

Landmarks Preservation Commission
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LP-0770

FLATBUSH TOWN HALL, 35 Snyder Avenue, Borough of Brooklyn. Completed 1875; architect John Y. Culyer.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 5103, Lot 93.

On July 24, 1973, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Flatbush Town Hall and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 1). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Sixteen witnesses spoke in favor of designation, and two persons were recorded against designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

This handsome Victorian Gothic structure was erected in 1875 from plans by John Y. Culyer, one of the engineers of Prospect Park. Built as a town hall, it is one of the best of its type in New York City and appropriately expresses the pride of Flatbush.

The region of Flatbush was settled by the Dutch as early as 1636 on land acquired from the Canarsie Indians. By 1658 Flatbush was the Seat of Justice for Kings County and served as a market town. The boundaries of the town were officially fixed by the Colonial Assembly in 1683, and the Assembly established the Court of Sessions in Flatbush in 1685. Flatbush remained as the Seat of Justice for the County until 1832 when the Courthouse was destroyed by fire.

Flatbush retained its rural character until the second quarter of the 19th century when streets were laid out and regulated, and Flatbush Avenue was established as the main artery from Brooklyn to Flatlands. In November 1873 the citizens of Flatbush and the other towns of Kings County defeated the annexation proposal which would have made them a part of the City of Brooklyn. Meanwhile, as further affirmation of Flatbush independence, the local papers began agitating for a town hall which was needed to hold village court sessions, town elections and other public meetings.

In 1874 the Flatbush Board of Improvement authorized the purchase of a site and the erection of a town hall. The Building Committee engaged Culyer to draft the plans. Culyer, who was associated with Frederick Olmsted and Calvert Vaux in the creation of Prospect Park, designed a Victorian Gothic building somewhat reminiscent of Vaux's Jefferson Market Courthouse in Greenwich Village though more modest in its scale and detail. A plot of land on Grant Street (now 35 Snyder Avenue) was purchased, and a construction contract was let to William Vause. The building was completed late in 1875 and officially transferred by the Board of Improvement to the town authorities at a large public meeting on February 7, 1876.

The Town Hall served multiple purposes for the Flatbush residents. It was a police headquarters and a seat of the local court. The grand ballroom on the second floor was the site of notable social and cultural functions, such as the celebration of the Erasmus Hall Academy centennial in 1887.

When Flatbush was annexed by Brooklyn in 1894, the Town Hall became the Police Precinct Headquarters and also the site of the 7th District Magistrates Court. The police moved to new headquarters in 1924 leaving only the Homicide Court in the Town Hall. However, the Police Department returned to the Town Hall in 1926, and a rear addition was built in 1929-30 to house the Homicide Court. The 67th Police Precinct utilized the building until the fall of 1972 when it moved to new quarters.

When viewed from Snyder Avenue, the Town Hall's imposing corner tower with its pointed-arch windows catches one's eye. The red brick exterior with its buff stone trim is enhanced by a series of pointed window arches accented by carved drip moldings ornamented with bosses. All of the arches are of stone, the arch on the first floor of the tower is supported by triple colonnettes. The tower also contains two plaques, that on the west side bears the inscription

"Flatbush Town Hall"; the south side states "Erected A.D. 1875". The front of the building is crowned by a large central gable which emphasizes the triple-arched entranceway at the first floor level. The side facades, with pointed-arch windows on both floors, are also punctuated by gables. The main structure is crowned by a steeply pitched hip roof, while the tower has its own peaked roof above a cornice supported on corbels.

A rusticated granite base extends in front of the building to create an open terrace which, with the staircase leading up to it, have limestone balustrades with pierced circular motifs. Two handsome cast-iron lamp posts rise from the foot of the steps.

The Homicide Court addition, its simple brown brick exterior set with large round-arched neo-Georgian windows, is similar in style to the neighboring Magistrates and Municipal Courts Building of 1922 to the west. An enclosed metal porch has been added to the east side of the original building at the rear.

The Flatbush Town Hall stands on historic ground. The Battle of Long Island, in August 1776, took place nearby. Erasmus Hall Academy, dating from 1786, and the Flatbush Dutch Reformed Church of 1798 both are neighborhood Landmarks. It is hoped that once again the Flatbush Town Hall will become a vital center of community life, offering facilities for public and cultural activities to the residents of the Flatbush community.

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 Flatbush Town Hall 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 the Flatbush Town Hall, erected in 1875 in the Victorian Gothic style, fittingly expresses the pride of Flatbush, that, with the nearby Erasmus Hall Academy and the Flatbush Reformed Church, a trio of public buildings, it represents the educational, religious, and civic institutions of the town of Flatbush, that together they provide an important reminder of the history of Flatbush in an architecturally meaningful continuum, that the well-preserved exterior of this building contains such notable features as a striking corner tower and a picturesque silhouette, and that the Town Hall, which has served for almost one hundred years as a focus for community life, can continue to serve as a center for cultural activities in the future.

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 Flatbush Town Hall, 35 Snyder Avenue, Borough of Brooklyn and designates Tax Map Block 5103, Lot 93, Borough of Brooklyn, as its Landmark Site.