

83RD PRECINCT POLICE STATION AND STABLE, 179 Wilson Avenue, Borough of Brooklyn.
Built 1894-95; architect William B. Tubby.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 3246, Lot 5.

On January 11, 1977, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 83rd Precinct Police Station and Stable and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 4). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Two witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The 83rd Precinct Police Station with its connecting stable powerfully dominates its corner site at the intersection of DeKalb and Wilson Avenues, and strikingly symbolizes its important purpose in the community. Wilson Avenue, originally called Hamburg Avenue, was renamed in honor of President Woodrow Wilson in 1919. Erected as the 20th Precinct House in 1894-5, this fine Romanesque Revival station house is situated in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn.

The small town of Bushwick, which derived its name from the Dutch word "Boswijk", meaning "town of the woods", was annexed by the City of Williamsburg in 1840. The Bushwick area remained primarily rural until the 1850s when a great many German immigrants settled there. Shortly afterward, in 1854, Bushwick together with Williamsburg, was officially made part of the rapidly expanding City of Brooklyn.

A few years before this consolidation, the rather primitive system of patrol in Brooklyn had been replaced by the more modern and efficient Brooklyn Police Department, established in 1850. The organization of Brooklyn's police force was based on that of Manhattan which had been formed six years earlier. The Brooklyn Department of Police and Excise was created in 1873 and existed until 1898 when Brooklyn became part of Greater New York. Its police system was then merged with that of Manhattan and the three other boroughs to become one single New York City Police Department. At the time of this merger the police precincts were renumbered and the 20th Precinct Station became the headquarters of the 64th Precinct. It remained the 64th until 1929, when once again the precincts were renumbered and it became the 83rd Precinct Station House.

In September 1895 the new 20th Precinct Police Station was completed and its opening was celebrated with much ceremony. Mayor Charles A. Schieren and Police Commissioner Leonard R. Welles attended, as did all the inspectors and captains who "were present in bright uniforms and made a reception committee of dazzling magnificence". The building and its opening ceremonies were described in a detailed article in the Brooklyn Citizen, which depicted the intense pride of the Police Department in its station houses. The author praised the modernity of the new 20th Precinct Station, noting that now policemen "returning from a tour of duty, filled with dangers and suffering from the biting winds, could obtain all the comforts as if they were at their own fireside".

The formalities of the opening ceremony were not without humour. Police Commissioner Welles, in presenting the key of the new station house to Captain Dunn, teasingly addressed him: "Captain Dunn, take this key. I know you will keep it as clean as your record and I hope you will continue to keep yourself as clean as you will keep the station house." Quite naturally, Captain Dunn "blushed like a school boy".

Hailed by Commissioner Welles as "commodious, architecturally ornate, and thoroughly equipped, ... the handsomest and most convenient police office in the world", the precinct station was designed by the prominent architect, William B. Tubby (1858-1944). Born in Des Moines, Iowa, Tubby moved to Brooklyn as a young boy and studied at the Polytechnic Institute there. After taking over the practice of Ebenezer L. Roberts in 1883, Tubby set up his own firm and designed a number of buildings in Brooklyn as well as in other northeastern cities.

Other Romanesque Revival structures by Tubby include the Charles Millard Pratt House (1893) on Clinton Avenue in Brooklyn and the no longer extant Market and Fulton National Bank (c. 1888) in Manhattan. The broad range of Tubby's use of architectural styles is illustrated by his expansive Dutch Renaissance Wallabout Market (1884) in Brooklyn and his several eclectic designs for branches of the Brooklyn Public Library, such as the neo-Classic DeKalb branch of 1905. Not only did Tubby work in a number of different styles, but he also executed several different building types, including a courthouse in Mineola, New York, hospitals in Greenwich and Norwalk, Connecticut, and a Presbyterian Church in Roslyn, New York, dating from the 1920s.

The precinct station was designed comparatively early in Tubby's long and varied career and it is a fine example of the late Romanesque Revival style. Its bold ornate character was remarked upon in the Brooklyn Citizen as presenting a "strange contrast to the plain modern tenement houses in the neighborhood." The image of a police station as a fortification defending the neighborhood seems to have been quite popular at this period and the use of Romanesque Revival motifs was particularly appropriate in creating the image of a station house as a medieval stronghold. A number of other Romanesque Revival station houses were erected in Brooklyn during the 1890s, including two almost completely identical police houses designed by the architect E.M. Gruwé. Gruwé's former 68th and 75th Precinct Stations are reminiscent of military architecture in their massive scale, dominating corner turrets and crowning parapets.

The most prominent feature of the 83rd Precinct Police Station is its corner tower which effectively dominates the three-story brick building. Originally a clock set in the tower, facing today's Wilson Avenue, gave further distinction to it and could be seen from "a considerable distance". Small, brick arches carried on a series of corbels ornament the flared top of the crenelated tower, which is crowned by a cone-shaped roof.

The polychromatic use of red, yellow and ochre brick greatly enlivens the building, giving it added texture and interest. This pronounced polychromy is accentuated by the combination of standard red brick for the walls with the narrower yellow and ochre Roman brick for the trim and base. Above the limestone cellar, the yellow brick first story is ornamented with alternating bands of ochre brick, creating a subtle and rich contrast of color. The elongated keystones of the first story windows are set between two continuous ochre brick bands. The deep red brick of the two upper stories contrasts vividly with the yellow and ochre brick decorative detailing. The windows, square-headed at the second story and round-arched at the third, are set in vertical, round-arched bays which extend up through two stories. These bays are connected at impost block level by a wide yellow brick band and are trimmed in yellow brick which is keyed with the red brick wall. Ochre brick spandrel panels beneath the windows further enrich this fine section of the facade. The limestone trim of the crenelated parapet continues the polychromatic theme.

The limestone entrance portico is composed of four monumental columns supporting a console-bracketed entablature. The cushioned Romanesque capitals are ornamented with a foliate design which recurs above in the rinceau pattern of the frieze. Centered in the frieze is the seal of the City of Brooklyn with the Dutch motto "Eendraght Maakt Magt," meaning "Unity Makes Might." A handsome pair of bracketed cast-iron lanterns flank the double entrance doors.

The small stable, connected to the station house by the one-story cell block wing, was a common feature of police stations at the end of the 19th century. The stable of the 83rd Precinct Station is entered through a broad segmental-arched doorway, above which are three narrow windows framed in limestone. Its gabled roof is topped by a limestone finial. At the rear of the stable, reached from the DeKalb Avenue side of the police station, a small courtyard was originally used for airing the police horses. It is now used as a service area and for parking. A segmental-arched window which once opened onto a hayloft is set in the gable of the rear of the stable.

The handsome and commanding 83rd Precinct Police Station is a particularly striking example of late 19th-century municipal architecture. Its imposing Romanesque Revival style is especially expressive of the building's role in the community and effectively contrasts with the less ornate buildings of the surrounding neighborhood.

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 83rd Precinct Police Station and Stable 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 83rd Precinct Police Station is a particularly fine and impressive example of late Romanesque Revival municipal architecture with polychromatic brick facades and striking corner tower, designed by the prominent architect William B. Tubby, that the station house forcefully symbolizes its important role in the community, that it continues to serve the needs of the Police Department in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn, and that its small connecting stable forms a handsome part of the overall station house complex.

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 83rd Precinct Police Station and Stable, 179 Wilson Avenue, Borough of Brooklyn and designates Tax Map Block 3246, Lot 5, Borough of Brooklyn, as its Landmark Site.