

WILLIAMSBURGH SAVINGS BANK, 1 Hanson Place, Borough of Brooklyn.
Built 1927-1929; architects Halsey, McCormick & Helmer.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 2111, Lot 1 in part.

On September 20, 1977, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Williamsburgh Savings Bank and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 5). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. One witness spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. The Williamsburgh Savings Bank has expressed its approval of designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Soaring 512 feet above Hanson Place, the Williamsburgh Savings Bank is the most prominent feature of the Brooklyn skyline. Its striking silhouette and famous four-faced clock are familiar to countless New Yorkers. Begun in October, 1927 and completed on May 1, 1929, the building is the third erected by the Williamsburgh Savings Bank -- one of the oldest financial institutions in Brooklyn.

Incorporated by an Act of the New York State Legislature on April 9, 1851, the bank opened for business two months later in the basement of All Souls' Universalist Church on the corner of Bedford Avenue and South 3rd Street. Three years later it moved from these rented quarters to its own handsome Italianate building across the street. By 1867, the bank's business had outgrown the South 3rd Street building and the trustees began to search for a suitable location for larger facilities. The northwest corner of Driggs Avenue and Broadway in the commercial center of Williamsburgh was the site selected for the new building. An architectural competition was held and the winning design was submitted by George B. Post. Construction on this second building began in 1870 and was completed in 1875. This impressive Classic Revival structure, a designated New York City Landmark, with a striking cast-iron dome is one of Post's earliest works; he later went on to design such notable buildings as the Long Island Historical Society (1878-80), the Cornelius Vanderbilt Mansion (1879-82), and the College of the City of New York (1902-11).

In 1923, again finding it necessary to expand, the trustees of the bank appointed a committee to select a site for a new branch office. In November, 1926, the trustees approved the site for the new bank on the northeast corner of Ashland and Hanson Places behind the Brooklyn Academy of Music and opposite the Long Island Railroad Terminal. Construction of the building, designed by the architectural firm of Halsey, McCormick & Helmer, began less than a year later in October, 1927, and was completed on May 1, 1929. The neo-Romanesque style chosen by the architects for the building, may have been suggested by the impressive Bowery Savings Bank (1921-23) designed by York & Sawyer on East 42nd Street opposite Grand Central Station in Manhattan.

The setback, the most striking feature of the building, enhances its soaring height and gives distinction to its silhouette. The setback, which is so characteristic of early post-World War I skyscrapers in New York, was, at first, the result of zoning regulations rather than aesthetics. At the turn of the 20th century, buildings began to rise dramatically to unprecedented heights in unbroken lines, casting many surrounding streets into perpetual shadow. There were exceptions, notably Ernest Flagg's Singer Building (1908) with a forty-one story tower set back from the street line above the thirteenth story, but this was an isolated example. More typical of the new skyscraper was E.P. Graham's Equitable Building (1915) at 120 Broadway which rose forty-four stories straight up above some of the narrowest streets in the Financial District, provoking unfavorable comment. The controversy surrounding the Equitable Building and what it portended encouraged the passage of zoning legislation that regulated the height and bulk of all new buildings to be built after July, 1916. The legislation dictated a series of setbacks for a building as it rose above a certain height to allow light and air into the surrounding streets.

Although the striking silhouette catches the viewer's eye from a distance, the fine details of the lower two stories give an especially interesting character to the portion of the building that is immediately visible from the sidewalk. The base of the bank is of handsome polished rainbow granite from Minnesota and the first story is of Indiana limestone laid up in random ashlar. This first story expresses visually on the exterior the full height of the interior ground floor main banking room which is sixty-three feet high. Three tall, carefully detailed arched windows rise about forty feet from the rainbow granite base at the center of the main facade along Ashland Place. The lower portion of each window has a limestone screen pierced by three small round arched windows; the upper portion has the ornate mullioned window of the banking room. These windows are made doubly imposing by the contrasting smooth broad wall surfaces which surround them. Smaller, narrower arched windows flank the three central windows. The richly carved arch of the main entrance on Hanson Place is similar to those of the windows on Ashland Place and has three round arched doorways with polished granite columns beneath the window. Above the impressive first story is a floor of closely-spaced arched windows resting on small polished granite columns and a continuous sill of ornamental corbels. This floor forms the transition to the buff-colored brick and terra-cotta office portion of the building, which rises in a series of setbacks to the crowning gilded copper dome which was intended to recall the dome of the earlier bank building on Broadway designed by George B. Post. The setbacks are accented by contrasting limestone trim with the thirteenth and the twenty-sixth floors set off by the use of round arches and a continuous decorative terra-cotta band. Beneath the dome is the famous illuminated four-faced dial clock that is one of the largest in the world.

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 Williamsburgh Savings Bank 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 Williamsburgh Savings Bank is one of Brooklyn's prominent banking institutions, that the design of the building is an imaginative adaption of the 1916 Zoning Law, that the lower floors are enhanced with rich decorative detail, that it is the tallest building on Long Island, that the building has one of the world's largest four-faced dial clocks, and that the building is a striking symbol of one of Brooklyn's oldest financial institutions.

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 Williamsburgh Savings Bank, 1 Hanson Place, Borough of Brooklyn and designates as its related Landmark Site that part of Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 2111, Lot 1 on which the described building is situated.