

NEW YORK ARCHITECTURAL TERRA COTTA WORKS BUILDING, 42-10 -- 42-16 Vernon Boulevard,  
Borough of Queens. Built in 1892.

Landmark Site: Borough of Queens Tax Map Block 477, Lot 20.

On June 8, 1982, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the New York Architectural Terra Cotta Works Building as a Landmark and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 14). The hearing was duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of 10 witnesses spoke in favor of designation at the hearing. There were two speakers in opposition to designation. Several letters and statements supporting designation have been received.

#### DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The New York Architectural Terra Cotta Works Building is a unique vestige of one of the most important terra cotta manufacturing concerns in the Northeast. Built in 1892, the building served as the office headquarters of the New York Architectural Terra Cotta Company, New York's only major manufacturer of architectural terra cotta. For some 50 years terra cotta was a major building material in the United States and one which has a significant impact on the shape and form of New York's architecture. The prominently-located headquarters building was calculated to display with great elegance the range and potential of the products manufactured by the company. It is a veritable catalogue of the company's art and the only one of its kind known to survive in the United States.

#### The New York Architectural Terra Cotta Company

Although the use of terra cotta in architecture dates back to ancient Greek and Roman times, architectural terra cotta was not generally accepted in the United States until the mid-1870s. Architectural terra cotta gained popularity for its comparative low cost over stone, its ornamental possibilities, and its fireproof properties. Chicago had been the first American city to establish a manufacturing works for terra cotta. The Chicago manufacturer corresponded with J.M. Blashfield, founder of a major terra cotta plant in Stamford, England. As a result, James Taylor, Blashfield's plant superintendent, made contact with the Chicago company and joined the firm in 1870 when it was reorganized as the Chicago Terra Cotta Works. Taylor was engaged as the superintendent, a position he held until 1877. The firm prospered after the fire of 1871, due to increased demand for fireproof building materials. The Chicago Company supplied terra cotta for two influential New York City buildings during Taylor's tenure there: a residence of 1877 on East 36th Street, designed by George C. Post; and the Morse Building (1878), at Nassau and Beekman Streets, the design of Silliman & Farnsworth, in which raised vertical joints were first used to point the masonry. In 1877, the A. Hall & Sons Fire and Bricks Works of Perth Amboy, New Jersey was reorganized to manufacture architectural terra cotta. By 1879, the company was incorporated under the name Perth Amboy Terra Cotta Company, with James Taylor as its superintendent. After serving as superintendent of the Boston Terra Cotta Company from 1880 to 1886, he joined the newly-formed New York Architectural Terra Cotta Company as its superintendent in 1886.<sup>1</sup> Taylor has been called the "father of architectural terra cotta" in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

The New York Architectural Terra Cotta Company, which owed much of its success to Taylor's expertise, was established in 1886 by New York real estate magnate Orlando B. Potter, with his son-in-law, attorney Walter Geer. Taylor brought with him Carl Matherson, who had

worked with him in Boston and then in Perth Amboy, to serve as his assistant manager, and W.I. McGregor, a celebrated sculptor and modeller, also from the Boston works.<sup>3</sup> The company offices were set up in the Potter Building at 38 Park Row.<sup>4</sup> A six-story manufacturing building on the waterfront in the once rural Ravenswood area of Queens (now Long Island City), was built on the site of the Wallach estate.<sup>5</sup> The architect was Clarence B. Cutler of Troy, New York. The first kiln was set in operation at the works on April 29, 1886. The cellar of the new factory contained clay pits, an engine, and machinery for burning clay. The ground floor had kilns and offices. The second floor had a showroom, and molding rooms were located on the third and fourth floors. The top floor had a drafting room and modelling studios. The old Wallach mansion was used for showrooms and private offices. This manufacturing site was considered the most up-to-date in the area.

The community eagerly welcomed the New York Architectural Terra Cotta Company, a new industry which brought many skilled workers to the area. Less than three months after operations began, on a Saturday evening (July 17, 1886), a fire swept through the plant and destroyed all but a portion of the walls. However, the firm had been so successful even in this short period of time that an additional 100 men had been hired to join the force of 150 at the manufacturing works. Taylor announced that, "we shall rebuild without a moment's delay,"<sup>6</sup> and the management erected temporary sheds and set workers about filling orders. After the fire the kilns were found with their contents preserved, and the boilers were salvaged. As a result of the loss of power, clay was prepared manually. By October of 1886, the plant, with a new automatic sprinkler system, was rebuilt, and a new dock was in place. Four kilns were in use (one more than before the fire). The offices were moved from the Wallach mansion to the newly rebuilt manufacturing works, while Taylor and his family, who had previously resided in New Jersey, moved into the mansion. The Long Island City community hailed this successful effort to continue manufacturing under emergency circumstances and to rise "Phoenix-like" from the ashes.<sup>7</sup>

#### The Manufacture and Use of Architectural Terra Cotta

Architectural terra cotta was used in conjunction with brick to highlight and emphasize architectural detail. Beginning in the 1890s, it was also used for exterior cladding over steel-frame structures. It gained popularity for several reasons. The material has the unique capability of achieving a variety of tints and contrasts. Its plasticity allows for artistic versatility. It also allows architects to view actual full-sized details through various stages of design before final placement on a building. Taylor praised architectural terra cotta as a "recognized building material, having its own quality and purpose ...not an imitation of stone or iron or wood."<sup>8</sup>

The material of architectural terra cotta is burnt clay that derives its color from the constituent elements remaining after firing. The selection of raw material in the process of manufacturing architectural terra cotta is integral to the success of the endeavor, as each shade and tint calls for the mixing of clays from different localities. The New York Architectural Terra Cotta Company used clays from northern and central New Jersey, and occasionally from other parts of the country. As related by Walter Geer in his 1891 pamphlet on terra cotta, the clay, after being mined, had to be properly seasoned before it was delivered to the factory. Once received from the docks, it was crushed and ground or washed, then mixed with grit and water. The clay was then piled in layers, each quality being in a separate layer, to attain as many as twelve strata. Perpendicular cuts were then taken from this mass, which was again tempered in pug mills or with rollers which mixed all the ingredients. It was then formed into small cakes and sent to molding rooms. Using the architect's specifications, architectural details were formed into full-sized molds of plaster and clay in the modelling and molding rooms. When the molds were dried, they were sent to the pressing department where clay was pressed into molds, and when partially dry, the work was turned out on the floor. It was here that the carver or modeller would follow the often intricate tracings of the architect's designs to fit and trim each piece.

This stage required great precision, as only the joints could be chiselled down or trimmed to secure a proper fit after firing. The work was then placed on the drying floor, and loaded into kilns, where it remained for seven days for burning and cooling. For practical reasons of manufacture and final installation, terra-cotta elements had to be of a size that would allow for installation by no more than two workers. Large-scale designs were therefore created in segments, carefully designed to fit into an integrated ensemble.

The New York Architectural Terra Cotta Company had a photographic department to reproduce architect's plans. Copies of the plans were provided to every department head, to enable him to paint out in colored inks each portion of the work as it progressed. These records were preserved in order to duplicate orders years hence, as well as to keep a graphic record of the progress of each item.<sup>9</sup>

The facilities of the New York Architectural Terra Cotta Company were the largest of their kind in the country and were built specifically for the manufacture of architectural terra cotta.<sup>10</sup> In his 1891 pamphlet on terra cotta, Walter Geer noted that the company catalogue illustrated "the wonderful range of uses and diverse styles of design of which terra cotta is capable."<sup>11</sup> The company kept in stock a large assortment of molded brick, and details of every kind, including chimney pots, wall copings, panels, tiles, moldings, sills, jambs, lintels, brackets, corbels, etc., for national sale. Thus an architect or builder had the option of ordering stock pieces or placing a special order.

Taylor noted the role of architects themselves in fostering the development of architectural terra cotta:

Having no precedents, they made all kinds of demands, such as had not hithertofore been required or expected; but these very requirements have tended to lead the makers into new channels, which have produced successful results in regard to color, ornamentation, construction, and surface treatment, so that now there is no reasonable doubt that architectural terra cotta as it is designed and made and used in America is far better in many respects than the best products of European factories.<sup>12</sup>

With its increasing popularity due in large part to its versatility, the material was being used in a majority of the masonry buildings constructed in New York by the turn of the century.

The New York Architectural Terra Cotta Company supplied terra cotta for a host of prominent architects and numerous buildings. By 1891, the company had filled contracts in fifteen states as well as Canada. Among the New York projects for which the company supplied terra cotta were: the Lincoln Building (1886), R.H. Robertson; the Corbin Building (1888), Francis H. Kimball; the Schermerhorn Building (1889), H.J. Hardenbergh; the Old Grolier Club (1890), Charles W. Romeyn; the Montauk Club (1891), Francis H. Kimball; Carnegie Hall (1891), William B. Tuthill; All Saints Church (1894), Renwich, Aspinwall & Russell; and the Ansonia Hotel (1904), Paul E.M. Duboy. Through Walter Geer's writings, the company also made a significant contribution to the documentation of the material itself. In 1891 Geer published Terra-Cotta in Architecture and in 1920, he wrote The Story of Terra-Cotta.

#### The New York Architectural Terra Cotta Works Building

By 1892, with the growth of the company, a need was evidently felt for an office facility separate from the manufacturing plant, and the headquarters building was constructed. The New York Architectural Terra Cotta Works Building is a fanciful, two-story structure that

displays in its construction an exuberant use of brick and terra cotta. Placed at the easternmost end of the nearly two-acre site with a frontage of over 200 feet on the East River, the headquarters building stood against a backdrop of the company's entire manufacturing, warehouse and shipping operation when built in 1892.<sup>13</sup> The entire complex was once surrounded to the north, south and east by brick walls. All that remains on the site are a much-altered brick warehouse and segments of the brick walls which curve inward to reveal the mansion-like headquarters building.<sup>14</sup>

The building, combining elements of the Renaissance and Tudor Revival styles in its design, is rectangular in plan, with its longer sides running parallel to Vernon Boulevard. The principal facade faces east, and has two entries of equal size at its north and south ends. The gable ends of the roof terminate in stepped parapets with pyramidally-shaped coping stones of beige terra cotta. The peaked roof is sheathed in semi-circular pantiles which have the appearance of slate shingles. It is pierced by the two chimneys, one at its southern end,<sup>15</sup> and one atop a semi-circular projecting bay, placed slightly off-center toward the southern end of the facade. This bay has a conical roof, and its chimney flues have Tudor Revival chimney pots, identical to those featured in the company's catalogue offerings.<sup>16</sup>

The major facade elements stand out from the wall which is faced with light brown brick. To the south of the semi-circular bay are two windows each at the first and second stories. To the north of the bay are four windows at the first story and three at the second story. A belt course of terra-cotta ornament in a Vitruvian scroll pattern runs the length of the entire facade, just below the level of the lintels of the first story windows. The flush window lintels, molded in beige terra cotta, have drip moldings with foliate ornament on the keystones and ends. The sills, also of beige terra cotta, project slightly and have foliate patterns at their bases.

The entrances at either end of the facade are approached by steps of beige terra cotta. Both entryways contain wood-panelled doors, and the doorways are flanked by pilasters with composite capitals and Northern Renaissance-derived panel carvings with paired figures. The pilasters support friezes of intricate leaf patterns, the design of which conceals masks to achieve a trompe l'oeil effect. The coronas have modified egg and dart motifs.

The southernmost entry carries the former street address (401 Vernon Boulevard) of the company on the frieze directly above it. The frieze on the corresponding doorway of the north entry reads "Office." The focal point of the main facade is the asymmetrically-placed curved projecting bay. Its north and south side have windows which match in detail the trim of the other windows of the facade. The bay itself is faced with a darker, rock faced brick. The center of the bay bears a rectangular plaque, giving the name of the company "New York Architectural Terra Cotta Works," in flowing letters, executed in relief against a terra-cotta background. The plaque, which approximates the size of the windows, is slightly recessed from the surface of the brick around it. This plaque is flanked by fluted pilasters with composite capitals. The pilasters support a frieze in trompe l'oeil design of leaves and masks which matches those of the entries, and is capped by a pediment. Centered above, at the second story level, is another smaller plaque, bearing "Anno Domini 1892" in a flowing scroll-like form, framed by an egg and dart trim.

A band of cast terra-cotta with a foliate design runs the length of the facade, just below the roof line. Foliate consoles at the south and north ends of the facade intersect the stepped parapets.

The north elevation is partially obscured by a one-story addition, and the lower section of the southern elevation is obscured by a small, one-story shed.<sup>17</sup> The north facade has a central, circular window with two smaller openings flanking it. The west elevation

which faced the factory, has a fenestration pattern matching that of the front facade, although its lintels and sills are of a more utilitarian design. The roof band is similar.

### Conclusion

By 1915 the company was the fourth largest employer in Long Island City. The terra cotta company's business prospered into the 1920s when it acquired a second manufacturing site in Old Bridge, New Jersey, allowing for direct access to clay deposits. (Shipments of 400 tons per barge were made twice weekly to Long Island City works from the Cheesquake, New Jersey area.) Walter Geer, Jr., the son of Walter Geer, continued the family involvement in the company until it went bankrupt in 1928-29. Richard Dalton, who had been the president of the New York Architectural Terra Cotta Company from 1919 to 1928, formed the Eastern Terra Cotta Company in 1931. This company, combining the facilities of the New York and New Jersey companies, produced architectural terra cotta for New York's recreational facilities under the administration of Robert Moses and his architect Aymar Embury II in the 1930s. Business continued into the mid-1940s. After its closing, Mr. Dalton used the headquarters building for his own construction company's offices until his death in 1968. In 1968, the Dalton family sold the building and property to Citibank. In 1976 the manufacturing works buildings were demolished.

Today only the New York Architectural Terra Cotta Works Building survives as a symbol of the material and industry which transformed the construction profession in the late 19th century. Built at a time when terra cotta was enjoying an unparalleled popularity, the building was a showpiece for the company and a major example of the quality and range of the company's products. As the headquarters of New York City's only major terra cotta manufacturer, it has special significance in the history of architecture and construction and is one of this country's few tangible links with this important manufacturing process.

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## FOOTNOTES

1. Walter Geer, Terra-Cotta in Architecture (New York: Gazlay Bros., 1891), pp. 18-21.
2. See: National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form: New York Architectural Terra Cotta Company Office Building. Prepared by Susan Tunick and Theo H.M. Prudon, Friends of Terra Cotta, July 1982. Section 8, p.2.
3. Long Island City Star, April 9, 1886, p.(?).
4. The Potter Building, the 1883 design of Nathan Starkweather, is itself a terra-cotta building. It was the first in New York City to be fireproofed by terra cotta, which was manufactured by the Perth Amboy Terra Cotta Company.
5. Long Island City Star, February 26, 1886, p. 2. In 1881, Rudolph Franc had attempted to establish a terra cotta manufacturing operation on a waterfront location in Long Island City but failed after eighteen months.
6. Long Island City Star, July 23, 1886, p. 1.
7. Long Island City Star, July 23, 1886, p. 3; October 15, 1886, p. 1.
8. A History of Real Estate, Building and Architecture in New York City (New York: Real Estate Record Association, 1898), p. 512.
9. Geer, pp. 24-27.
10. Other terra cotta companies made commercial clay products, ranging from flower pots to sewer pipes, in addition to producing architectural terra cotta.
11. Geer, p. 41.
12. History of Real Estate, p. 519.
13. Before the Manhattan bridge was completed in 1905, the Terra Cotta Works were readily accessible from various locations in New York City and Brooklyn via ferries. Once landed, visitors could board a streetcar which ran along Vernon Boulevard passing the gates of the factory. The company used its own trucks to transport finished work, and utilized rail and steamship routes to execute long-distance deliveries.
14. The design of the building has been likened to that of the 1870 office of the Hatherware Ceramics Co., England's only surviving terra cotta producer. The New York Architectural Terra Cotta Works Building is similar to the English company's office in style and scale but it has a higher degree of ornamentation. While the architect has not been determined with certainty, it may have been Clarence B. Cutler, the architect of the manufacturing plant.
15. Historical evidence indicates that the chimney at the building's southern end had chimney pots similar in design to those of the projecting bay.
16. New York Architectural Terra Cotta Company Catalogue, 7th edition (1894) p. 49.

17. This shed obscures an intricate terra-cotta plaque set into the main wall. It matches the design of an overmantel within the first floor interior. This overmantel, which is the only known, signed work of James Taylor, is among several interior features of interest in the building. The original office layout and many details have been retained. Taylor's plaque design was also used for the cover of the company's catalogue.

#### FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the New York Architectural Terra Cotta Works Building 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 New York Architectural Terra Cotta Works Building is a unique vestige of one of the most important terra cotta manufacturing concerns in the Northeast; that, built in 1892, it served as the office headquarters of New York's only major manufacturer of architectural terra cotta; that the design of the building, beautifully crafted in brick and terra cotta, is a veritable catalogue of the company's art, reflecting the quality and range of the company's products; that the company achieved particular significance for the scope of its operations which were in large part fostered by James Taylor, often called the "father of architectural terra cotta" in the United States; and that the building is the only one of its kind known to survive in the United States.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly 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 Architecture Terra Cotta Works Building, 42-10 -- 42-16 Vernon Boulevard, Borough of Queens, and designates of Tax Map Block 477, Lot 20, Borough of Queens, as its Landmark Site.

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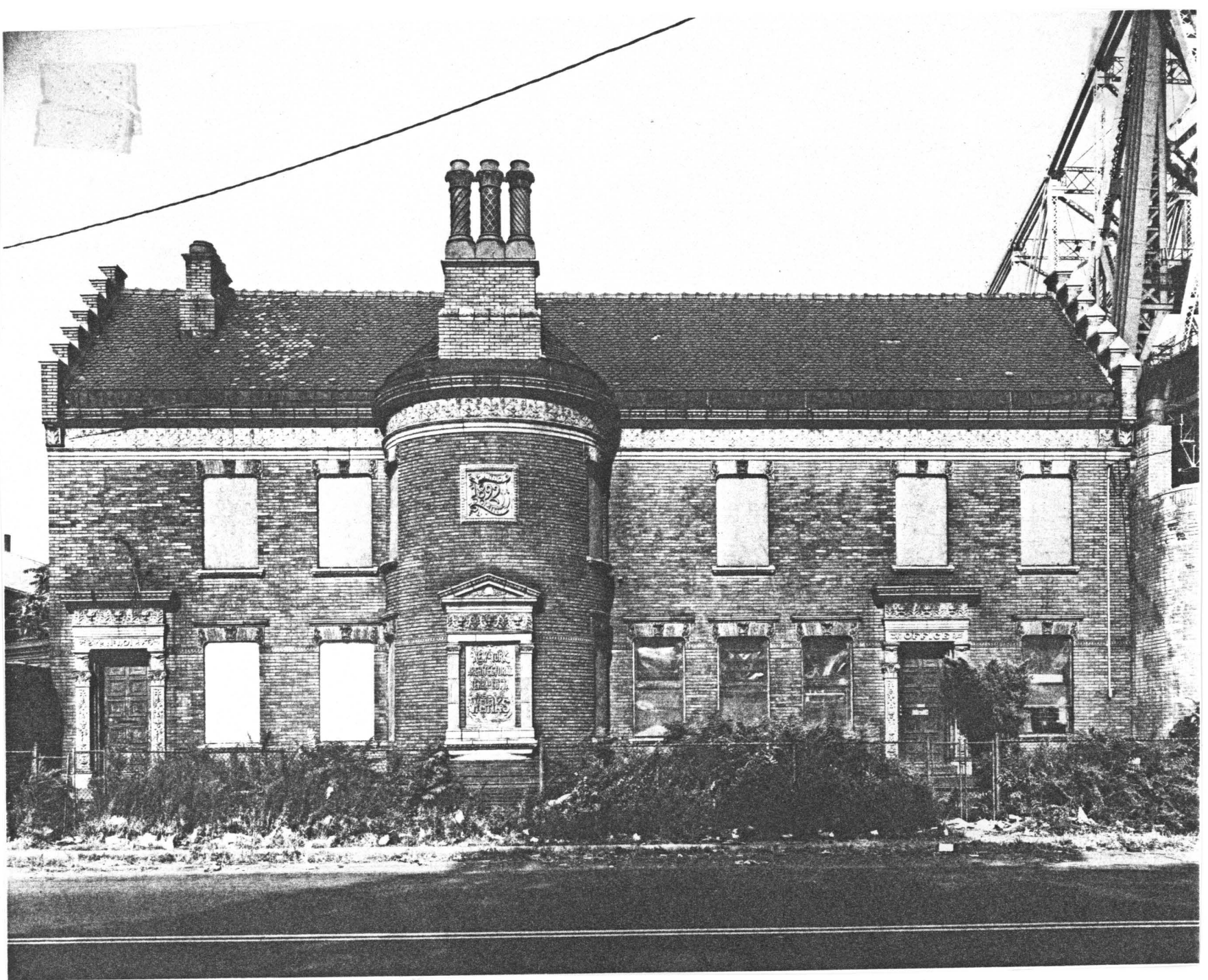


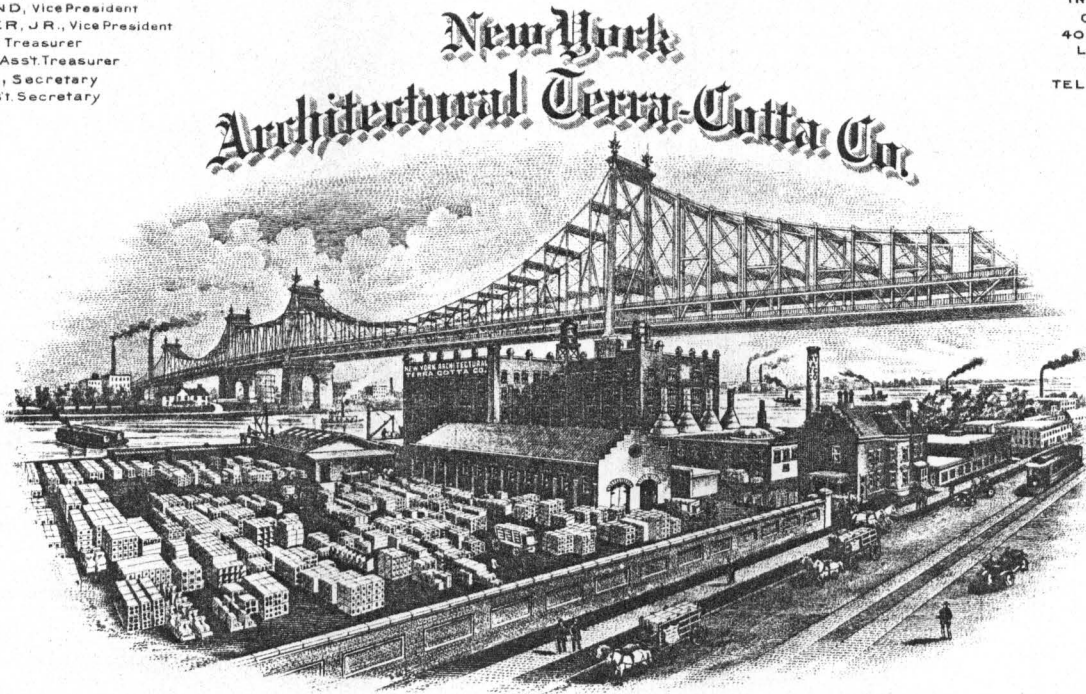
Photo: Friends of Terra Cotta

NEW YORK ARCHITECTURAL TERRA COTTA  
WORKS BUILDING  
42-10 - 42-16 Vernon Blvd.  
Queens

Built 1892

WALTER GEER, President  
F. C. TOWNSEND, Vice President  
WALTER GEER, JR., Vice President  
R. F. DALTON, Treasurer  
J. R. OWENS, Asst. Treasurer  
F. B. ORTMAN, Secretary  
J. P. GEIB, Asst. Secretary

INCORPORATED 1886  
OFFICE AND WORKS  
401 VERNON AVENUE  
LONG ISLAND CITY  
NEW YORK  
TELEPHONE 700 ASTORIA



March 24th, 1917.

Mr. Louis J. Horowitz,  
51 Wall Street,  
New York City.

My dear Mr. Horowitz, -

In re Claim Against Arlington Hotel Co. etc.

In connection with the enclosed duly executed assignment of claim, kindly pay Five Thousand Dollars, as agreed, to the order of R. F. Dalton, who has represented the Terra-Cotta Company throughout as its Attorney in this matter.

Yours very truly,

*Walter Geer*

President,  
New York Architectural Terra-Cotta Co.

COVER from the 1894  
New York Architectural  
Terra Cotta Company  
Catalogue.

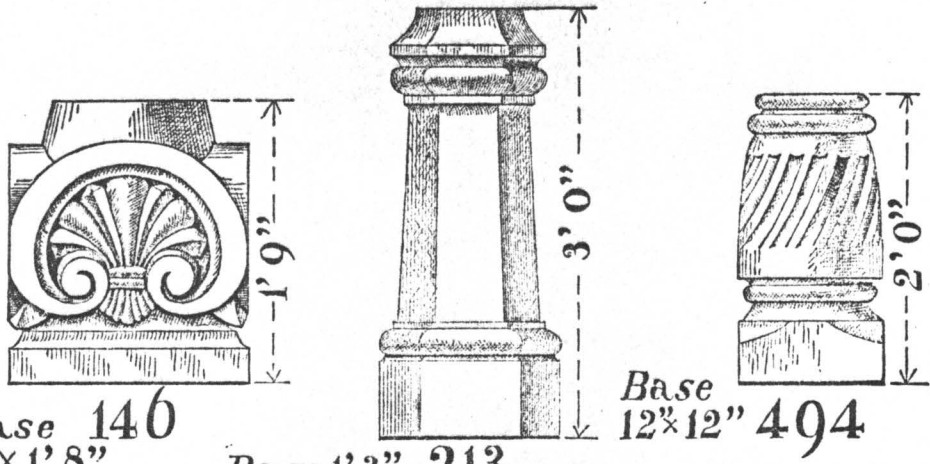
SEVENTH EDITION

OFFICES  
POTTER BUILDING  
38 PARK ROW NEW YORK.



WORKS  
RAVENS WOOD  
LONG ISLAND CITY NEW YORK.

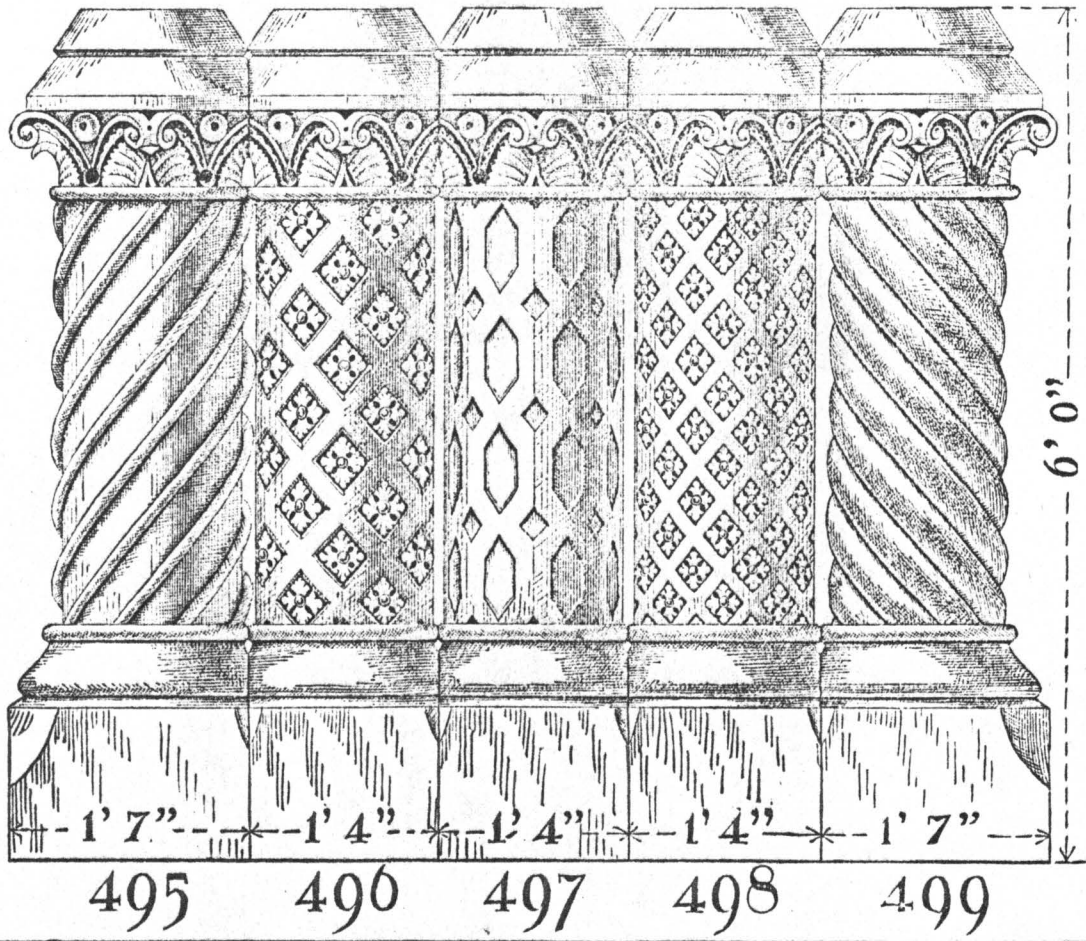
New York Architectural



Base 146  
1'4" x 1'8"

Base 1'3" 213

Base 12" x 12" 494



495

496

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Terra Cotta Company.