied another building on the site. The Peter Doelger Brewery was established by Peter Doelger, who emigrated from Bavaria in 1850 and opened his first brewery on this Avenue A property. The brewery in 1858 moved uptown to 55th Street and First Avenue, where it eventually grew to occupy an entire block; it was one of the largest breweries in the country until it closed due to Prohibition.⁴ It is not known if the site at 101 Avenue A remained in use as a brewery after the company purchased the land on 55th Street, but the family did hold on to the property after the present building was built.⁵ The "Peter Doelger Brewing Company" is still listed as the owner of the property on a 1929 alteration permit when the building's vaults were altered to accommodate the widening of Avenue A.⁶ It is likely that the Brewery held on to the parcel of land until about 1932 when it was finally sold.⁷

From the time of its construction until at least the mid-1930s, the ground floor of 101 Avenue A was a hall where people would come to eat, celebrate, mourn, or discuss union and labor issues. Not surprisingly given the history of the East Village neighborhood, many of the halls were German-run and served their German neighbors. The earliest hall is Kern's Hall, which was an important gathering spot for the local community. Kern's held the celebratory supper when the neighborhood's most prominent park, Tompkins Square Park, was completed in 1879.⁸ The hall was also a location for many important labor-related discussions. In 1881, the Livery Stable Keeper's Association met at Kern's to discuss the increase in prices for funeral carriages.⁹ Four years later, the Amalgamated Building Trades Council held a "mass meeting of workingmen" to discuss the question of mandating shorter hours for New York State workers.¹⁰ Kern's closed by the mid-1880s, but the space continued to be occupied by similar halls for decades to come. In 1886, a notice about a cigarmaker's union refers to "Shultz's Hall" at 101 Avenue A,¹¹ and in 1896, a *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* article refers to Fritz's Hall at the same address.¹²

Whatever the name, the hall at 101 Avenue A continued to be a popular meeting location for unions. Just two years after the formation of the American Federation of Labor in 1886, Brooklyn and New York members of the AFL met at 101 Avenue A to plan for the union's larger New York State convention.¹³ The hall was also a popular gathering spot for the Germans

and German-American organizations in the neighborhood. The United German Society hosted meetings at 101 Avenue A, and the Central Spar Verein (“Verein” being the German word for a union or association) occupied an office there.¹⁴ Whenever a tragedy would befall the people of the neighborhood, they could find support at 101 Avenue A. In 1898, a local barber found consolation there when a group of Germans, many of them from the East Village, lost their supplies and food on their way to try to strike it rich during the Klondike gold rush.¹⁵ In addition, after over a thousand people, most of them of German descent, perished in the General Slocum disaster in 1904, the neighborhood gathered at 101 Avenue A for a service memorializing those who passed away and honoring officers who had helped investigate the disaster.¹⁶

The longest-running hall at 101 Avenue A was Leppig’s. It is unclear when John Leppig (Sr.) first opened his establishment. However by 1906, when the United German Society invited Germans of the city to attend a meeting at “Lippig’s Hall,” it was clearly in business.¹⁷ John Leppig (Sr.) was of German descent and was probably born in Germany. He married an Irish woman, Katherine Moroney, and together they had two children, John Leppig and Frances Morio (nee Leppig).¹⁸

Leppig (Sr.) became known as the “Mayor of Avenue A.” This was more than just a charming monicker, as the local “mayors” of New York took themselves seriously. By 1931 there were 18 “mayors” of New York City streets or neighborhoods, usually in the tenement districts. They formed the League of Locality Mayors, which met regularly, had heated debates, and even planned a diplomatic trip to Europe in the 1930s to meet with other official mayors abroad.¹⁹ The local mayors took care of the people in their neighborhoods, settling fights, bailing people out of jail, and helping the destitute find food, shelter, and other services. A *New York Times* article states that Leppig made “Leppig’s Hall a familiar rendezvous for both those who could pay for their sausage and soup and those who could not.”²⁰

When Leppig Sr. died in 1907, he left both his business and his position as the “Mayor of Avenue A” to his son.²¹ Leppig (Jr.) operated the restaurant “Leppig’s Hall and Meeting Room” throughout the first three decades of the 20th century. He added bowling lanes to the hall, holding a long-running bowling tournament, and sponsored community charity events, such as a Thanksgiving frankfurter eating contest in 1923 that benefited the needy.²² Leppig, like his father, made his hall a place where the destitute could come for a hot meal and support. During Prohibition, Leppig switched, at least officially, to serving “near beer.”²³ Although Leppig’s Hall survived Prohibition, John Leppig and his wife Anna Leppig (nee Baer) decided to close the hall in 1936, and the couple relocated to Riverdale. He died just ten months later in July 1937, and like his mother, he was mourned in the East Village at the Most Holy Redeemer Church on East 3rd Street.²⁴

While the ground floor of 101 Avenue A seems to have always been some type of German-run hall and restaurant, the upper floors from the start were apartments. Both John Leppig, Sr. and his son lived above their establishments with their families, and death notices appear in the *Times* for other people who resided there.²⁵ In 1961, the building, along with 95-99 Avenue A, was sold by Mrs. C.D. Jackson, wife of the publisher of *Life* magazine, and Mrs. Mary Livermore, who had both owned it since c. 1932.²⁶ It is possible that Mrs. Jackson and Mrs. Livermore

purchased the property from the Peter Doelger Brewery and were therefore only the second owners of the building. The buildings at 95-101 Avenue A were sold again just a few years later in 1965 for \$112,000.²⁷

In the 1960s, as the immigrant neighborhood of the East Village was being discovered by Bohemians and artists, the second floor apartment was occupied by underground music icon and Warhol superstar Nico, and the ground floor space had become a music venue, the East Village In.²⁸ Although the name and the type of music played within the space has changed many times over the last four decades, the space has continued to be a music club. In 1972, an establishment called the Shipwreck was shut down by the Department of Health, and by the next year, the Jazzboat had opened in its place.²⁹ Owned by a member of Duke Ellington's band, Aziz Latif, the Jazzboat had jazz nightly in a space with a "spankingly new and attractive" ship-motif décor.³⁰ The New Rican Village Cultural Center (Areyto Theater Lab) is listed as being at 101 Avenue A in 1979, although later that year, the current tenant, the Pyramid Club, opened in the space.³¹

The Pyramid Club was a defining club of the East Village scene in the 1980s. The club was a hangout for both the fashionable showing off their latest looks, as well as for the counter cultures emerging in the neighborhood, leading the *New York Times* to write, "There is nothing quite like this club anywhere in New York, and it adheres to no formulas. In fact, it is more like the Paris boites of the 50s or the speak-easies of the 20s than anything else."³² Another *New York Times* article in 1985 wrote, "If your navy blue trademark is your hair, not your suit, you might prefer the live bands and progressive sounds featured at the Pyramid Club."³³ The club became a hangout for "a new breed of politicized drag performers" like Lypsinka, Lady Bunny, and RuPaul, whose first New York City show was at the Pyramid Club in 1982.³⁴ Legend has it that in the early 1980s, after partying at the Pyramid Club, a group of drag queens walked over to Tompkins Square Park and put on an impromptu outdoor festival which became the first Wigstock Drag Festival.³⁵ Over the next 20 years, Wigstock would become more formalized and would grow to be a major New York City event, attracting world-wide attention and participation.

Avant-garde performance artists like Ann Magnuson were regulars at the Pyramid Club, and several well-known artists and musicians performed and partied at the club.³⁶ Madonna, who frequented the Pyramid Club, attended an early AIDS benefit there in 1986 for her former roommate and close friend, Martin Burgoyne. Andy Warhol, Keith Haring, and Kenny Scharf were also in attendance at Burgoyne's benefit, supporting their ailing friend at a time when misinformation about the disease pervaded the American public and it "had become a plague in the bohemian neighborhoods of downtown Manhattan."³⁷ In addition to performance art, cabaret, theater, and dancing, the Pyramid Club hosted live bands.³⁸ Several up and coming artists who would dominate mainstream music in the 1990s played their first New York City shows at the Pyramid Club, including the Red Hot Chili Peppers, who played in 1984, and Nirvana, who played in 1989.

In the 1980s, the Pyramid Club and its peers, including CBGBs, the Mudd Club, Area, and Danceteria, were a generation of performance venues that had an unusually broad impact upon the larger cultural landscape. Today, of these influential clubs, the Pyramid is the sole survivor. The

club has managed so far to endure the recent rising property values and changing population of the East Village and continues to host dancing and other parties.

Remarkably, the building's façade today is almost identical to the time when Kern first opened his hall. Although the neighborhood has changed greatly since 1876, it is not hard to imagine the German immigrants gathering to celebrate, mourn, or discuss labor issues at 101 Avenue A or to picture John Leppig settling a neighborhood dispute from his headquarters. The building both aesthetically and culturally captures much of what is so compelling about the East Village and its role in the growth and evolution of New York City, and it merits consideration as a New York City landmark.

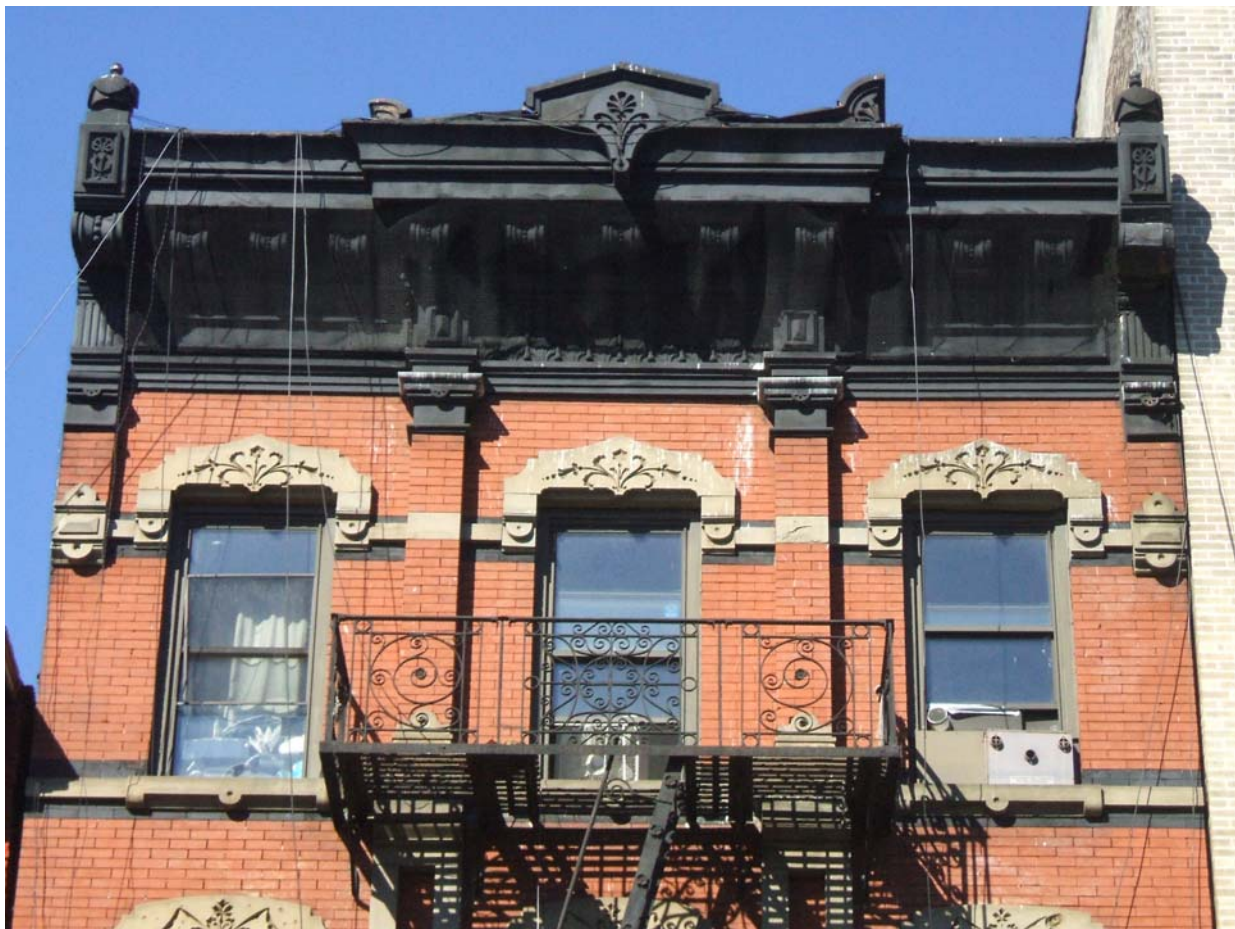


Figure 1. Cornice and upper floor details of 101 Avenue A.



Figure 2. Lintel and fire escape details of 101 Avenue A.

¹ The address of the building changes from 93 Avenue A to 101 Avenue A between 1870 and 1871.

² N.B. 260-1876; from Docket Books.

³ It is difficult to decipher whether it is “A. Kerr” or “A. Kern” on the docket book information for N.B. 260-1876. In *New York Times* pieces, it is listed as Kern’s Hall in 1879 (“New-York.” 13 Sept. 1879); Kerr Hall in 1881 (“The Livery Stable Keepers.” 1 Jun. 1881); and later Kern’s Hall in 1885 (“Workingmen Want Shorter Hours.” 21 Feb. 1885). It is assumed in this document that the name of the hall was Kern’s Hall.

⁴ “Old Doelger Block Bought By Chanins.” *New York Times*. 15 Feb. 1930; and “Peter Doelger, 75, Brewer Dies Here.” *New York Times*. 16 Nov. 1936. From ProQuest 8/16/2007.

⁵ Curiously, tax records show that 101 Avenue A was under the ownership of “E. Stultz” until c. 1867, after which time “Peter Doelger” is listed as the owner.

⁶ Alt. 901-1928, Permit No. 1775-1928.

⁷ “9 Buildings Sold on E. 6th Street.” *New York Times*. 28 Aug. 1961; from ProQuest 8/16/2007.

⁸ “New-York.” *New York Times*. 13 Sept. 1879; from ProQuest 8/16/2007.

⁹ “The Livery Stable Keepers.” *New York Times*. 1 Jun. 1881; from ProQuest 8/16/2007.

¹⁰ “Workingmen Want Shorter Hours.” *New York Times*. 21 Feb. 1885; from ProQuest 8/16/2007.

¹¹ “War Agains the Knights; Progressive Cigarmakers Resolved Not to Yield.” *New York Times*. 31 Jul. 1886; and “The Cigarmakers’ Fight.” *New York Times*. 1 Aug. 1886; from ProQuest 8/16/2007.

¹² “Killed By A Fall.” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. 9 Oct. 1896. p. 16. From <http://www.brooklynpubliclibrary.org/eagle/>

¹³ “City and Suburban News.” *New York Times*. 7 Jan. 1988; from ProQuest 8/16/2007.

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- ¹⁴ “Affidavits Muddle Schmittberger Trial.” *New York Times*. 22 Sept. 1906; and “Other 5.” *New York Times*. 17 Jan. 1909. From ProQuest 8/16/2007.
- ¹⁵ “Klondike Party on Fire.” *New York Times*. 6 Feb. 1898; from ProQuest 8/16/2007.
- ¹⁶ “Slocum Medals Presented.” *New York Times*. 29 Jul. 1904; from ProQuest 8/16/2007.
- ¹⁷ “See A Schmittberger Plot.” *New York Times*. 25 Sept. 1906; from ProQuest 8/16/2007.
- ¹⁸ “New Mayors’ Tour Threatens Europe.” *New York Times*. 15 Jun. 1931; and “Obituary 1” *New York Times*. 26 Feb. 1936; from ProQuest 8/16/2007.
- ¹⁹ “Locality Mayors to Meet.” *New York Times*. 9 Sept. 1929; “Mayor of Avenue B Gets Lively Adieu.” *New York Times*. 8 Dec. 1930. From ProQuest 8/16/2007.
- ²⁰ “The Other Eighteen Mayors of the City.” *New York Times*. 9 Aug. 1931; from ProQuest 8/16/2007.
- ²¹ “Obituary 4.” *New York Times*. 26 Apr. 1939; from ProQuest 8/16/2007.
- ²² “Thanksgiving Cheer Spread Among Poor.” *New York Times*. 30 Nov. 1923; “Fuller Team Tops Builders’ League.” 6 Jan. 1929; and “The Other Eighteen Mayors of the City.” from ProQuest 8/16/2007.
- ²³ “The Other Eighteen Mayors of the City.” from ProQuest 8/16/2007.
- ²⁴ “John Leppig, Mayor of Avenue A for Quarter Century Dies at 53.” *New York Times*. 13 Jul. 1937; “Deaths.” *New York Times*. 13 Jul. 1937; “Wills for Probate.” *New York Times*. 6 Aug. 1937; and “Estates Appraised.” *New York Times*. 24 Nov. 1938; from ProQuest 8/16/2007.
- ²⁵ “Obituary 1.” *New York Times*. 6 Jan. 1900; “Obituary 1.” *New York Times*. 1 Oct. 1912; “Display Ad 4.” *New York Times*. 11 Aug. 1923; “Wills for Probate.” *New York Times*. 9 Aug. 1928; and “Obituary 1” *New York Times*. 26 Feb. 1936. From ProQuest 8/16/2007.
- ²⁶ “9 Buildings Sold on E. 6th Street.” From ProQuest 8/16/2007.
- ²⁷ Ennis, Thomas W. “News of Realty: \$4 Million Deal.” *New York Times*. 11 May 1965. p. 62; from ProQuest 8/16/2007.
- ²⁸ “Entertainment Events.” *New York Times*. 7 Oct. 1967; and “Entertainment Events.” *New York Times*. 14 Oct. 1967; from ProQuest 8/16/2007.
- ²⁹ “29 More Food Spots Cited As Violators.” *New York Times*. 21 Nov. 1972; and “Jazz/Rock/Folk/Pop.” *New York Times*. 14 Jan. 1973; from ProQuest 8/16/2007.
- ³⁰ Shepard, Richard F. “Going Out Guide.” *New York Times*. 20 Feb. 1973; from ProQuest 8/16/2007.
- ³¹ “Hispanic Arts Festival Plans Citywide Events.” *New York Times*. 14 Apr. 1979; from ProQuest 8/16/2007.
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- ³⁴ Keeps, David A. “How RuPaul Ups the Ante For Drag.” *New York Times*. 11 Jul. 1993. from ProQuest 8/16/2007; <http://www.rupaul.com/bio/index.shtml> on August 30, 2007.
- ³⁵ <http://www.wigstock.nu/history/history.html> on August 30, 2007.
- ³⁶ Dowd, Maureen. “Youth. Art. Hype.: A Different Bohemia.” *New York Times*. 17 Nov. 1985. p. SM26; from ProQuest 8/16/2007.
- ³⁷ Geist, William E. “About New York: In the Face of a Plague, a Party.” *New York Times*. 6 Sept. 1986. p. 31; from ProQuest 8/16/2007.
- ³⁸ Pareles, Jon. “Dance and Music Clubs Thriving in Era of Change.” *New York Times*. 12 Nov. 1982. p. C1; from ProQuest 8/16/2007.