

Landmarks Preservation Commission
July 28, 1981, Designation List 145
LP-1080

HIGH PUMPING STATION, Jerome Avenue, Borough of The Bronx. Built 1901-06;
Architect George W. Birdsall.

Landmark Site: Borough of The Bronx, Tax Map Block 3251, Lot 401 in part.

On July 12, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the High Pumping Station and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No.9). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. No witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. There was a letter in favor of the designation from The Bronx County Historical Society.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The High Pumping Station in the northwest section of The Bronx was built in the years 1901-06 by George W. Birdsall of The Department of Water Supply, Gas and Electricity. Constructed as part of the Jerome Reservoir complex, an adjunct to the Croton Aqueduct system, the station was built to pump water from the reservoir located to its west to consumers throughout the borough. The area that gave rise to this reservoir gained its name from the Jerome Park Racetrack (named for one of its founders, Leonard W. Jerome, Winston Churchill's grandfather) which occupied the site between 1876 and 1890. Dating back to the time of the American Revolution this land was the property of Colonel Frederick Philipse, a Tory whose estate was later confiscated by the Continental Congress.¹

The decision to build a new receiving reservoir at Jerome Park was reached by the Aqueduct Commissioners as early as 1884, however the plans for the new reservoir were not ready until 1894 with the contract for construction being signed only in August 1895.² At the turn of the century the demand for clean water by a growing urban population was supplemented by the need to have necessary pressure in order that the water be able to reach the upper floors of multi-storied structures. It is precisely this service performed by the High Pumping Station that made it such an important utility for The Bronx. This is clearly recognized by the author of the Annual Report of The Department of Water Supply, Gas and Electricity, 1903 who characterizes the High Pumping Station as being a valuable tool from which "...a much needed supply can be delivered to a territory where the pressure is at present totally insufficient."³

Contracts for the foundations, engines, boilers, tank, standpipe, and coal house for the station were given out in the summer and fall of 1901. Work was delayed, however, because a sewer needed to drain the site of the reservoir had not yet been completed by the Aqueduct Commission; only the laying of the

foundations was begun in 1901.⁴ Other delays were experienced in the course of the station's building and by 1905 the station was still being furnished with equipment.⁵ By 1906, with the western basin of the reservoir completed, the High Pumping Station was used for the first time.⁶ The eastern basin was never finished. Instead, in 1911 the legislature authorized the building of the Kingsbridge Armory, a designated New York City landmark, on part of this ground.⁷

Not only is the High Pumping Station important for the service it was built to perform, but also for how its structure came to be expressed. The pumping station is built in the Romanesque Revival idiom, a style that was widely used at the turn of the century for all different types of buildings. The fact that it is employed here for strictly a utilitarian purpose reflects the adaptability of the style as well as the importance attached to this utilitarian building.

Situated along the west side of Jerome Avenue just south of Mosholu Parkway, the High Pumping Station is a long and narrow red brick building topped by a steeply pitched roof. The facade is divided into a series of bays, each consisting of two arched windows (or doorway, if an entrance) flanked by shallow brick buttresses. This arrangement of the facade relieves, in part, the dominant horizontality of the station's layout and provides the facade with a sense of rhythm. Capping each window is a semi-circular corbelled brick lintel that gives added texture and variety to the wall surface.

Both the north and south ends, i.e. the shorter facades, of the pumping station, continue the double-arched rhythm formed on the longer east and west facades. In the gables of these two sides appear three rondels with corbelled enframements that echo the semi-circular corbelled lintels below; the circular and semi-circular shapes complement one another in a subtle and effective way. Above these rondels are raking eaves that again are articulated by brick corbelling. The north end serves as one of the entrances to the building. There is a garage door at ground level that is flanked by stairs running up the facade on either side to an entrance on the upper level.

It is questionable just how much of the designing may have been done by George W. Birdsall. His name generally appears as an engineer for the Department of Water Supply, Gas and Electricity and he eventually became Chief Engineer of the Croton Aqueduct, which meant that he would have had authority over the High Pumping Station. The station is, nonetheless, important for supplying a valuable service to the borough as well as expressing in its design an early twentieth-century industrial use of the Romanesque Revival style. Austerity of form coupled with a sensitive handling of detail is one of the hallmarks of this style and is beautifully expressed in the High Pumping Station. No doubt it was these same qualities that were admired at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904 which exhibited photographs of the then rising pumping station.⁸

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FOOTNOTES

1. New York City Guide, (New York: Octagon, 1970), pp.324-26.
2. Edward Wegmann, The Water Supply of the City of New York, 1658-1895, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1896), p.209.
3. Annual Report of the Department of Water Supply, Gas and Electricity, 1903, p.8.
4. Ibid., 1901, pp.5-6.
5. Ibid., 1905, p.104.
6. City of New York, Department of Water Supply, Gas and Electricity, The Water Supply System, 1916, p.21.
7. The Catskill Aqueduct and Earlier Water Supplies of the City of New York, 1917, Vol.II, p.76.
8. F.S. Cook & George A. Taber, Exhibits at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, (New York: The Water Supply of the City of New York, 1904(?)), p.11.

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 High Pumping Station 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 High Pumping Station is an important link in New York City's water supply system; that it represents the technology that allowed water to be pumped to areas that had previously had insufficient service; that it is a superbly designed Romanesque Revival style structure; and that it is a major example of the nineteenth-century belief that even the most utilitarian structures were worthy of careful and sophisticated design.

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 High Pumping Station, Borough of The Bronx, and designates Tax Map Block 3251, Lot 401, Borough of The Bronx, as its Landmark Site.

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High Pumping Station
Jerome Ave.
The Bronx

Architect: George W. Birdsall
Built: 1901-1906