

COLLEGE OF MOUNT ST. VINCENT ADMINISTRATION BUILDING, West 261st Street, Riverdale, The Bronx. Built 1857-1859, architect Henry Engelbert; 1865; 1883; 1906-1908, architect E. Wenz.

Landmark Site: Borough of The Bronx Tax Map Block 5958, Lot 1 in part consisting of the land on which the described building is situated.

On September 12, 1978, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the College of Mount St. Vincent Administration Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 14). The hearing was continued to November 14, 1978 (Item No. 7). Both hearings 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 striking administration building complex of the College of Mount Saint Vincent is dramatically situated on a high hill commanding a sweeping view of the Hudson River and the unspoiled Palisades. Surrounded by a rolling seventy-five acre campus in the Riverdale section of the Bronx, the buildings present a picturesque profile in keeping with their romantic setting. The site was acquired from Edwin Forrest, one of this country's leading 19th-century actors, by the Sisters of Charity for their New York motherhouse and academy on December 20, 1856. Construction of the first building, designed by Henry Engelbert in the Early Romanesque Revival style, began the following May and took two years to complete.<sup>1</sup>

The Order of the Sisters of Charity, the first Roman Catholic religious community founded in this country, was begun by Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton (1774-1821) in 1809. The earliest charitable institutions established by the Church in the city were placed under the direction of the Order: the Roman Catholic Orphan Asylum, incorporated 1817; Saint Vincent's Hospital, opened in 1849; the New York Foundling Asylum, incorporated 1869; and the first parochial schools and academies. During their long history in this country, the Sisters of Charity have instituted over two hundred educational and charitable endeavors in response to pressing social and civic needs.

For their first thirty years in New York, the Sisters served as missionaries sent from their motherhouse in Emmitsburg, Maryland. In 1847, a separate and independent motherhouse and academy were established in a former tavern at McGowan's Pass near 106th Street in what is now Central Park. A small complex of buildings, which grew around the McGowan's Pass house, was named Mount Saint Vincent, but in 1856 the land was acquired by the City of New York for park purposes,<sup>2</sup> and the Sisters of Charity acquired the Forrest estate in Riverdale. The buildings served a number of uses after they were taken over by the city. Frederick Law Olmsted and his wife lived there while Central Park was being constructed, and during the Civil War they were used as a hospital staffed by the Sisters of Charity for wounded Union soldiers. The McGowan house became a tavern again in 1866 and

the chapel became a sculpture gallery. The complex burned in 1881, but some of the stained glass from the chapel has been incorporated into the present chapel at Riverdale.<sup>3</sup>

The first building of the College on the Forrest estate was designed by Henry Engelbert, an architect active in New York City from 1852 to 1879. He first appears in the New York City Directories in 1852/53, listed as an architect working with another architect, John Edson, at 85 Nassau Street. Their association was brief, lasting only five years. The earliest known work designed by these men was the brownstone First Baptist Church built in 1856 on the southeast corner of Fifth Avenue and East 35th Street in the Early Romanesque Revival style. The building attracted attention and favorable comment at the time of its completion. The most notable feature of the church was the interior lighting. With the exception of the three windows between the towers of the Fifth Avenue facade, the side and rear walls were not pierced by windows. The interior was lit by three skylights in the roof of the nave. Each skylight, 12 feet in diameter and glazed with ornamental glass, was in the center of a dome 30 feet in diameter. This interior arrangement bears a striking resemblance to the interior of the sculpture galleries in the Munich Glyptothek, completed in 1830, by Leo von Klenze.<sup>4</sup> It was written of the First Baptist Church that, "...the interior has not been excelled...in any Protestant church on this continent; and it is pronounced the first [i.e. foremost] Baptist church in the world."<sup>5</sup>

Another prominent church attributed to the firm is St. Mary's Abbey Church (1856) in Newark, also designed in the Early Romanesque Revival style but for Benedictine monks. This church complex was said to be modelled on the Bonifaciusbasilica in Munich, begun in 1835 by Georg Friedrich Ziebland for a Benedictine Abbey. The fact that these two early works in which Engelbert was involved are strongly reminiscent of buildings in Munich, indicates that the firm was quite familiar with work executed in Southern Germany after 1830. It may also indicate Engelbert's origins about which nothing is known. It may have been the success of these two works that led the Sisters of Charity to select Engelbert as the architect for their new motherhouse. Whatever the reason for their choice, the association between the Order, the Catholic Church and Engelbert was a productive one.

Among his better known religious structures are Holy Cross Church (1868) and Academy (1869) on West 42nd and 43rd Streets; Saint Gabriel's Church (1864) and Rectory (1868), now the site of the entrance to the Queens-Midtown Tunnel; Saint Alphonsus school (1876) on Thompson Street; an extension to Saint Catherine's Convent (1867) on East 81st Street, now demolished; the House of the Good Shepherd (1868) which was located on East 89th and 90th Streets at the East River; and, one of his most prestigious ecclesiastical commissions, the reconstruction of Old Saint Patrick's Cathedral after it was gutted by fire in 1866.

Most of Engelbert's work, however, was not religious or institutional in character. He designed a variety of building types including stables, loft buildings, tenements, rowhouses and hotels. One of his more interesting domestic projects was a pair of early Second Empire style apartments houses

and a private residence, still standing on the northeast corner of Charles and Bleecker Streets in Greenwich Village. The plans, drawn up in 1868, show a certain degree of innovation in their use of space. With little open land remaining on the double-sized corner lot after the erection of the three buildings, Engelbert designed the attic fifth story under the mansards of the two flathouses "to be used by the tenants in common for yard purposes."<sup>6</sup> One of his most sophisticated designs still graces the southeast corner of Broadway and West 31st Street. It is the handsome Second Empire styled Grand Hotel built of marble in 1868. The extant examples of his work indicate that he was a talented architect of the period with the ability to create fine designs in a number of styles. In 1879, Engelbert closed his New York office, and nothing is known of his life or career after that date.

During the 1830s, when Greek Revival architecture with its trabeated construction was most popular in the United States, another style of architecture characterized by the arch—a round-arch style (Rundbogenstil) based on Romanesque and Renaissance prototypes—was being built in Germany by the architects Gärtner, Schinkel and Ziebland. It was not until the mid-1840s that this mediievally-inspired round-arch style was introduced into New York City by Richard Upjohn, James Renwick and Leopold Eidlitz--all of whom are better known for their non-Romanesque Revival work. Typical features of the style are the use of brick and brownstone, either singly or in combination, round-arched openings, often compound, pilaster strips, and arched corbel tables. The pilaster strips are slightly raised, attenuated piers without bases or capitals that, in Romanesque Revival architecture, often meet an arched corbel table—a raised band of arches carried on corbels. The effect is often austere but powerful. The earliest example in New York and one of the first in the country is Upjohn's Church of the Pilgrims built in 1844-46 on the northeast corner of Henry and Remsen Streets in Brooklyn Heights. Renwick followed in 1846 with the drawings for the Smithsonian Institution in Washington and with the Church of the Puritans, the design of which was influenced by Upjohn, on the southwest corner of East 15th Street facing Union Square. That same year, Eidlitz started work on Saint George's Episcopal Church in Stuyvesant Square for one of the most prominent parishes in the city.

Throughout the next three decades, the round-arched, Early Romanesque Revival was one of the most popular styles of architecture due partly to the inherent qualities attributed to it. Some of these qualities and characteristics propounded by contemporary architects to promote the style included rapidity of construction, economy in material and workmanship, durability, ample fenestration, and the ease of adding extensions without gross violation of the original fabric.<sup>7</sup> The popularity of German culture and the massive immigration to this country of Germans after the Rebellion of 1848 undoubtedly contributed to the widespread popularity of the style. It was used, not only for churches, but for schools, hospitals, charitable institutions, loft buildings, office buildings, breweries and industrial buildings. Most of these buildings in the style have been demolished and of those remaining, the College of Mount Saint Vincent is one of the finest examples.

The first building of the present administration building complex was built between 1857 and 1859. Extensions were added in 1865, 1883, 1906-08 and 1951, to form an imposing asymmetrical group with the main facade facing west overlooking the Hudson. The three 19th-century sections are stylistically similar; the 1906-08 section is more neo-Classical but was designed to harmonize with the earlier three buildings; the 1951 structure (which is being excluded from the designation) has neo-Federal elements.

The original structure built to house the Mt. St. Vincent Academy and mother house is the most impressive portion of the complex. Standing on a rough fieldstone base, the red brick building rises four stories and has an attic fifth story pierced by domers and a central six-story tower crowned by a copper lantern and spire. The major focus of the facade is the square tower, screened at its base by a two-story high wooden porte cochere and porch flanked by gabled sections. The main entrance, which is round arched with large brownstone voussoirs, is entered from the porch at the second floor of the tower. Access to the porch is provided by facing flights of stairs that lead up from the ground floor porte cochere. The simple square wooden piers of the porte cochere carry the balustraded porch which is enclosed by columns with foliate Romanesque capitals from which spring molded round and segmental arches. A dentiled and modillioned cornice surmounted by a balustrade crowns the porch.

The tower is strongly articulated. At each floor level, with the exception of the first and second which are screened by the porch and not meant to be seen, a brick band--different at each level--marks the change of story. The face of each story, except the sixth, is pierced by two narrow rabbeted windows with variations to enhance the verticality of the tower. At the third and fourth stories, the windows are separated by pilaster strips and marked by arched corbel tables. Above each window at the fifth floor is a bull's-eye, and both openings are set within a tall arched recess. The raised corner piers and corbels of the sixth floor frame three round-arched windows flanked by full and half pilasters with capitals. Above the corbeled cornice crowning the tower is the octagonal lantern and spire.

The slightly projecting gabled sections to either side of the tower are four stories high with an attic fifth story in the gable. At each corner is a four-story high pilaster while five-story high pilasters, rising to the peak of the gable, flank the central windows inspired by the Venetian Renaissance. Between the central and corner pilasters are paired windows with shared stone sills at each story. There is a wide stone band above the ground floor and a brick and stone band course separating the gable from the lower floors. The brick and stone band course extends the strong horizontal cornice line of the adjoining wings, tying the two together and softening the vertical thrust of the pilaster strips. Within each gable is a central niche with statue beneath a rose window and flanked oculi. A heavy arched corbel table carries the raking corbeled cornice, the ends of which rest on brick blocks incised with crosses above the corner pilasters. Originally, balconies protected the central windows of the second floor.



The central tower and flanking gabled sections indicate the interior functions of the rooms behind them. The tower with its porch marks the important public areas --the vestibule and center hall on the second, or main, floor for visitors and the ground floor hall for deliveries and access to the service areas. It also marks the entrance to the chapel that opens onto the center hall and extends back axially from the main entrance. The chapel was extended about 1872. On the second floor of the gabled sections are formal reception rooms. The central bay, emphasized by the pilaster strips and originally a balcony, indicates a hall that extends through the building lighting an interior corridor and providing cross ventilation.

The simple wings that extend from the gabled sections terminate in gables flanked by short towers. Very deep, two-story high verandas, similar to the porte cochere and porch screening the base of the central tower, are set at the base of the wings. These verandas, one of the most arresting features of the building; create a volumetric space defined by the segmental arches and columns. They function as a dramatic horizontal element extending along the base of the building to balance the vertical thrust of the tower and pilaster strips. They also form a three-dimensional space which acts as a foil for the basically linear facades above them. Their addition to the building, aside from their purely functional purpose, is the mark of a talented architect. The veranda along the southern wing is L - shaped, continuing across its gabled southern facade. This facade is pierced by three windows at each story--a central Venetian window flanked by two narrow ones. A continuous double brick and stone band course at the sill level of the fourth floor, interrupted only by the end towers and corner pilaster strips, continues on each facade of the wings and breaks the plain flush wall surface. A rose window enhances the gable which is surmounted by a raking corbeled cornice carried on an arched corbel table. The simple towers are pierced by round-arched slit windows, and small bull's-eyes, and they are topped by louvered belfries with corner pilasters and pyramidal roofs crowned by finials. The matching facade, the northern wing, can no longer be seen due to the 1883 addition.

Set back from the building but joined to it at the southeastern tower at each floor by a two-bay wide connecting section is the 1865 extension which may also have been designed by Engelbert.<sup>8</sup> The style of this part of the complex is Early Romanesque Revival but simpler than the first building and containing elements that reflect the then current architectural tastes. Its plain, smooth brick walls are pierced by doubly recessed round-arched openings at all levels. The main or second floor is marked by double height windows and the central entrance which is flanked by slender columns with stylized Romanesque capitals that carry a brownstone Florentine arch. Stone bands, wide above the ground floor and narrow at the sill levels of the third and fourth floors, create the major horizontal element of the facade. Above the bracketed wooden cornice is a mansard roof with pedimented dormers. On the main facade, the wall surface continues up above cornice level creating a foreshortened gable with arched corbel table and raking cornice. The gable is pierced by a rose window and has the date "1865" in raised brick. The southern side of the building is ten windows wide. The stone banding of the main facade is continued onto this side but only for the length of the first two bays and again at the last two bays which

project slightly. The northern facade also has a veranda that overlooks a quiet rear courtyard.

The next section to be added to the complex was built in 1883 abutting the northern facade of the motherhouse and academy. It is four stories high with an attic fifth floor and stands on a rough fieldstone base. The central entrance is enframed by deep brownstone pilasters supporting a pediment. A broad brownstone band separates the segmental-arch windows of the first floor from the round-arched windows of the upper floors. Each round window arch is embellished with raised brick extrados. Monumental pilaster strips, similar to the corner pilasters of the 1857-59 building, mark the corners and flank the three central window bays. The central paired windows rising above the entrance are stylized Venetian windows recalling those of the first building. The gable over the central, three-bay section is pierced by three slit windows. The metal raking cornice is carried on an arched corbel table. The roof is pierced by pedimented dormers and crowned by three diminutive turret-like ventilators along the ridge pole. The architect of this building is unknown, but the care he used in his design so that it would harmonize with the earlier building it joins indicates his recognition of and sensitivity to the quality of Engelbert's work.

In 1906-08, an handsome addition to the complex was designed and built by E. Wenz. Although the it is an example of the neo-Classical style popular at the time, by using some of the same materials and architectural elements found in the earlier sections, the architect has skillfully designed an addition that becomes part of the original group. This section, like the others is four stories high with an attic fifth floor pierced by domers. Corner pilaster strips, round-arched windows with raised extrados, a raking bracketed cornice, stone band courses and continuous sills strongly echo the design of the first three buildings and ease the integration of this addition into the group.

The additions to the original motherhouse and academy building reflected the growth of the institution and changing needs through the years. In 1910 the academy of Mt. St. Vincent became the College of Mt. St. Vincent. The original academy building now serves as the administration building of the college, and the additions house related administrative and academic functions. The complex remains one of the finest example of Early Romanesque Revival architecture in the city.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Donald M. Reynolds, Jane Nobes Brennan, and Sister Mary David Barry, Fonthill Castle: Paradigm of Hudson-River Gothic (New York, 1976), p. 23.
2. Mother Seton's Daughters of New York: Historical Sketch (New York: Sisters of Charity, Mount Saint Vincent on Hudson, [1959]), pp. 8-9.
3. Henry Hope Reed and Sophia Duckworth, Central Park, a History and a Guide (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1967), pp. 129-131.
4. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1971), pp. 50-51.

5. Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, May 24, 1856, p. 373.
6. New York City, Manhattan Buildings Department; Docket Books N.B. 167-1868.
7. Carroll L.V. Meeks, "Romanesque Before Richardson in the United States", The Art Bulletin, 25 (March 1953), 20, 22.
8. Although no definite proof has been found that Engelbert was the architect, stylistic evidence and historical information on Engelbert's work for the Catholic Church indicate the possibility of his authorship.

Our thanks to Max Kahn for the research efforts which helped make this report possible.

#### 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 College of Mount St. Vincent Administration 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 Administration Building of the College of Mount Saint Vincent is one of the few surviving buildings designed in the Early Romanesque Revival style; that it is one of the finest examples of that style; that the building was designed by Henry Engelbert and erected in 1857-59; that extensions were added in 1865, 1883 and 1906-08; that these extensions harmonize well with and complement the first building; that these additions are stylistically similar creating a unified assemblage; and that the buildings house an educational institution deeply rooted in the development of the City.

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 College of Mount St. Vincent Administration Building Borough of The Bronx and designates Tax Map Block 5958, Lot 1, in part consisting of the land on which the described building is situated, Borough of The Bronx, as its Landmark Site.

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College of Mount Saint Vincent  
Administration Building  
West 261st Street, Riverdale  
Henry Engelbert Date: 1857-1859