

NEW YORK STATE SUPREME COURT, QUEENS COUNTY, LONG ISLAND CITY BRANCH, 25-10 Court Square, Long Island City, Borough of Queens. Built 1872-1876, architect George Hathorne; rebuilt 1904-1908, architect Peter M. Coco.

Landmark Site: Borough of Queens Tax Map Block 83, Lot 1.

On March 23, 1976, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the New York State Supreme Court, Queens County, Long Island City Branch, and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 2). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Five witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The courthouse at Long Island City, a dignified and monumental neo-English Renaissance building designed in the early years of the twentieth century, today houses a branch of the State Supreme Court. A prominent structure in Queens, it is not only architecturally notable, but also a striking visual reminder of the history of the area.

The first court sessions of Queens were held in the mid 1600s at a meeting hall in Jamaica. In 1683 the General Assembly ordered that a court session be held annually at Jamaica. The construction of a "sessions-house" and prison in Jamaica had been authorized as early as 1666, but it was not until sometime after 1669 that the structure was completed by the contractor under penalty of fine of ten pounds for non-completion. It had been agreed that the townspeople would keep and repair the building for twenty-one years provided that they be allowed to worship in it on Sundays. During the Revolutionary War the British commander ordered the old courthouse torn down and its materials used to construct barracks and huts for his troops. As a result, by 1784 the old stone Presbyterian church in the area was being used as a courthouse. From 1785 to 1798 a new courthouse-jail was under construction which was later called the "Old Brig".

The "Old Brig" had a colorful history and one sheriff, in the early 1800s, sold liquor there in his spare time. This lively situation grew worse with time and regularly led to raucous behavior and fights. Attempts were made to clean up the courthouse which finally led to legal action to stop liquor sales. The resourceful sheriff, obeying the legal notice, built a lean-to shed in front of the building and continued to ply his trade through an adjoining window into the courthouse. During the late 1820s renewed campaigns to correct the situation were successful. The "Old Brig" continued to function as the county courthouse until 1877 after which time it served as the County Insane Asylum for a number of years. In 1910, after being vacant for some time, "Old Brig" burned down. The fire was seen for miles by the local residents who had always described the old building as resembling a windmill.

In the mid-nineteenth century it had been decided to move the Queens County Seat from Jamaica to a more convenient location. A logical site for this relocation was near the convergence of all the Long Island railroad lines in the newly formed township of Long Island City.

Long Island City had previously consisted of several communities, the most important of which were Newtown and Astoria. Rapid development in the 1860s resulted in a series of disjointed areas without sufficient municipal services, while corrupt politicians, the most notorious group being the Newtown ring, consisting mainly of liquor dealers, were in power. These conditions inspired local residents to action in 1870, and on May 6 of that year incorporation of the area as a township was approved by the state legislature. The name Long Island City was probably first suggested by Levi Hayden who prophesied in 1853 that this area would eventually be united as "Long Island City."

In 1865 The Star newspaper began publishing as the Long Island Star, its new name suggesting the growth of community spirit and identity.

Abram D. Ditmars was elected the first mayor of the new township and he appointed a charter committee to review and suggest better ways to manage the new city. The result of their efforts was the implementation of a public school system, the surveying and paving of streets, the establishment of a regular police force, equitable tax assessments and, most important of all, a pure water supply.

As the town grew, the older English and Dutch families were replaced by the Irish and other immigrants from Europe. The last Long Island City mayor "Battle-Axe" Gleason was the most colorful of these public-spirited individuals. Gleason earned his name in July of 1888 when he and his supporters, armed with axes, chopped to pieces a fence erected by the Long Island railroad on a local street as a barrier intended to force the general public to purchase railroad tickets in order to pass through. Due to forceful action like this the voters twice re-elected the popular Gleason mayor, and when his fight for his constituency led to a brief stay in jail, "Battle-Axe" was supplied with home-cooked supper and champagne.

Queens County originally included what is now both Queens and Nassau Counties until the city of Greater New York was formed in 1898. At that time approximately one third of the more populous parts of the original county were consolidated as an administrative entity known as the Borough of Queens.

Eleven years later the Queensboro Bridge was completed and connected Long Island City with Manhattan. The bridge made it convenient to commute to Long Island City from Manhattan and many businesses moved there. Several years later elevated trains were extended over the bridge and provided easy transportation for workers in the new factories. Among new residents were many theatrical performers who commuted to Broadway by the "El", while many older residents moved away due to the noise and unpleasantness of the "El".

During the Depression some of the larger houses were converted to multi-family dwellings which still survive as such. Long Island City weathered that era and is today a mixed area of residential and light industrial uses.

The move of the county seat to Long Island City was authorized by the state legislature in 1870, and in 1872 funds were allocated for the erection of the Long Island Court House. George Hathorne, originally from Springfield, Massachusetts, was chosen as the architect to design the new courthouse which was built in 1872-1876. Among his more notable buildings was Walker Hall at Amherst College. During later years Hathorne maintained an office in New York City and became one of the early members of the American Institute of Architects. The contractors in charge were D. C. Weeks & Son. The interior walls and detail work was undertaken by B. Gallagher. There were a number of delays and a scandal arose about the construction of the building. It was not until March of 1877 that it was in full use.

When completed, the Long Island City Courthouse was one of the most important and prestigious civic structures on the Island. Designed in the French Second Empire style by George Hathorne it had a symmetrical, tri-partite plan. The central portion was intended to contain the courtrooms proper; a front pavilion housed the court and administrative office, while the rear pavilion contained the various associated court chambers. The structure was a monumental, yet well-balanced, two-story brick building with attic, on a battered foundation wall of rusticated granite. The attic story was crowned by a picturesque, high mansard roof. The windows of the main floor were deeply recessed in an imposing double-height arcade, and the most striking features of the courthouse were the centrally placed towers at the main facade and at the rear. These impressive towers also had mansard roofs and arched openings with flanking pilasters. The mansard roof of the building rose from behind an

ornamental stone balustrade pierced with arched openings and accentuated by a series of arched windows with foliate enframements. A delicate iron cresting crowned the roof line.

After a disastrous fire in 1904 which gutted the building, the courts were moved to the Flushing Town Hall while reconstruction was undertaken. Architect Peter M. Coco redesigned the courthouse, raising it two stories in order to accommodate the projected needs of the court. Coco was considered one of the foremost architects in Long Island City. He received his training at Cooper Institute, graduating in 1892 with high honors. He had designed a great number of churches, dwellings, apartments, lofts and office buildings. One of his crowning achievements was the redesigning of the courthouse in Long Island City. In the reconstruction of this building Coco had to overcome many obstacles while working within the limitations of retaining the burnt-out shell of the original structure. He was required to rebuild without removing the original walls, although he was permitted to strip and vastly alter them. Two additional stories replaced the original mansard roof, the accompanying towers were razed and all of the old exterior detail was removed. The plan of the structure, remaining essentially the same as the old, was incorporated within the new.

The front facade of this impressive four-story structure is symmetrically disposed with large limestone enframed windows at each floor on either side of the two-story entrance. This main entrance is set in an arched stone enframement with a foliate keystone and set on impost blocks which rest on pilasters. It is flanked by projected paired Ionic columns which support small balconies above full entablatures displaying crisp egg-and-dart moldings. The Ionic capitals include an imaginative detail--small helmeted heads set between the volutes. In the spandrels of the arch are two medallions upon which are carved the dates '1874' and '1908' the two periods of construction. At the entrance double doors below a three panel transom are surmounted by a broken pediment with central feature.

The fourth floor, a classical attic, is set above the main cornice which is carried on console brackets. Three windows with sidelights enframed by stone pilasters and separated by garland reliefs enhance the front facade at the attic story, and above the columns of the main entrance are windows flanked by heavy pilasters carried on scrolled bases.

The corners of the building below the main cornice are adorned with stone ornament of an interesting and original character--eagles set above cartouches are flanked by foliate console brackets, below which are three tablets set on scrolls. At the attic story above these crowning features are fluted engaged pilasters. The top cornice is surmounted by a solid stone parapet wall which is punctuated, above the pilasters, by heavy smooth-faced uprights with an open bull's-eye at the center of the front.

The side elevations are composed of the end pavilions flanking a central recessed section. The detail at the attic story of the pavilions differs from that of the main facade through the introduction of oval windows flanking the tri-partite windows. Also an interesting decorative detail is the series of swags between the windows of the central portion of the building. Beneath these at the third floor especially handsome disc-like cartouches, surmounted by intricate foliage with decorative ribbon motifs below them, are cut in strikingly deep relief, and are set between the windows. Above the front pavilion there is a convex mansard roof which is constructed of metal with batten ribs. A low mansard roof of Spanish tiles, outlined with sheetmetal trim covers the rest of the building.

A prison was added at a later date. The annexes were built in 1935-1936 to house the District Attorney's Office and the Sheriff's Office. The County Court was located in the Long Island City courthouse until it was forced to move out in 1932 in order to accommodate the Supreme Court. Since the 1930s there have been a succession of courts in the building.

This courthouse has provided the setting for many interesting events. In 1927 the famous murder trial of Ruth Snyder and her lover Henry Judd Gray, which attracted curious crowds, was held here. The great double-height trial room on the third floor, which is lighted in part by a splendid sky light, was a most dramatic setting for this spectacular trial. Both were convicted and executed. The courthouse has also been the setting for such movies as "Crazy Joe", "Panic in Needle Park" and Alfred Hitchcock's "The Wrong Man". In real life Willie Sutton is supposed to have made his famous remark in the courthouse. When asked why he robbed banks, he responded, "because that's where the money is."

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the New York State Supreme Court, Queens County, Long Island City Branch, has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that among its important qualities the Long Island City courthouse, providing a focal point for the area, has served for many years as the center of judicial activity for Queens County, that it has also been the setting for many interesting trials and events, that it is the second courthouse on the site, rebuilt in the neo-English Renaissance style, that it displays a wealth of ornamental detail and that, in its overall massing and composition, it is a dignified civic structure worthy of the area which it serves.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 63 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the New York State Supreme Court, Queens County, Long Island City Branch, 25-10 Court Square, Long Island City, Borough of Queens and designates Tax Map Block 83, Lot 1, Borough of Queens, as its Landmark Site.