

ADDRESS: 1617 WALNUT ST

Proposed Action: Designation

Property Owner: Rosenberg Family Partners

Nominator: Staff of the Historical Commission

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

OVERVIEW: This nomination proposes to designate the property at 1617 Walnut 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 the Seeburger & Rabenold-designed building conveys the aesthetics of the Italian Renaissance Revival style through its classical temple form, verticality, and classical detailing. While the ground-story commercial space has been altered several times, most recently in 2011, the modifications have remained sensitive to the building's original detailing and classical style.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION: The staff recommends that the nomination demonstrates that the property at 1617 Walnut 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: 1617 Walnut Street

Postal code: 19103

2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Historic Name: _____

Current/Common Name: 1617 Walnut Street

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: _____

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 1921 to 1921

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: 1921

Architect, engineer, and/or designer: Seeburger & Rabenold, architects

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan: William R. Dougherty, builder

Original owner: William H. Wilson 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 October 22, 2019

Name with Title Meredith Keller 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: 10/31/2019

☒ Correct-Complete ☐ Incorrect-Incomplete Date: 10/31/2019

Date of Notice Issuance: 11/1/2019

Property Owner at Time of Notice:

Name: Rosenberg Family Partners

Address: 1617 Walnut 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

12/7/18

5. Boundary Description



Figure 1. The boundary identifying the parcel at 1617 Walnut Street. (Source: Atlas)

Situate on the north side of Walnut Street at the distance of one hundred and seventy-eight feet six inches westward from the west side of Sixteenth Street in the Eighth Ward of the City of Philadelphia. Containing in front or breadth on the said Walnut Street twenty-five feet six inches and extending of that width in length or depth northwardly one hundred and twenty feet to Moravian Street.

6. Architectural Description



Figure 2. 1617 Walnut Street, 2019. (Source: Philadelphia Historical Commission)

Located on the north side of Walnut Street two blocks east of Rittenhouse Square, the Renaissance Revival structure extends two stories in height, with a length that spans from Walnut Street to Moravian Street. The building contains a flat roof behind a pedimented façade and has served as office and commercial space since its construction in 1921 (Figure 2).

South Elevation

The Walnut Street façade is clad largely in limestone with carved elements at each of the two elongated stories. The three-bay façade sits atop a modest black granite base. Substantial paneled pilasters extend the full height of the building at the east and west ends. At the ground story, the limestone appears to be coated in a textured paint or light stucco. Two large display windows flank a central doorway, and each opening contains a spandrel panel with a round-arched transom above. Fluted pilasters with Ionic capitals separate the three openings. The ground story is topped by a projecting cornice with a carved Vitruvian scroll pattern.

The height and fenestration pattern of the ground story is replicated at the second story, though with more decoration. Three identical openings contain pairs of French doors that open onto Juliette balconies with decorative iron railings. Pairs of casement windows add height above the doors. Like the ground story, the second-story openings contain the same round-arched transoms. Fluted pilasters with Ionic capitals again separate the openings. At the second story, however, roundels with patera have been added between the arches of the transoms. A dentilated pediment, which functions as a parapet, caps the façade. Decorative urns stand on acroteria above the party walls at either end. Below, the corners of the architrave contain carved floral elements. The façade communicates a sense of grandeur and presence through its design and verticality, despite its much taller neighbors to the east and west.



Figure 3. Walnut Street façade, 2019. (Source: Philadelphia Historical Commission)

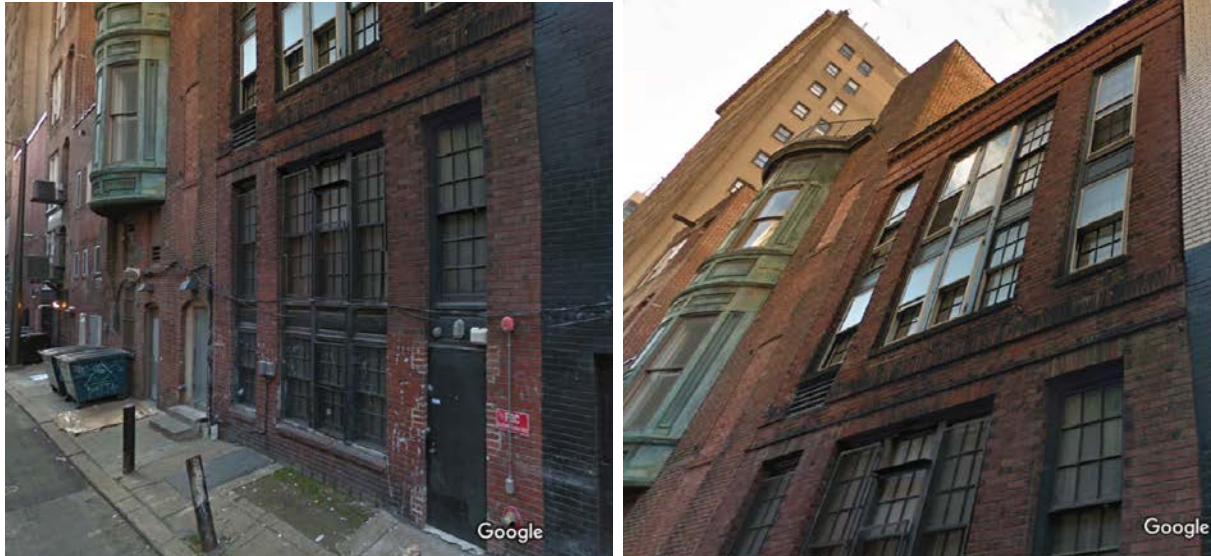


Figure 4. The ground story (left) and upper story (right) of the north, or Moravian Street, elevation, 2016. (Source: Cyclomedia)

North Elevation

The building's Moravian Street elevation lacks the decorative elements of the Walnut Street façade and instead projects a more utilitarian appearance (Figure 4). From the exterior, the elevation appears as two large stories, similar to the Walnut Street façade. However, spandrel panels positioned between window groupings could allow for up to four stories. The building's brick exterior is clad in a modified American bond pattern, with seven rows of brick in running bond and one row of Flemish bond. The elevation again consists of three bays. The two outer bays feature six-over-six double-hung sash windows below the spandrel panel with nine-over-nine double-hung sash windows above. The center bay maintains the same pattern of windows and spandrel panels, though it is larger with a tripartite configuration. A security door has been installed in the westernmost bay at the ground story. The façade is finished with a corbelled brick cornice.

East and West Elevations

The east west elevations function as party walls and are not visible from the exterior.

7. Statement of Significance

Site History

The property at 1617 Walnut Street was sold at auction in March 1921 for \$90,000, at which time a brownstone residence occupied the lot¹ (Figure 5). The property was resold to William H. Wilson, president of the Philadelphia Real Estate Board, later that year. A newspaper article announcing the sale states: “It is understood the purchaser will erect a two-story office building on the site for use of his firm.”² (Figure 6).

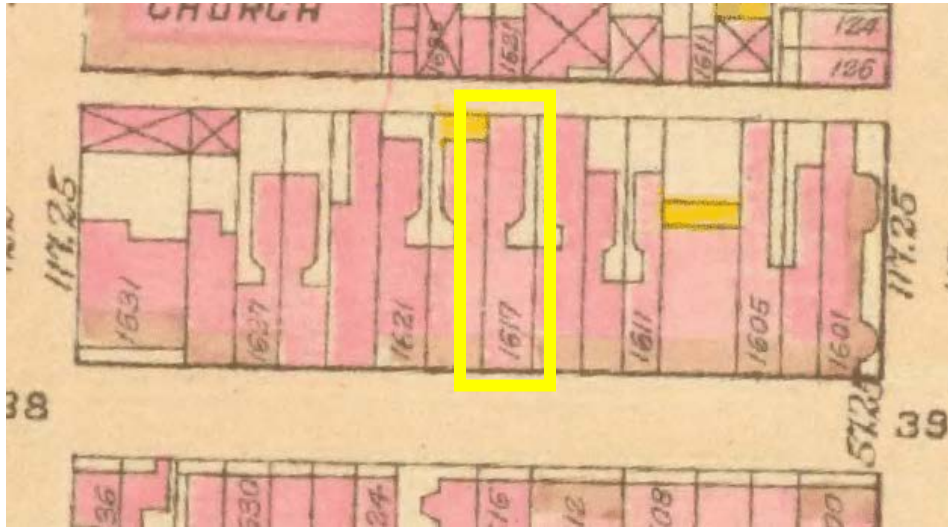


Figure 5. 1910 atlas showing townhouse which previously occupied the lot. Atlas of the City of Philadelphia, 1910. G. W. Bromley & Co. (Source: Athenaeum of Philadelphia)

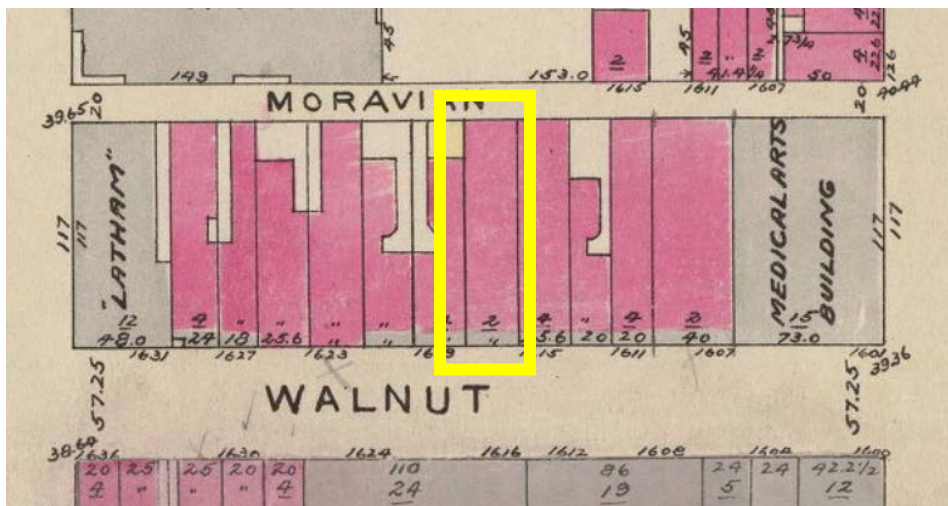


Figure 6. 1927 atlas showing new building with full lot coverage. Atlas of the 5th to 10th Wards of the City of Philadelphia, 1927, revised 1931. Elvino V. Smith. (Source: Athenaeum of Philadelphia)

¹ *Evening Public Ledger* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), Saturday, March 5, 1921, p. 19; *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), Tuesday, May 24, 1921, p. 22.

² *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), Saturday, June 25, 1921, p. 10.

William H. Wilson commissioned the noted Philadelphia architectural firm of Seeburger & Rabenold to design his office building in 1921.³ The firm was a partnership of Frank Seeburger and Charles Folk Rabenold and was active from 1914 through 1934.

Frank Seeburger grew up in South Philadelphia and attended the Franklin Institute Drawing School in 1887. The following year, he attended the Pennsylvania Museum and School of Industrial Art. Seeburger worked for many years in the office of Horace Trumbauer, where he met Charles Rabenold. Seeburger worked on independent projects which primarily included suburban residences, until he and Rabenold partnered in 1914. Charles Rabenold entered the office of Muhlenberg Bros. in Reading, Pennsylvania in 1900, and then attended the University of Pennsylvania, where he graduated in 1905 with a degree in architecture. He then worked in the office of Horace Trumbauer until his partnership with Seeburger in 1914. The firm of Seeburger & Rabenold was active for twenty years, during which time it produced designs for numerous residences and several Protestant churches in Philadelphia and the surrounding suburbs.⁴

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

The building at 1617 Walnut Street embodies distinguishing characteristics of the Italian Renaissance Revival architectural style, thereby satisfying Criterion for Designation D.

The Italian Renaissance Revival style developed in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century and remained popular until about 1930, especially in the northeastern states.⁵ Prominent New York architects McKim, Mead & White first employed the style in 1884 for the design of the Villard Houses on Madison Avenue between 51st and 52nd Street in Manhattan. Like other classically-inspired styles, the Italian Renaissance Revival style drew inspiration from Italy and, more broadly, the ancient world. The formal, classical style developed in direct contrast to the medieval forms and vocabularies of other popular styles of the time like the asymmetrical Romanesque Revival and Queen Anne styles. The Italian Renaissance Revival style as well as the earlier Italianate style were modeled on the fifteenth and sixteenth-century buildings of the Italian Renaissance. However, Italian Renaissance Revival style buildings are much closer stylistically to the original forms than the earlier Italianate style, which capture the feeling if not the details. This additional authenticity may be attributable to a greater familiarity with actual Renaissance buildings that resulted from greater opportunities for travel to Italy as well as greater availability of scholarly works on Renaissance architecture, many of which included photographs. In his 1855 work *Histoire de France*, Jules Michelet coined the term *Renaissance* to describe the period in Europe's cultural history that represented, as he saw it, a drastic break from the Dark or Middle Ages. For Michelet, man created the modern understanding of humanity and its place in the world during the Renaissance. Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt authored the first modern histories of Italian Renaissance art and culture. Burckhardt's *Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien* of 1860 and his *Die Geschichte der*

³ *Philadelphia Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide*, v. 36, August 24, 1921, p. 544.

⁴ "Seeburger & Rabenold." *Philadelphia Architects and Buildings*. Accessed October 18, 2019. https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/ar_display.cfm/24185.

⁵ Virginia McAlester, and Lee McAlester, "Italian Renaissance," *A Field Guide to American Houses* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997): 396-407.

Renaissance in Italien of 1867 are counted among the classics of Renaissance historiography. S.G.C. Middlemore published an English translation of Burkhardt's *Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien* in 1878. In 1891, Swiss art historian Heinrich Geymüller lectured on Bramante at the Royal Institute of British Architects in London. Following these groundbreaking efforts, English-speaking scholars began studying and publishing on Italian Renaissance architecture. William James Anderson's *The Architecture of the Renaissance in Italy* of 1896 was the first comprehensive narrative of Italian Renaissance architecture in the English language. American art historian Bernard Berenson published extensively on Renaissance art at the turn of the century. His works include *Venetian Painters of the Renaissance* (1894); *Florentine Painters of the Renaissance* (1896); *Central Italian Painters of the Renaissance* (1897); *The Sense of Quality: Study and Criticism of Italian Art* (1901; 1902); *The Drawings of the Florentine Painters* (1903); and *North Italian Painters of the Renaissance* (1907). In 1914, British architecture school dropout Geoffrey Scott, who was working for Berenson in Florence, published *The Architecture of Humanism*, an influential work. By the turn of the twentieth century, the architecture of Renaissance Italy was considered the pinnacle of Western architectural achievement.⁶

The characteristic features of the Italian Renaissance Revival style include formality, an imposing scale, vertical symmetry, round-arch door and window openings, and classical detailing such as columns, pilasters, entablatures, and pediments. Most buildings in the style are clad with masonry, usually ashlar stone. First floors may be clad in rusticated stone. The elegant style was most often used for grand, architect-designed structures such as institutional and civic buildings. Buildings in the style are often found in urban settings.

The front façade building at 1617 Walnut Street presents the hallmarks of the Italian Renaissance Revival style. The building has a classical temple form that is vertically symmetrical. It is clad in an off-white, stone-like material that gives the appearance of limestone. Despite being a rather small structure, narrow and only two stories tall, the building has an imposing scale, with three bays of monumental, round-arched openings. The façade is framed by broad, paneled pilasters at the outer edges and the bays are separated by slender, fluted, Ionic pilasters. The arches of the door and window openings spring from impost blocks ornamented with stylized acanthus leaves. The first and second floors are divided by a classical entablature ornamented with a Vitruvian scroll or wave. Large casement windows with round-arched transoms open onto Juliette balconies with ornamental, wrought-iron railings at the second floor. Roundels with patera decorate the abutments of the arches at the second floor. The facade is terminated with a classical pediment set on a classical, denticulated entablature. Above the roofline at the party walls, decorative urns stand on acroteria. The façade presents a formal, sophisticated composition of classical elements.

While the front façade of 1617 Walnut Street does not precisely replicate a specific Italian Renaissance façade, Seeburger & Rabenold undeniably drew inspiration from the primary façade of the Cathedral of Pienza (Figure 7), which is considered by many to be the first High Renaissance façade and which likely

⁶ See Katherine Wheeler, *Victorian Perceptions of Renaissance Architecture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016); and "Biographical Note," in Peter Murray, *The Architecture of the Italian Renaissance* (New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1986), 239-243.

was predicated on Alberti's Tempio Malatestiano (San Francesco) at Rimini (Figure 8). Florentine architect Bernardo Rossellino designed the cathedral and adjacent buildings on the central piazza in Pienza, Italy, a small town in southern Tuscany, for Pope Pius II between 1459 and 1462. The ensemble is considered a jewel of Italian Renaissance urban design. Like the façade at 1617 Walnut Street, the Pienza Cathedral façade is symmetrical and stone, is two stories tall and three bays wide, has arched openings, and is topped by a denticulated pediment.⁷ Images of both the Pienza Cathedral and Tempio Malatestiano were routinely published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; for example, photographs of both buildings appeared on the same page in A.L. Frothingham's *A History of Architecture* of 1915.⁸ (Figure 9). Drawn from the canonical design for the Cathedral at Pienza, the building at 1617 Walnut Street embodies distinguishing characteristics of the Italian Renaissance Revival architectural style, thereby satisfying Criterion for Designation D.



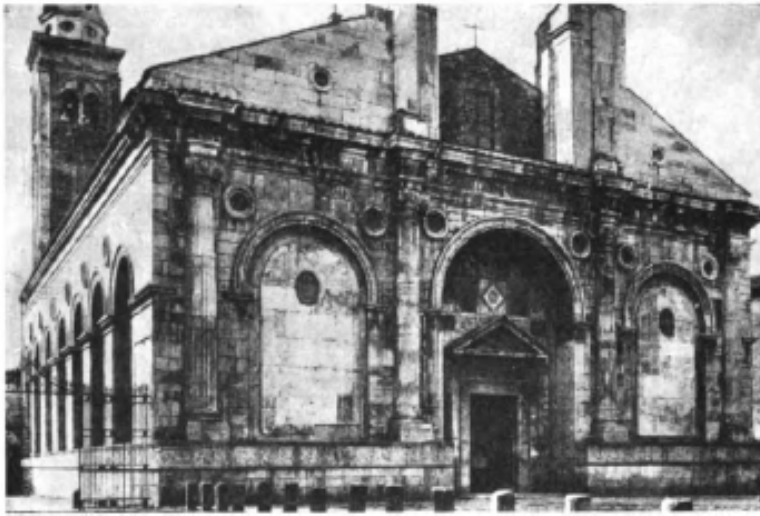
Figure 7. Cathedral of Pienza, Italy, Bernardo Rossellino, architect, 1459-1462. (Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pienza_Cathedral)

⁷ See Charles R. Mack, *Pienza: The Creation of a Renaissance City* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1987).

⁸ A.L. Frothingham, *A History of Architecture* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1915), vol. 4, p. 165.



Figure 8. Tempio Malatestiano, Rimini, Italy, Leon Battista Alberti, architect, 1446. (Source: <https://www.sigismondomalatesta.com/il-tempio-malatestiano/>)



634—S. Francesco, Rimini. (From photo.)

Alberti himself, when he remodelled the Santa Maria Novella façade, still kept the columns away from the angle.

Before speaking of Alberti's other façades, I must refer to one by his pupil Rossellino, which was very closely related to this Rimini façade, and was equally classic Roman: the façade of the cathedral of Pienza (Fig. 635). Its interior and plan were described on p. 154. The façade is in absolute contrast to the Gothicizing interior. It is severely classic, and in its perfect preservation has the advantage over its predecessor at Rimini. It has the same simplicity and felicitous proportions. The main difference, the equal width of the second



635—Cathedral of Pienza. (From photo.)

Figure 9. A.L. Frothingham, *A History of Architecture*, 1915.

Conclusion

Based on the distinctive form of several High Renaissance structures, the building at 1617 Walnut Street further conveys the aesthetic of Italian Renaissance design through the incorporation of classical detailing at the building's front façade. Ionic and paneled pilasters, acanthus leaves, Vitruvian scrolls, round-arch fenestration, and a denticulated pediment draw on the vocabulary of the Renaissance Revival style. Though only two stories in height, Seeberger & Rabonold further designed the structure with an imposing scale that lends presence to the stately building, even among its towering Walnut Street neighbors. Through its classical detailing, verticality, and masonry cladding, the building at 1617 Walnut Street embodies the distinguishing characteristics of the Renaissance Revival style, satisfying Criterion for Designation D.

8. Bibliography

Frothingham, A.L. *A History of Architecture* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1915), vol. 4, p. 165.

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Wheeler, Katherine. *Victorian Perceptions of Renaissance Architecture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).