

Landmarks Preservation Commission
August 11, 1981, Designation List 146
LP-1168

OTTENDORFER BRANCH, New York Public Library, first floor interior consisting of the entry vestibule, the reading room, the bookstacks, the staircase leading from the first floor to the mezzanine level bookstacks, the staircase leading from the first floor to the second floor; mezzanine level interior consisting of the bookstacks; second floor interior consisting of the two reading rooms; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, doors, windows, window seats, bookstacks, fireplace, staircase railings, and circulation counter; 135 Second Avenue, Manhattan. Built 1883-84; architect William Schickel.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 464, Lot 37.

On May 13, 1980, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as an Interior Landmark of the Ottendorfer Branch, New York Public Library, first floor interior consisting of the entry vestibule, the reading room, the bookstacks, the staircase leading from the first floor to the mezzanine level bookstacks, the staircase leading from the first floor to the second floor; mezzanine level interior consisting of the bookstacks; second floor interior consisting of the two reading rooms; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, doors, windows, window seats, bookstacks, fireplace, staircase railings, and circulation counter (Item No.40). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Thirty witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Ottendorfer Library is the oldest branch library in Manhattan and one of the earliest buildings in the city constructed specifically as a public library. Designed by the German-born architect, William Schickel, the library displays elements of both the neo-Italian Renaissance and Queen Anne styles on its facade, while the interior exhibits Queen Anne features. Built in 1883-84 in conjunction with the German Dispensary, now the Stuyvesant Polyclinic, next door, the library was the gift of Anna and Oswald Ottendorfer, German-American philanthropists who concerned themselves with the welfare of the German population centered on the Lower East Side in the mid to late nineteenth century. The juxtaposition of the library and the clinic building is by no means coincidental. Rather it reflects the nineteenth-century philosophy, particularly influential in Germany, of developing the individual both physically and mentally. Ottendorfer's desire was to help to uplift both the body and the mind of his fellow Germans in the United States ("dem Körpern und dem Geisten zu helfen"). Both the library and the clinic are designated New York City Landmarks.

Early Development of Libraries in New York

Although dispensaries, the nineteenth-century equivalent of health clinics, were widespread in New York City, the concept of the free circulating library, especially that which served the poorer segments of the population, was only just beginning to receive considerable attention in New York. In the 1830s the first of a series of bills to encourage the growth of libraries was passed by the New York State legislature. The New York newspapers were filled with editorial criticism of the lack of library facilities, the failure to serve the poor, and the backwardness of New York, in contrast with other cities such as Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago, in establishing a free public library. The New York Evening Post reported in 1880 that "only one class of people in our city are unprovided for in the matter of reading--that is the very poor, some of whom cannot afford to procure their reading, and are not eligible for the free libraries."¹ The New York Times, writing in the more political tone which characterized the movement for public libraries in the press, wrote in 1884: "It is not too much to say that next to a clean administration of its affairs a great free circulating library is the city's chief lack."²

By the late nineteenth century, New York City had excellent research facilities in a number of privately owned libraries, but few general libraries that offered a wide variety of popular and serious reading to the general public. The Astor and Lenox Libraries founded respectively by the will of John Jacob Astor in 1849 and by the famous book collector and philanthropist James Lenox (1800-1880) in 1870 both served as great research libraries open to students and scholars. These two research institutions together with the funds of the Tilden Trust, established in 1886 by the will of Samuel J. Tilden (1814-1886), a former governor of New York, were consolidated in 1895 to form the New York Public Library. Despite these resources in research libraries, the reading needs of the general public, especially the poor and immigrant population, went largely unmet by any institution through most of the nineteenth century.

The influence of nineteenth-century moralistic philosophies is apparent in the earliest private efforts to provide free reading to the public. Most of the early public libraries were the philanthropic efforts of wealthy New Yorkers interested in aiding and encouraging the self-education of the poor. Libraries were seen as an agent to the improvement of the city as well as the lot of the poor. The earliest of the philanthropic efforts in the city was the New York Free Circulating Library founded in 1878 and incorporated in 1880 with the express purpose, according to the First Annual Report (1880), of providing "moral and intellectual elevation of the masses." During its first few years the library grew impressively, and the board of the Library began discussing the possibility of establishing branches in the various neighborhoods of New York. The Second Annual Report of the New York Free Circulating Library (1880-81) stated that:

It is proposed to establish small libraries, located in the centers of the poorest and most thickly settled districts of the city. The books are to be selected with special reference to the wants of each community, carefully excluding all works of doubtful influence for good.

The first branch of the New York Free Circulating Library, the Ottendorfer Branch, was formally opened on December 7, 1884. One of the very first buildings in New York City to be designed specifically as a public library, it was the gift of Oswald and Anna Ottendorfer to the people of the Lower East Side.

The Ottendorfers

The library and the German Dispensary next door were among numerous charitable gifts of the Ottendorfers. Anna Ottendorfer (1815-1884) had immigrated to New York in 1844 with her first husband, Jacob Uhl, a printer. They purchased the German language newspaper, the New Yorker Staats-Zeitung, a weekly paper founded in 1834 (and still published today). At the death of her husband in 1853, Anna inherited the paper, by then a thriving daily publication, and six years later, married Oswald Ottendorfer, (editor-in-chief since 1858. Oswald Ottendorfer (1826-1900) was educated at the Universities of Vienna and Prague and was politically active in Austria. After the Revolution of 1848 failed, he fled to Switzerland, and in 1850 to the United States. He worked first as a laborer and then joined the staff of the Staats-Zeitung. Under his management the newspaper continued to grow in popularity, and was a highly respected, conservative paper, "severely classic in tone."³ By the 1870s the Staats Zeitung was housed in an elaborate building on "Newspaper Row" (Tryon Row, now the site of the Municipal Building). Ottendorfer, a leading citizen within the German community of the city, was politically influential both at the local and national levels. In 1872 he was a New York City alderman, and in 1874 as a staunchly anti-Tammany Democrat he ran unsuccessfully for Mayor. Both Ottendorfers were deeply concerned with philanthropic projects, although Mrs. Ottendorfer was more directly involved in their execution. She helped fund German schools in the city, gave a wing--The Women's Pavilion--to the German Hospital, and established the Isabella Home in Astoria (now located on Amsterdam Avenue and 190th Street in Manhattan). The Home, named in memory of her daughter who died as a young woman, was an institution which cared for aged and indigent German women.

The Ottendorfer Library and the German Dispensary were the joint gifts of the Ottendorfers. Mrs. Ottendorfer acquired the land in 1883 and commissioned the architect William Schickel to design a dispensary building. According to Oswald Ottendorfer in his speech at the opening ceremony, the land was sufficient for an additional building and it was decided to erect a library in conjunction with the Dispensary, thereby serving both the physical and mental well-being of the German community.⁴

In November of 1883 the German Empress Augusta honored Anna Ottendorfer for her philanthropic work by presenting her with a silver medal of merit and a citation. Unfortunately Mrs. Ottendorfer died in early 1884, before the opening of either the Dispensary or the Ottendorfer Library. The dedication on May 27, 1884 of the Dispensary was also a memorial service for her. The opening of the Library on December 7 of the same year was attended by trustees of the New York Free Circulating Library as well as by leading members of the German community in New York, including the famous German-born statesman and politician, Carl Schurz (1829-1906), a personal friend of the Ottendorfers. Schurz also spoke on the importance of reading good books and on the need for libraries.⁵

On January 10, 1884,--well before construction was completed--the Ottendorfers had officially turned the library over to the New York Free Circulating Library and the Board of Trustees promptly named the building after the donors. Oswald Ottendorfer personally selected the first books for the library. Numbering some 8,000, the books were equally divided between English and German titles. Ottendorfer also provided the library with an initial endowment of \$10,000, which he frequently augmented by additional gifts in later years. Ottendorfer's purpose in establishing the bilingual library was multi-fold. He not only wished to provide German reading material for the immigrant population, but also hoped that "they would naturally be attracted from the German books to those in English."⁶ He also hoped that the library would serve the needs of American interested in the German language. Like the Dispensary building, the Library was aimed at uplifting the community and easing the assimilation of the German population into American society.

Development of the Library System

The New York Free Circulating Library was supported wholly by private funds until public funding was added to its budget under state legislation in 1887. Many prominent and wealthy New Yorkers helped to further the library including Andrew Carnegie, J.P. Morgan, Cornelius Vanderbilt, Jacob H. Schiff, and Henry G. Marquand. Both Oswald Ottendorfer and John Jacob Astor, the son of the founder of the Astor Library, served for many years on the Board of Trustees. During the next seventeen years (1884-1901) the New York Free Circulating Library grew tremendously, adding branches in various parts of the city, increasing circulation impressively, and benefiting by increased public support and state funds. It was the desire of the trustees that the library serve the general public, and many, including a writer in the New York Times of 1884, saw the emerging system in just such terms:

The substantial growth of the New York Free Circulating Library since its modest beginning, four years ago, has made it clear that its founders and promoters have already laid the cornerstone of the city's future great free library.⁷

By 1901 when the New York Free Circulating Library was incorporated with several smaller free circulating libraries in the city to form the Circulation Department of the New York Public Library (now the Branch Libraries System), the system had eleven branches throughout Manhattan and over 1,600,000 volumes, as well as a traveling branch.

The Carnegie grant of the early twentieth century resulted in a large scale construction of neighborhood branch libraries and is largely responsible for the New York Public Library System as it is today. As a forerunner of these later libraries, the Ottendorfer is an important example of the earliest philanthropic efforts on behalf of the popular education of the public.

The Architect and His Design

At the dedication ceremony for the German Dispensary, Mr. Ottendorfer noted that his wife had taken a great interest in the construction of both the Dispensary and the Library and that she herself had selected the architect.⁸ William Schickel (1850-1907) was a native of Germany where he received his architectural training. At the age of twenty he immigrated to New York and worked as a draftsman for several architectural firms, including that of the well-known architect Richard Morris Hunt. In the 1880s Schickel established his own office and designed, in addition to the German Dispensary and the Ottendorfer Library, the Stuart Residence on Fifth Avenue at 68th Street (1881) and a building for St. Vincent's Hospital (1882). Schickel enlarged his firm calling it Schickel & Company in the late 1880s, and during this period designed several notable buildings such as the brick commercial structure, No. 93-99 Prince Street, now within the SoHo-Cast Iron Historic District, the Constable Building on Fifth Avenue of 1893--a handsome neo-Renaissance office building adjacent to the former Arnold Constable Department Store, and the Jefferson Building on West 23rd Street, an impressive structure of brick with terra-cotta trim. By 1896 Schickel had taken Isaac L. Ditmars as partner. The firm's most noted work was in church architecture of which numerous examples can be found in both Manhattan and Brooklyn, including the magnificent Church of St. Ignatius Loyola (1895-1900) on Park Avenue, a designated New York City Landmark.

The Stuyvesant Polyclinic and Ottendorfer Library were constructed together in 1883-84 and are united in appearance by their materials and a number of design elements such as the alignment of floor levels and round-arched fenestration. Although both buildings are three stories in height, the Ottendorfer Library is smaller in overall height and width and more modest in its use of decorative detail. The library is an interesting and personal combination of elements from several late Victorian building styles, although many of its details such as the very clear separation of each of the three floors by decorative friezes are ultimately derived from Italian Renaissance sources. The contrast of deep red Philadelphia pressed brick with dark mortar joints and terra-cotta trim and the manipulation of classical details are common features of late Victorian architecture and of the Queen Anne style.

Despite the benign neglect that afflicts many branch libraries, the interior of the Ottendorfer branch remains much as Schickel designed it. One enters the main floor reading room through a wood and glass paneled entrance vestibule lit by a plain glass skylight. The doors, of Queen Anne design, have square lights surrounding a center rectangular light. The arrangement of the first floor space differs somewhat from Schickel's design. The library was originally set up with closed stacks. An account in the New Yorker Staats-Zeitung describes the librarian's office as being across the entrance with a registration desk towards one wall and book shelves behind. Now one's attention is drawn by the freestanding paneled circulation desk immediately opposite the entrance. The entrance wall is dominated by a large three-centered arched opening which contains the entrance vestibule at the center, flanking casement windows above wooden window seats, and a tripartite transom. A wainscot with vertical ribbing beneath a wide molding begins on this wall and extends to the staircase on the south wall and the first window on the north wall. On the south wall is a dumbwaiter shaft, part of the original book circulation system. Book shelves are also placed along these walls. The rear area of the main floor is now occupied by double-height cast-iron book stacks. The end panels of the bookcases are adorned with an openwork pattern of squares with a crossed cornucopia and ribbon motif at the top of each panel. Glass panels at the top of the first book stack tiers provide a floor surface for the second tier at mezzanine level. Slender iron railings create balconies at the second tier. A work area at the rear of the book stacks contains built-in cupboards and book shelves. The stacks were made by Hopkins & Co.

The present arrangement dates from 1897. It had been felt by the founders that the poor population which used the library could not be trusted to use an open-shelf library, but the pride and responsibility which was taken in the use of the collection led to such democratizing innovations.

Near the entrance vestibule on the south wall is a very handsome staircase of Queen Anne design leading to the second floor. The staircase, which ends in a curved run, has a railing with alternating turned and rectangular balusters terminating in a large newel post. A wainscot like that on the first floor walls extends along the staircase wall. The space beneath the staircase is enclosed by a paneled wall and door.

The second floor was set up to be the main reading room facility and it retains the essential features for that use. Ample natural light was provided. The windows on the front wall have enframements with cornices and stylized brackets. Windows on the side and rear walls have enframements with square panels at the corners. Instead of a wooden wainscot, the architect chose to use Lincrusta Walton wall covering (now painted) below a wide molding. A pink marble chimneypiece adorns the fireplace on the side wall. The high ceiling is coved above moldings. The rear section of the room was originally set up as a separate reading room for women. Raised two steps above the level of the remainder of the floor, it is set off by a glass paneled wall. The front part

of the reading room was established as a special children's room in 1900 as part of an attempt to increase service to children and encourage reading from an early age. The children's collection is still housed here, while the German collection occupies the other two sections of this floor. A staircase, similar in design to that leading from the first floor, is placed along the south wall leading to the third floor. Originally a librarian's apartment was located on the third floor.

Although not within the scope of this interior designation other features of Schickel's original design must be noted. The original bindery of the New York Free Circulating Library was installed in the basement and began functioning in 1887; for many years it was the central bindery for the New York Public Library System as well. The basement also housed a large fireproof vault for the storage of valuable books and documents. The water mains and heating system were connected with those of the dispensary. The library was heated by steam, and the heat was made adjustable with a series of registers and ventilation ducts. Gaslight was the original lighting source.

The careful detailing and the skillful use of Queen Anne design elements to create a modest, yet handsome space, make the Interior of the Ottendorfer Library an integral part of the total library design. It remains much as it was when the Ottendorfers presented it to the New York Free Circulating Library in 1884 and as such is a remarkable survivor. The library is today as then a source of pride to its diverse neighborhood. It still attracts readers from all over the city and offers a variety of reading material in foreign languages with particular strength in its German collection, which includes many of the original books donated by Oswald Ottendorfer. As both an architectural and historical symbol, the Ottendorfer Branch continues to play an active role in the life of the community.

Report prepared by
Marjorie Pearson
Director of Research

Footnotes

1. New York Evening Post, March 18, 1880.
2. New York Times, December 4, 1884, p. 4.
3. Kings Handbook of New York, 2nd ed., (Boston: Moses King, 1893), p. 613.
4. New Yorker Staats-Zeitung, December 7, 1884, p. 4.
5. New York Times, December 7, 1884, p. 13.
6. Ibid.
7. New York Times, December 4, 1884, p. 4.
8. New York Times, May 25, 1884.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this Interior, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Ottendorfer Branch, New York Public Library, first floor interior consisting of the entry vestibule, the reading room, the bookstacks, the staircase leading from the first floor to mezzanine level bookstacks, the staircase leading from the first floor to the second floor; mezzanine level interior consisting of the bookstacks; second floor interior consisting of the two reading rooms; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, doors, windows, window seats, bookstacks, fireplace, staircase railing, and circulation counter; 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 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 Ottendorfer Branch Interior houses the oldest branch library in Manhattan and is one of the earliest in the city constructed specifically to house a public library; that the interior, designed by German-born architect William Schickel, exhibits features of Queen Anne design; that the library, built in 1883-84 in conjunction with the German Dispensary, now the Stuyvesant Polyclinic, next door, was the gift of Anna and Oswald Ottendorfer, German-American philanthropists who concerned themselves with the welfare of the German population on the Lower East Side; that the careful detailing and skillful use of Queen Anne elements to create a modest, yet handsome space, make the interior of the Ottendorfer an integral part of the total library design; that the interior remains much as it was when the Ottendorfers presented it to the New York Free Circulating Library in 1884, except for

the addition of the handsome bookstacks, and as such is a remarkable survivor; and that as both an architectural and historical symbol, the Ottendorfer Branch continues to play an active role in the life of 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 Ottendorfer Branch, New York Public Library, first floor interior consisting of the entry vestibule, the reading room, the bookstacks, the staircase leading from the first floor to the mezzanine level bookstacks, the staircase leading from the first floor to the second floor; mezzanine level interior consisting of the bookstacks; second floor interior consisting of the two reading rooms; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, doors, windows, window seats, bookstacks, fireplace, staircase railings, and circulation counter; 135 Second Avenue, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 464, Lot 37, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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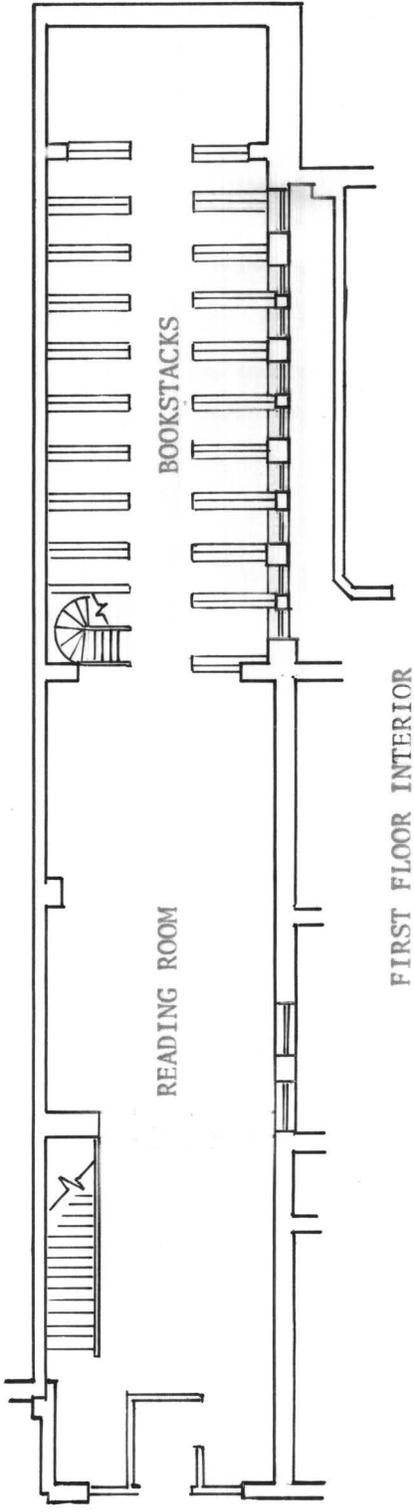
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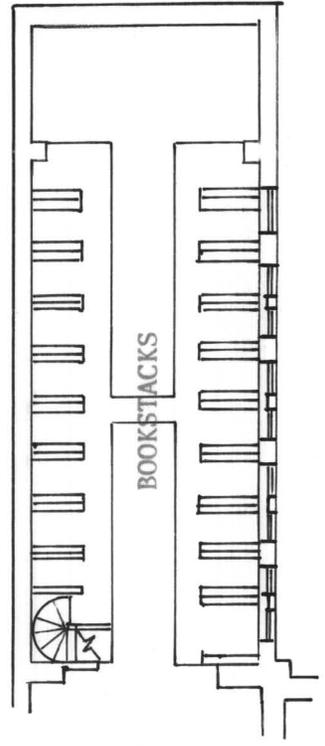
New York Herald. December 7, 1884, p. 18.

New York Times. December 4, 1884, p. 4; December 7, 1884, p. 13.

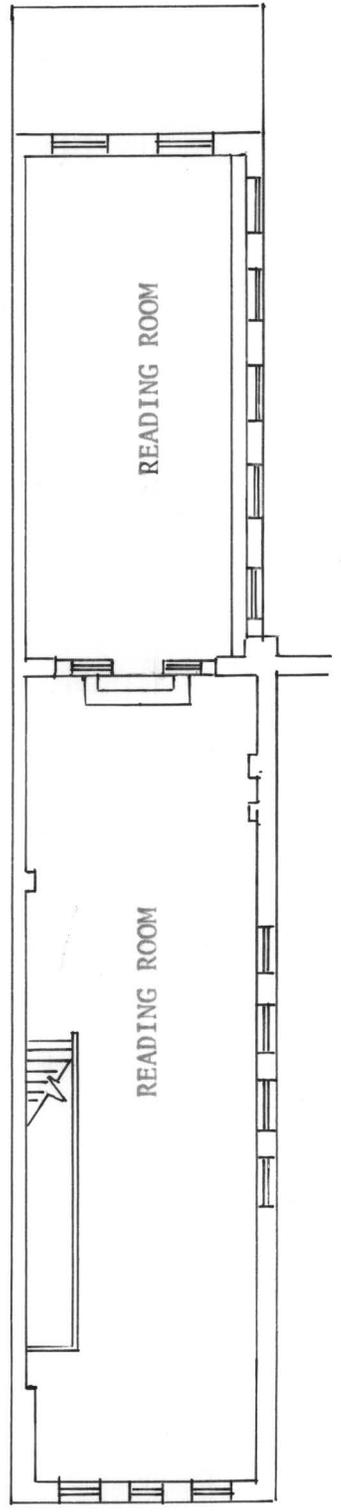
New Yorker Staats-Zeitung. December 7, 1884, pp. 4, 71-72.



FIRST FLOOR INTERIOR



MEZZANINE LEVEL INTERIOR

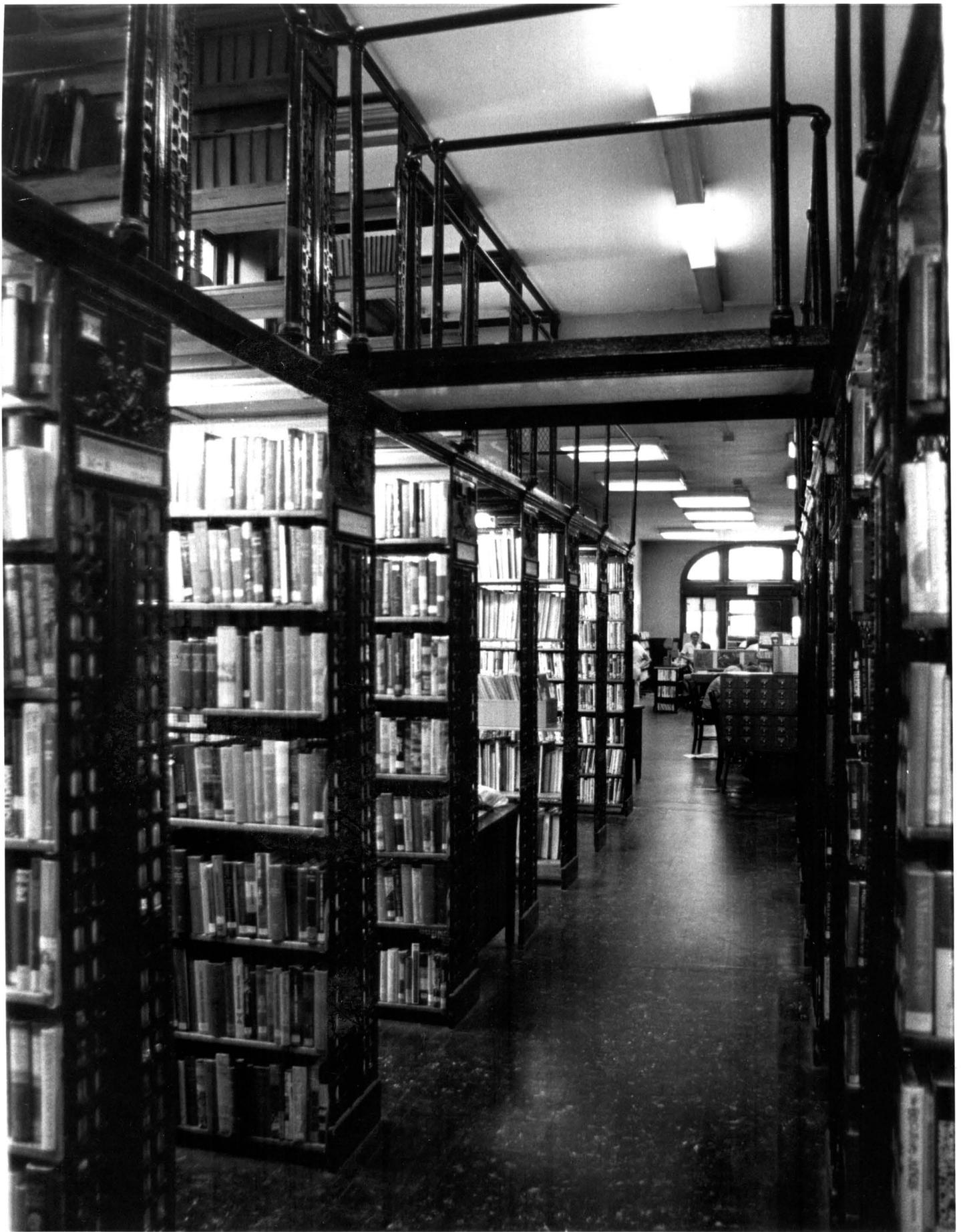


SECOND FLOOR INTERIOR

OTTENDOFER BRANCH, NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY
 135 Second Avenue
 Manhattan



Ottendorfer Branch
New York Public Library
135 Second Avenue
Manhattan
First Floor Interior



Ottendorfer Branch
New York Public Library
Cast-Iron Bookstacks
135 Second Avenue
Manhattan