

Landmarks Preservation Commission
March 23, 1982, Designation List 153
LP-1131

LONG ISLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY BUILDING, first floor interior consisting of the entrance vestibule, the foyer, the hall, and the staircase extending from the first floor to the second floor; second floor interior consisting of the stair hall, the main reading room of the library and its balconies, and the members' room; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, doors, windows, columns, attached bookcases, attached lighting fixtures, fireplace, stair railings, and balcony railings; 128 Pierrepont Street, Borough of Brooklyn. Built 1878-81; architect George B. Post.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 243, Lot 47.

On March 11, 1980, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as an Interior Landmark of the Long Island Historical Society Building, first floor interior consisting of the entrance vestibule, the foyer, the hall, and the staircase extending from the first floor to the second floor; second floor interior consisting of the stair hall, the main reading room of the library and its balconies, and the members' room; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, doors, windows, columns, attached bookcases, attached lighting fixtures, fireplace, stair railings and balcony railings; and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 13). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three witnesses, including the representative of the Long Island Historical Society, spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Long Island Historical Society Building, built in 1878-81 and designed by George B. Post, is a prominent and especially noteworthy feature of the Brooklyn Heights Historic District. The home of one of New York's major historical societies, the building symbolizes the importance of that cultural institution in the nineteenth century. The interior, carefully designed by Post to accommodate the various functions of the society, is particularly distinguished by its library which stands today as the hallmark of this fine building. In addition, the interior as a whole is characterized by a careful handling of space and by handsome architectural detail in the Queen Anne stylistic tradition.

The first half of the nineteenth century saw the steady rise of the historical society as a cultural institution in the United States. By the time of the Civil War a historical society could be found in every state east of Texas, with the exception of Delaware. Groups such as the New-York Historical Society, founded in 1804, were formed with the intent "to collect, preserve, and make available the materials for the history of the United States or a section of it."¹ Interest in Americana was fueled in the third quarter of the century by the approaching Centennial. At this time, in 1863, several prominent men in Brooklyn Heights recognized that "the people of Brooklyn and Long Island needed a library in which they could deposit the records of their own history"² and formed the Long Island Historical Society.

After being organized in 1863 the Long Island Historical Society rented space for its meetings and various collections in the Hamilton Building at Court and Joralemon Streets in Brooklyn. It soon became apparent that this rented space was not adequate and so in 1867 property at the corner of Clinton and Pierrepont Street was purchased for the site of a permanent building. The choice of fashionable Brooklyn Heights as the location of the Society's headquarters reflects the prestige this neighborhood held as a cultural and social center; a "growing concern of Brooklyn's elite with preserving and celebrating its own history"³ was the major catalyst in this developemnt. By 1870 the Building Committee of the Society hired the architect, Leopold Eidlitz, who had designed the nearby Brooklyn Academy of Music,⁴ to prepare drawings for a new building. The Society fell in debt, however, due to the large sums of money necessary for the outlay on mortgages and for tax assessments on the site. The economic panic of 1873 further aggravated the situation. Affairs worsened when a fire broke out in the Hamilton Building in January 1874, damaging the library and other property. At this point the Long Island Historical Society chose not to overextend itself any further and brought a temporary halt to its building program;⁵ it was believed that to proceed would result in ultimate disappointment for the people of Brooklyn and Long Island.⁶

In 1876 as the general economic climate began to improve, interest was generated once again in a new building campaign for the Long Island Historical Society. Active discussion of the building's plan began in 1877. It was

determined that, in addition to a library, an auditorium and a museum were to be essential features in the design, to accommodate the various activities and requirements of the Society. Other practical considerations such as ventilation and fireproofing were discussed and remained important factors throughout the planning and construction of the building.

A competition for the architectural commission was announced in December 1877, and the requirements and specifications for the building were printed and distributed to the competitors. Several architects hopeful of receiving the commission published their plans before the Building Committee officially announced the competition. This overzealousness on the part of some to have their designs recognized is indicative of the importance and prestige attached to the commission. Plans were submitted by fourteen architects: Julius W. Adams, Solon Spencer Beman, Josiah Cleveland Cady, Alexander Jackson Davis, Henry Hudson Holly, Hugh Lamb, Emlen Trenchard Littell, George L. Morse, the Parfitt Brothers (Henry D., Albert E., and Walter), George B. Post, William E. Putman, Henry J. Schwartzman, Alfred H. Thorp, and Richard Mitchell Upjohn. In February of 1878 the Building Committee narrowly chose George B. Post over Josiah Cleveland Cady on the second ballot. It was not until September 26, 1878, and after three sets of plans and elevations had been submitted by Post that a final design was approved by the Building Committee.

George Browne Post (1837-1913), born in New York City, graduated from New York University in 1858 with a B.S. in civil engineering, then received his architectural training in the office of Richard Morris Hunt. In 1860, he formed a partnership, interrupted by the Civil War, with Charles D. Gambrill. By 1868 Post was practicing alone. His first major commission was the structural redesign of the Equitable Life Assurance Company Building (1868-70), 120 Broadway, in conjunction with the firm of Gilman & Kendall. An elevator building, it was constructed with brick partitions and floor arches and wrought-iron beams--features of the newly emerging technology of the construction of large commercial buildings. In the early 1870s Post began to gain a reputation as a designer of commercial buildings with the same kind of technological innovations as those used in the Equitable Building. In 1870 he was given a major Brooklyn commission, the Williamsburgh Savings Bank, completed in 1875. Designed in a neo-classical style, the bank was distinguished by an imposing high cast-iron dome. Other major commercial buildings designed by Post were the Western Union Building (1873-75), Chickering Hall (1874-75), the Mills Building (1881-83), the New York Produce Exchange (1881-85), the New York Cotton Exchange (1883-86), the New York Times Building on Park Row (1888-89), the Union Trust Company Building (1889-90), the Pulitzer Building (1889-92), the Havemeyer Building (1891-92), the Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building at the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition (1893), the St. Paul Building (1897-99), and the New York Stock Exchange (1901-04). Major public and institutional projects, in addition to the Long Island Historical Society, included the New York Hospital (1877), the campus of the City College of New York (1897-1908), and the Wisconsin State Capitol (1906-17), the latter two commissions won in competition.

The design of the Long Island Historical Society Building was considered to be "thoroughly modern, even innovative."⁹ It is a three-story building with an asymmetrically-placed entrance tower and a hipped roof punctuated by dormers. This treatment of the roof and tower displays Post's free adaptation of the Queen Anne style popular during the period. The first and second stories are marked by arcades formed of brick piers supporting arches with portrait heads in the spandrels. This architectural arrangement was inspired by Italian Renaissance sources, in particular, the work of Alberti. The arcades signal the presence of the first floor auditorium (no longer extant) and the second floor double-height library reading room. Faced with hard-fired red brick, the building is especially distinguished by its use of architectural terra-cotta, a material which Post had introduced to New York City architecture in 1877.¹⁰ The portrait heads in the arcades are by Olin Levi Warner, while other terra-cotta ornament was the work of Truman Hiram Bartlett.

Because of his achievements in commercial architecture, Post was especially equipped to successfully meet the exacting specifications of the commission, including fireproofing, ventilation, and the placement of the major interior spaces. In particular, Post's experience with iron framing enabled him to design the auditorium and the library in a manner that would serve the needs of the society.¹¹

The foundation stone of the Long Island Historical Society Building was laid on November 18, 1878. As the building progressed the Building Committee decided to postpone the completion of the auditorium and museum until more money could be raised. But a compromise was suggested that would have allowed the gallery of the library to serve as space for the museum. However, A.A. Low initiated a fund-raising campaign to spare the library this dual purpose and to enable Post to complete all of the interior spaces at the same time. The necessary money was obtained, and the building was completed and was officially dedicated and opened in January 1881.

Since its opening, the interior of the Long Island Historical Society has undergone some alterations. Unfortunately, the auditorium is no longer extant; tenants have used the space for other purposes since 1917.¹² In 1926 the first floor was remodelled, the museum on the third floor was converted into storage space, and an elevator was installed, replacing most of the skylight. The library remains intact and is today, as it was then, the most striking part of the interior.

The building is entered from Pierrepont Street into a vestibule which gives access to a foyer located directly behind it along a north-south axis. Both of these entrance spaces feature colored geometrically-patterned tiles on the floor, and wooden wainscots set below white plaster articulating the walls. The first floor hall is situated on axis beyond a doorway leading from this entranceway.¹³ The type of low wooden wainscot set below plaster walls found in the vestibule and foyer continues in the first floor hall. Positioned along the west wall is a grand staircase that extends from the first floor to the second; it is divided into two flights, thereby taking the shape of an "L". As one ascends the staircase the wooden wainscot continues on the west side while a wooden handrailing with spindels and a massive newel post is on the east side. The newel post with its Queen Anne style carving strikes a note of refinement and elegance in this room and majestically invites one to ascend the steps.

At the top of the second flight of steps which run along an east-west axis is another hall. Here one finds a continuation of the same type of wooden wainscot. The use of this feature gives the interior a sense of unity and flow. The elevator today blocks much of the light which would have come down through the stained-glass skylight above the hall. Two doors lead from this stair hall, one opening into the back hall

outside the library office and the other leading to the main reading room of the library. Stairs continue upward to the third story that once contained the museum.

The double doors opening into the library are placed on an east-west axis and have glass in their upper panels with a transom above. The library has approximately the same dimensions as the auditorium that once stood below it, i.e., 80 feet by 50 feet in size and 24 feet high. It is an impressive space which has a gallery level extending around the room and partially over the main level of the library; the gallery extends diagonally across the corners of the room giving it the appearance of an octagon. On both the north and south walls are three round-headed windows, each with geometrically-patterned stained glass filling the arch, while five windows of the same configuration are located on the east wall. Light was an important consideration in the design of the library; the windows extend from the reading room level up to the balcony level. The importance given to the lighting of the room from three sides is revealed in a letter from Post to the Hon. H.C. Murphy of May 24, 1878:

I have received your note explaining the wishes of the committee. The privilege of entering on the side removes the only difficulty in the plan with the library lighted on three sides.¹⁴

It is the subtle contrast between the light-filled central, open space on the one hand and the rich, warm colors and textures of the wooden bookstacks, tables, columns, and railings on the other that gives the room its brilliance and elegance. All the interior woodwork is of black ash.

To either side of the library entrance is a platform underneath the gallery level; the one on the south side was arranged for the librarian's desk while the one on the north side was for the assistant's. The purpose of this arrangement was clearly set out in the competition requirements:

It (the platform) should be arranged that the Librarian, or assistant in charge, may command a view of the Library entrance door, as well as of the stairways leading to the anterooms above.¹⁵

Behind each of these platforms are stairs which give access to the gallery level. A wooden balustrade of alternating rectilinear and curvilinear posts runs the entire perimeter of the gallery. Freestanding bookcases are situated between the windows on the lower level, perpendicular to them with enough space for a passageway between the windows and the end of the cases. A similar series of bookcases are located on the gallery level; in this location the cases are placed against all four walls, without a passageway along the windows. An A-B-A rhythm of small and large bays is created by this arrangement, providing the room with a sense of movement and variety. The wooden bookcases on both levels also have a massive quality without sacrificing light and open space.

Light fixtures hang in between the bookcase bays, under the gallery level, as well as over the central reading area. Also in this central space are two alcove cases set perpendicularly to the library entrance at the east side of the room. Four reading tables also occupy this central space. The alcove bookcases, tables, and the rest of this central area are separated from the stack space by a freestanding paneled wainscot railing with entrances placed at the corners of the room. Linoleum tile now covers the floor of the main reading room of the library, but the floor of the gallery is still wood. The walls, not covered by bookcases, and the ceiling are white, hard-finished surfaces.

The wooden bookcases - like the staircase extending from the first floor to the second floor-- are articulated by beautifully carved ornament. Diagonally-arranged panels running along the ends of the balcony bookcases as well as the sunburst motif crowning the ends are all suggestive of the Queen Anne style and give the room a sense of grace and delicacy. The diagonally-arranged panels are also to be found on the freestanding railing on the main reading room level; the use of this motif helps to unify the elements of the room. Twenty-four columns, terminating the ends of the book cases on the main level, are beautifully carved with Corinthian capitals and twisted swag-like motifs adorning pedestals that stand on indented bases. Bracket-capped pilasters flank each column, enhancing the massive quality of the room while at the same time contributing to the variety and refinement of its architectural ornament.

The wooden columns, however, are partly a disguise. Post specified that iron columnar-supports be enclosed in machine-carved casings with hand-carved details. Therefore, the columns, did not have to be thick and bulky which would have impeded the flow of light into the room, Here it is possible to see the transition from hand- to machine-carving that took place in the nineteenth century,¹⁶ both displaying Post's interest in new materials and techniques while respecting the past. In the library of the Long Island Historical Society Building, Post was able to fuse technology with craftsmanship to produce the most favorable results.

Along the west wall of the library near the north corner is a handsome wood-paneled doorway that opens into the members' room. The room is lighted on its north side by a window of the same type as those found in the library proper. Again, the walls are richly trimmed with wood with plaster above. On axis with the room's entrance and positioned along the west wall is a fireplace with wooden mantelpiece projecting slightly from the wall. The mantelpiece has a delicately-indented rectangular panel on either side with a sunburst motif, similar to that found in the reading room, in the smaller top panel. A handsome chandelier hangs from the ceiling. The furnishings are suggestive of a Victorian parlor. There is another room of the same dimensions and in the same area as this one but on the gallery level; there are also two rooms that correspond to these two on the south side of the building, all of which are for staff use. These latter three rooms are not subject to this interior designation.

The interior of the Long Island Historical Society Building stands as evidence of Post's expertise in the use of building materials and his genius for design. He was able to build a light-filled and spacious library with sufficient stack space by employing the most up-to-date methods while maintaining a stylistic unity. The interior is also a tribute to the determination displayed on the part of the members of the Long Island Historical Society who chose patience and good sense and carefully specified their requirements in the building of their new home. The building with its graceful and elegant interior, stands, as it was intended to be, at the time of its erection, a "centre of pleasure and culture in the community."¹⁷

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FOOTNOTES

1. Leslie W. Dunlap, American Historical Societies, 1791-1860 (Madison Wis, 1944), p. vii.
For discussion of the Long Island Historical Society Building in this tradition, see Frank L. Cinquemani, The Library of the Long Island Historical Society (Research paper, School of Library Service, Columbia University, 1951), pp. 2,5.
2. Carol Lopate, Education and Cultural in Brooklyn, A History of Ten Institutions (New York: The Brooklyn Educational and Cultural Alliance, 1979), p. 20.
3. Lopate, p. 20.
4. Lopate, pp. 20-22.
5. The Long Island Historical Society. 1863-1938, A Record: In Commemoration of the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the Founding of the Society in 1863 (Brooklyn, N.Y., 1938), pp. 7-8, discusses the problems at this time.
6. This is brought out in the Minutes of the Long Island Historical Society Building Committee.
7. In line with the concern for fireproofing and ventilation, the specifications requested double walls with air chambers between the outer and the inner, the avoidance of wood partitions, and "particular attention to be paid to ventilation."
8. This is discussed in "The Long Island Historical Society Building," American Architect and Building News, 2 (Dec. 8, 1877), 394.
9. Lori Zabar, The Long Island Historical Society Building (Historical American Buildings Survey, (n.d.)), p. I.
10. James Taylor, "The History of Terra Cotta in New York City," Architectural Record, 2. (Oct-Dec, 1892), 144.
11. The arrangement of tiered seating in the auditorium on the ground floor level presented Post with a most challenging problem. In his interior design he was able to reconcile the necessary incline of the auditorium with the remainder of the layout without sacrificing lighting in this room or the integrity of the library space above. The completion requirements specified the heights of both rooms.
12. See Zabar, pp. 2-3, on the alterations and additions.
13. The non-extant auditorium was situated on the first floor beyond this entrance hall. As the center for various lectures and meetings, the auditorium served an important function in the affairs of the Long Island Historical Society.
14. Letter from George B. Post to Hon. H.C. Murphy, May 24, 1878 (Long Island Historical Society Collections).
15. The competition requirements are reproduced in Zabar.
16. Zabar, pp. XIV-XV.
17. A.P. Putnam, Fifteenth Annual Report of the Long Island Historical Society (Brooklyn, N.Y., 1878), pp. 6-7.

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 Long Island Historical Society Building, first floor interior consisting of the entrance vestibule, the foyer, the hall and the staircase extending from the first floor to the second floor; second floor interior consisting of the stair hall, the main reading room of the library and its balconies, and the members' room; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, doors, windows, columns, attached bookcases, attached lighting fixtures, fireplace, stair railings, and balcony railings, has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City, and that the interior or parts thereof are thirty years old or more, and that the interior is one which is customarily open and accessible to the public and to which the public is customarily invited.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Long Island Historical Society Building, a prominent and significant feature of the Brooklyn Heights Historic District, is notable for its carefully designed interior; that the building, constructed in 1878-81, was designed by the prominent architect George B. Post to accommodate the various functions of the Society; that as the home of one of New York's major historical societies, the building symbolizes the importance of that cultural institution in the nineteenth century; that the interior is particularly distinguished by its library which stands today as the hallmark of this fine building; that the library design displays Post's interest in new materials and techniques while respecting past stylistic traditions; that the interior as a whole is characterized by a careful handling of space and by handsome architectural detail in the Queen Anne stylistic tradition; and that the building with its graceful and elegant interior continues to stand as a "centre of pleasure and culture in the community."

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 an Interior Landmark the Long Island Historical Society Building, first floor interior consisting of the entrance vestibule, the foyer, the hall, and the staircase extending from the first floor to the second floor; second floor interior consisting of the stair hall, the main reading room of the library and its balconies, and the members' room; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, doors, windows, columns, attached bookcases, attached lighting fixtures, fireplace, stair railings, and balcony railings; 128 Pierrepont Street, Borough of Brooklyn, and designates Tax Map Block 243, Lot 47, Borough of Brooklyn, as its Landmark Site.

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Photo: Carl Forster

LONG ISLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY BUILDING
128 Pierrepont Street, Brooklyn

Built 1878-81; architect George B. Post

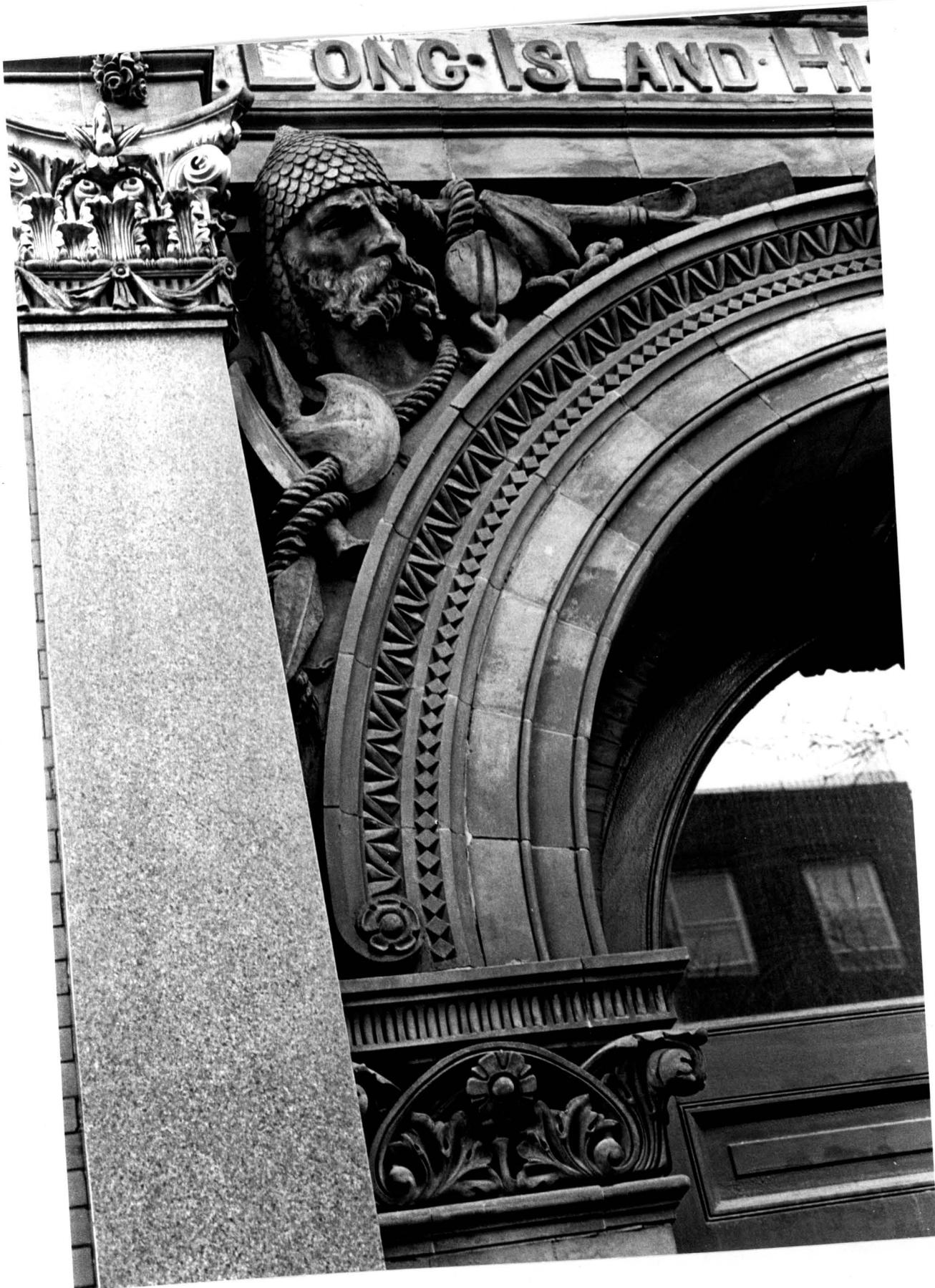


Photo: Carl Forster

LONG ISLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY BUILDING
128 Pierrepont Street, Brooklyn

Terra-cotta detail, sculptor Olin Warner

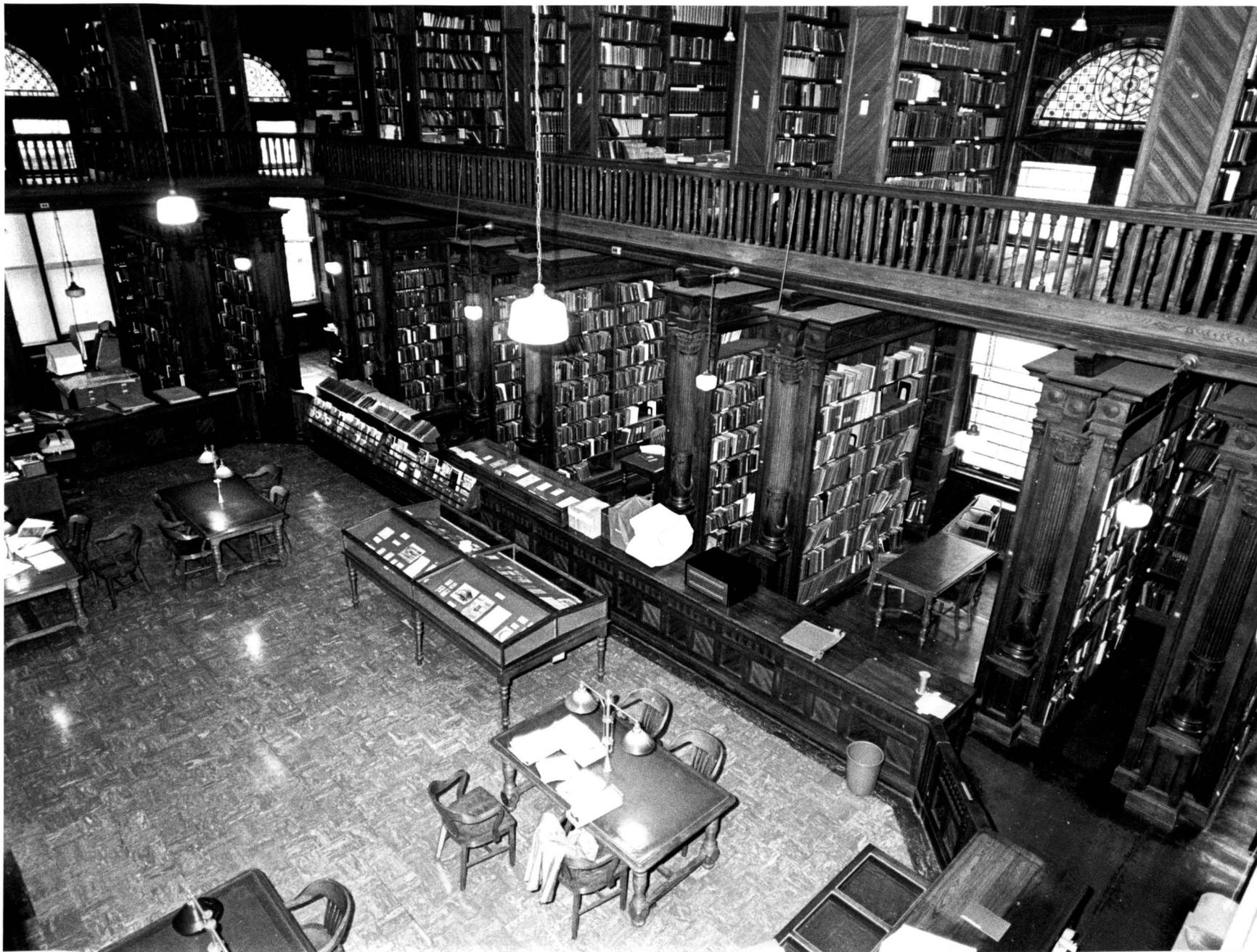


Photo: Carl Forster

LONG ISLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY BUILDING
128 Pierrepont Street, Brooklyn
Library reading room, second floor