

BANK OF THE MANHATTAN COMPANY BUILDING, LONG ISLAND CITY

29-27 Queens Plaza North (aka 29-27 41st Avenue, 29-39 Northern Blvd), Borough of Queens
Built 1925-27; Morrell Smith, architect.

Landmark Site: Borough of Queens Tax Map Block 403, Lot 9.¹

On April 21, 2015, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Bank of the Manhattan Company Building, Long Island City, and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 1). The hearing was duly advertised in accordance with provisions of law. Six people spoke in favor of designation, including representatives of the owner, the Historic Districts Council, and the Society for the Architecture of the City. There were no speakers opposed to designation. The Commission has also received approximately 100 letters supporting designation, including letters from Borough President Melinda Katz, Councilmember Jimmy Van Bramer, and Queens Community Board #1, as well as a petition signed by nearly 1,600 people.

Summary

For nearly a century, the Bank of the Manhattan Company Building has been one of Long Island City's most recognizable structures. Eleven stories tall, the most visually-prominent feature is the slender clock tower, incorporating four large glass faces with Roman numerals and a crenellated crown. Following the opening of the Queensboro Bridge in 1909, this section of Long Island City developed into an important commercial center, attracting a large concentration of factories and banks. When the Bank of the Manhattan Company was dedicated in May 1927 it was an instant landmark, easily seen by thousands of people in passing cars and on the various elevated transit routes that converge at Queens Plaza. Founded in 1799, the Manhattan Company acquired the site through a merger with the Bank of Long Island in 1920. With nearly 40 branches in Queens by the end of the decade, this office tower served as a prominent reminder of the bank's far-reaching commitment to the citizens of the borough. Morrell Smith was the building's architect.



During his 50-year career, this Queens-born designer was responsible for numerous buildings in the metropolitan area, including various structures for the Manhattan Company. At the time of completion, this tan brick and limestone tower was reportedly 85 per cent occupied, with many floors leased to tenants who had not been previously active in Long Island City or Queens. Morrell's design received first prize from the Queens Chamber of Commerce for the borough's best business building of 1927. Despite alterations to the base in the 1960s, the neo-Gothic-style elevations are mostly well-preserved, including the small roof-top reliefs that incorporate images of the god Oceanus, a symbol of the bank, as well as the bank's initials.

BUILDING DESCRIPTION

Description

The Bank of the Manhattan Company Building is located on an irregularly-shaped lot facing Queens Plaza North (41st Avenue, formerly Skillman Place), between Northern Boulevard (formerly Jackson Avenue) and 41st Avenue (formerly Hunter Avenue). The building is 11 stories tall, with a three-story clock tower at the south end. The fenestration varies on each facade, with the fewest number of windows facing east, towards Northern Boulevard. This elevation also incorporates a single vertical row of arched openings that enclose balconies and a steel fire stair.

Historic Features: double-height limestone base with a corbelled continuous balustrade in front of the fourth story windows, tan and brown brick facades with terra-cotta or cast stone details, tan-colored vertical brick stripes on the east and west facades, terra-cotta reliefs with B and M initials and image of the Greek god Oceanus at each corner above the 11th story; tower: four large glass-and-metal clock faces with Roman numerals, terra-cotta reliefs with medieval helmets above the number XII on each clock face, raised chimney stack at the northwest corner; roof: one- and two-story bulkheads adjoin the east and north side of the tower; rear/north side: one- and two-story addition; extending approximately 10 feet from the rear wall of the main building.

Alterations: lower south facade: glass panels and aluminum mullions, recessed street entrances with glass doors, lighting fixtures; upper south facade: light-colored tan brickwork on piers, lighting fixtures attached to top of balustrade; visibly-patched cracks in brick facades, scattered through-window air conditioners; east and west facade windows: scattered horizontal louvers; yellow parging covering the windowless lower part of the east and north facades; roof: some glass panels in clocks are replacements, antennae.

SITE HISTORY

Queensboro Bridge Plaza

The Bank of the Manhattan Company Building is located in the Dutch Kills section of Long Island City, in northwestern Queens. Soon after the consolidation of Greater New York City in 1898, the Queensboro Bridge (1909, a New York City Landmark, now the Ed Koch Queensboro Bridge) was planned and constructed, connecting East 59th Street in Manhattan to Dutch Kills, via Blackwell (now Roosevelt) Island. It was the third bridge to span the East River.

To create a semi-formal approach to the new bridge, Jane Street was widened by 90 feet, from 60 to 150 feet. Initially called Queensboro Bridge Plaza, it had several grassy malls flanked by broad boulevards leading to and from the bridge. In the 1920s, North and South Jane Street became known as Queens Plaza North and Queens Plaza South. Farther east, Queens Plaza South leads to a 100-foot-wide viaduct over Sunnyside Yards that connects to Queens Boulevard. Built by the Pennsylvania Railroad and connected by four tunnels to Manhattan, this immense outdoor storage facility debuted in November 1910.

These transit improvements transformed the character of Long Island City. In September 1911, *The New York Times* observed:

This section used to be about the most retired and uninteresting spot to be found within city limits – a place “so near and yet so far” from the heart of Manhattan as to be out of the reckoning for almost any purpose. The opening of the twelve-million dollar East River bridge in 1909 brought new life and activity to this long dormant territory . . . ²

A 1912 photograph of Queens Plaza documents a neighborhood poised for change. While the Bank of the Manhattan Company’s future site on Skillman Place (now 41st Avenue) was occupied by a modest frame house and garage, the blocks to the northwest were quickly filling with new structures, including several five-story apartment houses and Bryant High School (1902-06). On the north side of the plaza, as well as along Northern Boulevard, many factories were erected, including structures where parts for Brewster, Rolls-Royce, and Ford automobiles were manufactured. In subsequent years, the population of Long Island City surged, rising from 90,000 in 1920 to an estimated 163,000 in 1928.³

Until construction of the Triborough Bridge (1929-36, now Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Bridge) and the Queens-Midtown Tunnel (1936-40), Queens Plaza was the primary “gateway to Queens and Long Island.”⁴ On a single day in 1928, for instance, approximately 86,000 vehicles crossed the Queensboro Bridge and drove by the Bank of the Manhattan Company Building.⁵ Hunter’s Point, which had originally been Long Island City’s commercial center, declined after 1910 as Queens Plaza became “a new downtown,”⁶ eventually served by two multi-route subway stations. The first of these, the elevated Queensboro Plaza Station, accommodating the Astoria and Flushing lines, opened in April 1917. Nearly five hundred feet long, this two-level station cast much of Queens Plaza in shadow and by the mid-1910s the landscaped malls were eliminated.⁷ The underground Queens Plaza Station, which serves lettered trains and has an entrance just a few steps from the bank building at the northwest corner of Queens Plaza North and Northern Boulevard, was planned in the 1920s and completed in August 1933.

Queens Plaza became an important financial center. The first bank established in the immediate area was the Corn Exchange Bank in 1909-10, followed by First National City Bank in 1912. To the northeast, on the block where the Bank of the Manhattan Company would eventually rise, two banks operated side-by-side: the Bank of Long Island (1915, later replaced by the Bank of Manhattan) and the Title Guarantee and Trust Company (1921, demolished).⁸

The Bank of the Manhattan Company

The Manhattan Company, a predecessor to J. P. Morgan Chase & Co., was organized by Aaron Burr in 1799 to distribute fresh water to city residents.⁹ With approval from the New York State Legislature, this private company was also permitted to use surplus capital to invest in stock or open a bank – the third in New York City. Among the original 388 stockholders, 53 were women.¹⁰ Though Burr personally held strong antislavery views, the bank furnished capital and credit to a wide variety of local businessmen – many of whom were likely involved in the highly profitable cotton and slave trade networks. The Manhattan Company was originally based at 40 Wall Street, where the former Manhattan Company Building (1929-30, a New York City Landmark) stands today. The bank enjoyed substantial growth and by the start of 20th century had reportedly attracted more individual depositors than any bank in the country.

Following the end of the First World War, the Bank of the Manhattan Company sought to expand operations outside Lower Manhattan, acquiring numerous competitors in Queens. In 1910, it acquired a “minority interest” in the Bank of Long Island.¹¹ A decade later, the two banks merged. By this time, it had 13 branches throughout the borough, including an office at 5

Skillman Place.¹² This two-story structure was later demolished to build the significantly larger Bank of the Manhattan Company Building.¹³ P. A. Rowley, who joined the Bank of Long Island as a cashier in 1913, headed the Queens division and in 1929 was promoted to president of the Manhattan Company. The bank continued to grow in the late 1920s, absorbing the Greenpoint National Bank and the Bronx Borough Bank in 1926, followed by the First National Bank of Brooklyn, Flushing National Bank, First National Bank of Whitestone and the Queens-Bellaire Bank in 1928. By 1929, its 130th anniversary, the Bank of the Manhattan Company had approximately 61 offices, of which 39 branches – the largest concentration – were based in Queens.¹⁴

The Manhattan Company became a holding company in 1929 and was renamed the Bank of Manhattan Trust Company. In 1955, the stockholders approved a merger with Chase National Bank and it became part of Chase Manhattan Bank, the second largest bank in the United States.

Design and Construction

In October 1925, the Manhattan Company announced that it had filed plans with the Queens Bureau of Buildings to erect an “eleven story bank and office building with three additional floors forming a clock tower.”¹⁵ *The New York Times* reported that it would occupy a 60 by 100 foot lot, though the 1928 Belcher Hyde Atlas shows the building’s footprint as slightly different, 50 by 110 feet.¹⁶ Furthermore, the 1928 map shows a one-story addition at the rear. At this time, the tax lot was smaller than it is today, roughly corresponding to the future footprint of the tower. The dimensions of the tax lot were subsequently modified and expanded to include various accretions and a parking lot.

Charles T. Wills, Inc. served as builder.¹⁷ As with many office towers constructed in New York City at the start of the 20th century, the “buff-colored pressed brick” and Indiana limestone facade is organized like a classical column, with the arrangement of floors suggesting a base, shaft and capital. The limestone base (now altered), which originally contained the banking hall, was designed to complement the adjoining three-story Title Guarantee & Trust Company (1920, later the Banker’s Trust Company), which stood directly to the west. At the time of completion, the lowest floors were divided into three vertical bays, each with small gridded windows and a band of decorative relief running across the top. There was a prominent masonry entrance portico with a glazed transom and a neo-Gothic-style entablature framing a horizontal bronze relief depicting Oceanus. This Greek god was a traditional symbol of the Manhattan Company – a reclining figure of Oceanus decorated the reservoir that the company had erected on Chambers Street in 1800 (demolished), as well as the entrance to the Manhattan Company Building at 40 Wall Street (status of bronze sculpture unknown). The elevator lobby that served the office floors was located to the right (east) of the bank’s entrance.

Above the first-floor windows was the bank’s name, written with raised metal capital letters (later changed to Chase Manhattan Bank, now hidden by a sign). Each floor has seven windows. The outer windows are arranged in pairs while the three center windows are slightly closer together and continue into the lower part of the clock tower, where the uppermost row have round arches. This arrangement creates a slight vertical emphasis, drawing attention to the clock and the top of the building. At each corner, just above the level of the parapet, is a large relief that depicts Oceanus resting atop a plaque with the initials of the Bank of the Manhattan Company: “BM.”

The most visually-prominent feature is the clock tower. Three stories tall, it has four glass clock faces with Roman numerals. This was second building on the north side of Queens Plaza

designed with a clock tower. The first, constructed in c. 1911, was the Brewster Building, located two blocks west.¹⁸ Though clocks often crown church and government buildings, such as St. Paul's Chapel (tower 1794) and the Jefferson Market Courthouse (1874-77, both are New York City Landmarks), by the early 20th century clocks were also being integrated into commercial projects, such as factories and office buildings. Whether visible from a distance or located within a busy commercial hub, multi-face clocks served a dual purpose: to tell the time of day and to draw attention to the building's owner or primary tenant. Significant examples include the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company Building (1907-09) and the Consolidated Edison Building (1928-29) in Manhattan, as well as the Williamsburgh Savings Bank (1929-30), for decades the tallest structure in Brooklyn (all New York City Landmarks).

Bank exteriors frequently incorporate clocks. Symbols of constancy and trustworthiness, they serve a necessary public function. In July 1926, Queens Plaza was described by the Chamber of Commerce as the "gateway" to the borough.¹⁹ At a time when the Queensboro Bridge was the only link to Manhattan, it was here that many transit routes began and fanned out, leading towards numerous branches operated by the Bank of Manhattan. Not only was this building visible to thousands of people in passing cars but the clocks would be useful to time-conscious commuters who travelled by streetcar or on the various elevated subway lines that entered and snaked through the plaza each day.²⁰

The clock made the bank an instant landmark. Before construction began *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* commented: "A four-way clock will rise from the eleventh floor and will be a landmark easily seen from all points of Queens as well as from Manhattan."²¹ The Electime Co., based in Brooklyn, supplied the Telechron (non-winding) clock.²² On each side, directly above the number XII, is a cast-stone relief depicting, from top to bottom, a medieval knight's helmet, a sunken plaque, and a draped garland. These features complemented the tower's neo-Gothic-style embellishment and perhaps symbolized the Manhattan Company's financial strength and reliability.

Architect: Morrell Smith (1875-1947)

Morrell Smith was the building's architect. This Queens-born designer trained at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, where he graduated in 1893. During his 50-year-career, he built many structures in Queens and Long Island, including the neo-Tudor-style headquarters of the Queensboro Corporation (1928-29) in Jackson Heights²³ and branch offices for the Bank of Long Island, the Lynbrook National Bank, and the Jamaica Savings Bank. Smith had a long association with the Bank of the Manhattan Company. By 1930 he was identified as "Architect of the Bank." Working with Walker & Gillette, Smith designed the banking hall and executive offices at 40 Wall Street.²⁴ His earliest commission for the Manhattan Company was probably the Queens-Brooklyn headquarters, a six-story neo-Renaissance style branch and office building at 161-10 Jamaica Avenue (1920-21). Subsequent projects included branches in Jackson Heights (1922) and Far Rockaway (1930), as well as the Nostrand Avenue branch in Brooklyn (1925) and the executive office for 12 branches in the Bronx and Upper Manhattan at 369 East 149th Street (1930), in the Melrose section of the Bronx.²⁵ Though this 12-story building has no clock tower, it resembles the building in Queens Plaza, displaying similar materials, proportions, and fenestration. Smith also designed an unusual branch for Manhattan's Upper East Side at 720 Madison Avenue, at the corner of East 62nd Street. Completed in 1933, this neo-Georgian style building is part of the Upper East Side Historic District. He later designed a Moderne-style branch for the Jamaica Savings Bank (1939, a New York City Landmark). Both the Bank of the

Manhattan Company Building and the Far Rockaway branch won prizes from the Queens Chamber of Commerce.

History

Dedicated in May 1927, the \$1,000,000 building was described as “the first skyscraper in Queens.”²⁶ Many sources have identified it as the tallest structure in the borough, though the 12-story Realty Construction Corporation Office Building (Shampan & Shampan, 1928) at 41-14 29th Street, a half block north, has a greater number of full office floors.²⁷

The Bank of the Manhattan Company occupied the ground floor, the mezzanine and basement, where the bank vaults were housed. *The New York Times* also reported, the “erection of the building placed on the market the largest amount of space available in Queens.” Eight-five per cent occupied when completed, it attracted firms and businessmen who “previously were not represented in the borough.”²⁸ The following January, it received a first prize award from the Queens Chamber of Commerce for the best business building of 1927.²⁹ On the roof, facing east, a large lettered sign was installed, advertising the Bank of the Manhattan Company.³⁰

A one- and two-story addition was constructed in the rear of the building in stages. A portion extending approximately 10 feet from the rear was added in 1928 (included in designation). The remaining portion (not part of the designation), extending approximately 20 feet to the north and 15 feet to the east was added in 1931, or possibly 1933 (ALT 401/31 or 8118/33). After the bank was renamed Chase Manhattan, possibly in the mid-1960s, the exterior of the ground floor was modernized. The gridded windows, center portico, and Oceanus relief were removed and replaced by recessed glass doors with aluminum frames. The bank’s Long Island City branch closed in 1984 and the building was sold in 1988. The roof-top sign (and framework) was removed following the sale, no later than 2004. At present, the structure is partly vacant.

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NOTES

¹ The landmark site was originally designated as lot 21 in part, but the lot was subdivided and renumbered prior to the City Council’s vote. Lot 9 encompasses all of that part of lot 21 that was originally designated as the landmark site.

² “\$1,250,000 Building For Queensboro Bridge Plaza,” *The New York Times*, September 17, 1911, X11. Also see “Cultural Resource Assessment” in “Dutch Kills Rezoning Project,” prepared for New York City Department of City Planning, The Louis Berger Group, Inc., May 2008.

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- ³ *Queensborough*, (Queensboro Chamber of Commerce), January 1928, 35.
- ⁴ *Queensborough*, (Queensboro Chamber of Commerce), January 1928, 58.
- ⁵ Vincent F. Seyfried, *Three Hundred Years of Long Island City 1630-1930*, (Queens Community Series: Astoria, New York, 1984), 139.
- ⁶ Seyfried, 138.
- ⁷ Seyfried, 140.
- ⁸ “Guarantee Trust to Build,” *The New York Times*, February 13, 1920, 24.
- ⁹ In 1799, Burr was a New York State Assemblyman. He served as vice president under Thomas Jefferson from 1800 to 1804. Burr killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel in 1804.
- ¹⁰ See *Capital of Capital: Money, Banking + Power in New York City*, (Columbia University Press, 2012), 24.
- ¹¹ “An Alliance Formed With Queens Bank,” *The New York Times*, May 23, 1910, 13.
- ¹² Organized in 1903, the Bank of Long Island “resulted from the merging of the Bank of Jamaica, Far Rockaway Bank, and the Flushing Bank.” In Long Island City, it was previously located at 31 Jackson Avenue.
- ¹³ “Long Island Branch Merged,” *The New York Times*, January 12, 1920, 18.
- ¹⁴ See advertisement for Bank of Manhattan Company, *Standard Union*, January 3, 1929, 22.
- ¹⁵ “Bank Files Plans,” *The New York Times*, October 8, 1925, 54; “Long Island City To Have 14-Story Bank Structure,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 25, 1925, 78. According to the Queens Department of Buildings, the plans were submitted the previous year (New Building permit 1173-24).
- ¹⁶ *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported the plot was 50 x 100 feet and *Queensborough* magazine reported the dimensions were 50 x 75 feet. *Queensborough*, October 1925.
- ¹⁷ Founded by Charles Thomas Wills (1851-1915) in the 1880s, this New York City firm constructed numerous buildings, many of which have been designated landmarks, including the American Surety Building, the Montauk Club, the Judson Memorial Church, and the New York Stock Exchange. Wills also built the 149th Street branch in the Bronx, as well as the Far Rockaway branch, for the Bank of the Manhattan Company.
- ¹⁸ Located at 27-01 Queens Plaza North, the seven-story Brewster Building (Stephenson & Wheeler) was 96 feet tall, with an 84-foot tower. This four-sided clock tower was removed in 1950. Seyfried, 140.
- ¹⁹ “Plaza Gateway to Queens Borough,” *The New York Times*, July 11, 1926, RE16.
- ²⁰ By the end of 1923, nearly 30,000 cars traveled over the bridge each day. See “29,335 Vehicles A Day Passed Over Queensboro Bridge,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 29, 1924, 5.
- ²¹ *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, “Long Island City to Have 14-Story Bank Structure,” October 25, 1925, 78.
- ²² “Tower of Truth,” advertisement, *Queensborough* (Queensboro Chamber of Commerce), April 1927, 207.
- ²³ The Queensboro Corporation was the primary developer of Jackson Heights.
- ²⁴ Daniel M. Abramson, *The AIG Building and the Architecture of Wall Street* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2001), cited by Carter Horsley, in <http://www.thecityreview.com/srivals.html>.
- ²⁵ “Bronx Bank Building,” *The New York Times*, February 9, 1930, RE2.
- ²⁶ “Manhattan Co. Bank Has Home in Queens,” *The New York Times*, May 10, 1927, 41.
- ²⁷ See “Cultural Resource Assessment,” 99.
- ²⁸ “Manhattan Co. Bank Has Home in Queens,” *The New York Times*, May 10, 1927, 41.
- ²⁹ “Chamber Makes Award for Borough’s Best Buildings,” *Queensborough* (Queensboro Chamber of Commerce), January 1928, 20.
- ³⁰ “Chase and Manhattan Holders Approve Merger by Big Margin,” *The New York Times*, March 29, 1955, 39.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, architecture, and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Bank of the Manhattan Company Building, Long Island City, has a special character and a special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, history, and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that for nearly a century, the Bank of the Manhattan Company Building has been one of Long Island City's most recognizable structures; that the most visually-prominent feature is the slender clock tower, incorporating four large glass faces with Roman numerals and a crenellated crown; that following the opening of the Queensboro Bridge in 1909, this section of Long Island City developed into an important commercial center, attracting a large concentration of factories and banks; that when the building was dedicated in May 1927 it was an instant landmark, easily seen by thousands of people in passing cars and on the various elevated public transit routes that converge in Queens Plaza; that the Bank acquired the site through a merger with the Bank of Long Island in 1920; that with nearly 40 branches in Queens by the end of the 1920s, this office tower served as a prominent reminder of the bank's far-reaching commitment to the citizens of the borough; that Morrell Smith, the building's architect, was Queens-born and was responsible for numerous buildings in the metropolitan area, including various structures for the Manhattan Company; that at the time of completion, this tan brick and limestone structure was reportedly 85 per cent occupied, with many floors leased to tenants who had not been previously active in Long Island City or Queens; that Morrell's neo-Gothic-style design received first prize from the Queens Chamber of Commerce for the best business building of 1927; and that despite alterations to the base, the elevations are mostly well-preserved, including the small roof-top reliefs that incorporate images of the god Oceanus, a symbol of the bank, as well as the bank's initials.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Bank of the Manhattan Company Building, Long Island City, and designates Borough of Queens Tax Map Block 403, Lot 9 (see endnote 1), as its Landmark Site.

Meenakshi Srinivasan, Chair

Frederick Bland, Wellington Chen, Michael Devonshire, John Gustafsson,
Adi Shamir-Baron, Kim Vauss, Roberta Washington, Commissioners



Bank of the Manhattan Company Building, Long Island City
29-27 Queens Plaza North (aka 29-27 41st Avenue, 29-39 Northern Blvd), Borough of Queens
Photo: Christopher D. Brazee, 2015



Bank of the Manhattan Company Building, Long Island City
West and north facades

Photo: Christopher D. Brazee, 2015



Bank of the Manhattan Company Building, Long Island City
East and north facades

Photo: Christopher D. Brazee, 2015



Bank of the Manhattan Company, Long Island City
Photos by Matthew A. Postal (clock) and Christopher D. Brazee (base), 2015

