

CURTIS HIGH SCHOOL, Hamilton Avenue and St. Mark's Place, Borough of Staten Island.  
Built 1902-04, 1922, 1925, 1937; architect C.B.J. Snyder.

Landmark Site: Borough of Staten Island Tax Map Block 22, Lot 1 in part consisting of the land on which the school buildings are situated.

On September 9, 1980, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of Curtis High School and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 11). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. One witness spoke in favor of designation. One letter was received in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

#### DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Curtis High School is located on an elevated site that commands a panoramic view of Upper New York Bay. When it opened in 1904, Curtis High School was Staten Island's first public secondary school. As the first public building completed of those planned for the new borough created by the consolidation of Staten Island with New York City in 1898, its opening marked this new epoch in Staten Island's history as well as a turning point in the history of its public education.

A broad lawn dotted with trees and shrubs provides an appropriate campus-like setting for this complex of buildings designed in the Collegiate Gothic style by C.B.J. Snyder, the Board of Education's Superintendent of School Buildings. Begun in 1901-02, the original building of brick and limestone is dominated by a large square turreted tower inspired by English medieval models.

Snyder's additions to the original building were designed in 1919. The south wing with workshops and classrooms was completed in 1922. Its brick and limestone construction and use of neo-Gothic ornament harmonize with the earlier building. Ingeniously sited on a steep slope, the north auditorium/gymnasium wing with its tall, closely-set windows and abundant ornament reflects the influence of English chapels in the Perpendicular Gothic style. It was completed in 1925. Later additions of the 1930s -- the swimming pool on the west side of the main building and the new gymnasium wing set at right angles to the auditorium -- simplify but repeat the forms of earlier buildings. Together they form an impressive unified complex.

Although small high school departments had been formed in three Staten Island public elementary schools by the late 1890s, until the doors of Curtis High School were opened to admit the new school's first students in February 1904, the island had lacked a public secondary school. The history of public education on Staten Island is briefer than the educational history which begins with the late 17th-century Voorlezer's House at Richmondtown, said to be the oldest extant elementary school building in the United States. Representative of Colonial period schools, it was a church-affiliated institution offering a religiously oriented curriculum.

The first legislative effort to form and assist a public educational system in New York State occurred in the late 18th century. In 1795 the State Legislature authorized a temporary school fund that allocated monies to localities maintaining public or common schools for a five-year period. Governor Daniel D. Tompkins, an advocate of public education as a university student and later as a member of the Society for Establishing a Free School in the City of New York (founded in 1805), succeeded in obtaining enabling

Tompkins' land, including the Curtis High School site, was later incorporated into the suburban development known as New Brighton, initiated in 1835. By 1845 one of the many picturesque villas then being built in Staten Island's new suburb was constructed on the portion of the site now occupied by the original school building. It was acquired about 1850 by John C. Greene, a prosperous New York City merchant and avid horticulturist. The outbuildings, greenhouses, and gardens that surrounded his residence were described in The Horticulturist, a journal edited by the eminent landscape gardener and architectural critic, Andrew Jackson Downing. "The views of the Bay of New York," said the mid-19th century description of the Curtis High School site, "are exquisitely beautiful, and advantage is judiciously taken, in the planting, to conceal defects, and open the finest vistas."<sup>5</sup>

One of Staten Island's most renowned residents, the noted editor of Putnam's Magazine and Harper's Weekly, lecturer and essayist in whose honor the school is named, George William Curtis, was a friend of Downing and author of the commemorative introduction to the memorial volume of Downing's essays published in 1853. Curtis was a colleague and friend of the pioneering American landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted as well. Although the landscaped setting of Curtis High School dates from the 20th century, it, together with the site, evokes the memory of Staten Island's more rural past and its association with seminal figures in the history of American landscape architecture.

Curtis High School was one of several major new high schools constructed in New York City soon after consolidation. Their construction addressed one of many needs faced by a newly-unified educational system confronted at the turn of the century with a wave of immigration that had yielded a foreign-born population of 1.27 million in a city of 3.44 million, a transition from low- to high-rise buildings that would rapidly multiply the density of its urbanized portions, and the accelerated conversion of rural areas to suburbs. A host of independently administered school districts with a variety of curricula, grade divisions, educational policies, and standards for personnel selection needed to be welded into a single, uniform educational system.<sup>6</sup>

The New York City Board of Education was also faced with the problems of its physical plant. Existing schools required upgrading, repair, and enlargement. In many areas new schools were an urgent need. A 1905 issue of The American Architect and Building News said of the task, "The magnitude of the undertaking and the reality of the need for these new school-houses is shown by the fact that, even after several years of active building, there are at this time seventy-seven school-houses in various stages of completeness now in charge of the architect to the Department of Education, while contracts for twenty-four more will shortly be made."<sup>7</sup> The architect responsible for this prodigious effort was the Board of Education's Superintendent of School Buildings, C.B.J. Snyder. Snyder had served in that capacity since 1891 and continued in the position after consolidation until his retirement in 1923.

The 1905 writer in The American Architect went on to note that:

Possibly it was not the best, probably it was not the most economical, certainly it was not the most expeditious way to have all the school-houses the city stood in such sore need of designed and built by the official architect to the Department of Education. But since that method had to be followed, it is a matter of wonderful good fortune that the official architect chanced to be such a man as is Mr. C.B.J. Snyder, who not only at the outset showed distinct capacity for his task, but has proved himself a man able to grow as his opportunities opened before him. Mr. Wheelwright in Boston, Mr. Ittner in St. Louis, Mr. Mundie in Chicago...have done excellent service to their respective

cities in the way of building school-houses...but they have not had to do their work under the same sort of pressure that has been put upon Mr. Snyder, and they have not had to adopt their architectural treatment to as closely restricted sites. When first the New York school-house made its appearance in Gothic attire, it seemed as if a very doubtful experiment were being tried, but little by little the designer discovered new confidence in himself, and some of the later buildings are markedly successful as pieces of consistent and satisfying architectural composition. 8

Although Snyder has often been credited with developing designs that would insure adequate ventilation and light for schools constructed on small sites and enclosed by a rising city, his impressive achievements in shaping the evolution of public school architecture over a 32-year period have not been fully assessed. The many schools designed by him over this period reveal an inventive capacity to arrive at distinctive, individualized designs within a framework of financial constraint. His schools avoided the mass-produced look that characterizes many New York City public schools built in the decades immediately following his retirement. And it was he, the 1905 account suggests, who introduced the Collegiate Gothic style to New York City public school architecture.

Curtis High School, and its larger, more elaborate contemporary, Morris High School in the Bronx, were among the first of the city's schools to appear in full "Gothic attire." Both are similar in plan and elevation to Public School 31 (Old 167) in the Bronx, designed by Snyder just prior to consolidation in 1898. Similar to several others built at the same time, P.S. 31 was a four-story rectangular block flanked by gabled end pavilions. Its most prominent feature was the turreted center-section tower containing the main entryway. Gothic ornamentation was used abundantly in the tower section and included pointed arches, bands of windows with stone tracery and leaded glass, colonnettes, and label moldings rising from figured corbels. This elaboration and intensified Gothicization led to the design of Curtis and Morris High Schools, both begun c.1901-02 and completed in 1904, introducing to New York City public secondary school architecture the neo-Gothic style popularized in the late 19th century in collegiate buildings constructed by such institutions as Princeton University and the University of Chicago.

Curtis High School is a four-story building constructed of buff-colored brick with contrasting Indiana limestone trim. Its plan, like that of Morris High School, derives from the P.S. 31 scheme but is a scaled-down version of Morris's rectangular block with center tower and gabled end pavilions. Ornamentation is concentrated in the upper portions of the building, a practice adopted by Snyder for all schools constructed around this date and determined in part, no doubt, for economic reasons. Elsewhere relative severity prevails.

The use of limestone ashlar facing for the first story at Curtis creates the effect of a solid base for the upper portions of the building. That impression is further emphasized by the projecting water table placed at the base of the second floor windows. Continued across the main facade and end pavilions it also provides a strong horizontal accent. The single windows at the first story (the lateral Gothic entranceways, replacing windows and set in drip-molded arches, were added in 1924) contrast with the triple windows with multi-paned sash predominating above. Ornamentation consists of limestone lintels and corner quoins.

The more abundant ornamentation at the upper levels includes the stone-enframed triple windows with pointed arches used at the third story of the end pavilions, the label moldings with finials above them, and the tall lancet windows in the peak of the gables. A crenellated parapet wall adorns the roofline of the main block.

The centrally-placed five-story tower, which projects forward from the main block of the building, contains the main entrance formed by a compound four-center pointed arch. The arch is flanked by colonnettes and outlined by a drip molding which terminates in a finial with carved head. The arch spandrels are carved with foliation and seals of the City of New York. The bandcourse above the arch is inscribed: Curtis High School. Flanking piers feature carved heads and ornate lanterns; they terminate in carved owls, traditional symbols of wisdom, above the projecting water table. Steps within the entrance lead to inner entrance doors of wood and glass.

Two tiers of triple windows separated by a spandrel panel with fleur-de-lis and Tudor roses light the second and third stories of the tower. The upper tier is outlined by a drip molding with ornate carved finial. Beginning at the fourth story, flanking octagonal corner sections rise to support the crowning element of the tower. This features a series of blind arches, carved panels, and a stepped parapet, all executed in limestone.

Long before later additions were completed, an expanding school population had required additional classroom space as well as facilities to accommodate the school's expanded and enriched curriculum. Designs for the north and south wings were prepared by C.B.J. Snyder in 1919. The three-story south addition with a four-story tower section at its rear was completed in 1922. Housing classrooms and workshops, it duplicates the brick and limestone construction as well as the neo-Gothic style of the original building. It is of interest to note, however, the generally heightened decorative sensibility displayed in this building designed toward the end of Snyder's long career as Superintendent of School Buildings. Although less ornate than the north auditorium wing, it shares a similar spirit. Ornament is consistently distributed with all windows enframed by engaged limestone blocks and displaying label moldings. New decorative motifs in the form of inset lozenge-shaped panels with foliate centers appear. The three-story bay window on the east face of the building is particularly attractive with its crenellated parapet, decorative blind arcades, and inset quatrefoil panels. The rear tower section terminates in a crenellated limestone parapet adorned with gargoyles.

Completed according to Snyder's plans in 1925, two years after his retirement as Superintendent of School Buildings, the auditorium/gymnasium wing on the north is the part of the Curtis High School complex most influenced by a Gothic source. The tall, closely-set windows divided by narrow buttresses and the rich ornamentation suggest English chapels in the Perpendicular Gothic style. Because the structure has been set into a slope, the high gymnasium story below the auditorium does not detract from the chapel-like effect. While the auditorium of 1904 designed by Snyder for Morris High School has equally large windows, their separation by wide areas of masonry diminishes the sense of Gothic stylistic influence. A similar auditorium at a comparable location -- to the rear of the main building -- planned for Curtis High School was not built because funds were lacking. Until 1925 a large fourth floor room in the original building doubled as a gymnasium and auditorium. Although the absence of an adequate facility inconvenienced countless numbers of students and teachers, the long wait for the auditorium wing yielded one of the most distinctive structures Snyder designed for the New York City Board of Education, and one in which his affinity for the Collegiate Gothic style is fully manifest. Snyder's structural fidelity to the Gothic style is paralleled by his lavish use of ornamentation which includes a graceful, copper-clad center spire, arcaded corner towers terminating in elongated onion-shaped, copper-roofed domes topped by finials, and an elaborate crenellated and gabled parapet wall with blind arcades and inset foliate panels. Modern windows have replaced the stone tracery and leaded diamond-shaped panes of the original windows.

The new gymnasium wing completed in 1937 is set at right angles to the auditorium building and repeats its basic design including the large window openings. Detailing



and ornament copy in a simplified manner the forms of the earlier building. The swimming pool built at the same time in the location originally intended for the auditorium continues the simplified version of the Collegiate Gothic style used for the new gymnasium. The cafeteria wing constructed in 1961 is an unobtrusive addition to the 1922 wing. Curtis High School remains an impressive unified complex.

When Curtis High School opened, its capacity was 750. An acute need for a public secondary school on Staten Island was met by its opening, and in 1906 the Curtis High School Monthly observed that the new school was nearly filled, an opinion reiterated in 1908 by its architect, C.B.J. Snyder, who declared that additions were already required.<sup>9</sup> Today as one of seven large public high schools on Staten Island, Curtis High School continues its dedication to the mission it pioneered in 1904, and retains a special place in Staten Island's educational history.

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#### FOOTNOTES

1. Leng, Charles W. and William T. Davis, Staten Island And Its People: A History 1609-1929, (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1930), Vol. I, Chapter XIV, "Education and the Teaching Profession," p. 502-504, includes extensive selections from the "Book of Records and Proceedings for the School House in District #1, Westfield." The general history of education on Staten Island is, however, treated in a more cursory manner than other subjects addressed by the authors.
2. Ibid., pp. 512-523. The authors have compiled an extensive listing taken from maps, advertisements, and other sources of private schools, academies, and church-affiliated schools on Staten Island beginning in 1769. Private schools still exceed the number of public schools as late as the last quarter of the 19th century.
3. Staten Island Chamber of Commerce, Staten Island; Property, Commercial, Shipping, and Industrial Interests, (West Brighton, 1896), pp. 10-11.
4. Ibid. p. 10. The description of Staten Island school facilities notes that students in the three high school departments would be taking New York State Board of Regents examinations; the recent formation of those departments is implied.
5. "Visits to Country Places, No. 2. Around New York," The Horticulturist, n.s. 2, (1856), 401-402.

6. Board of Education, City of New York, The First Fifty Years: A Brief Review of Progress, 1898-1948 (New York: n.p. /1948/), p. 2-20, describes social, political, and educational conditions in New York City at the time of consolidation and outlines the general educational policies developed by the Board of Education between 1898 and 1900.
7. "Summary," The American Architect and Building News, 88, (No. 1544, 1905), 33.
8. Ibid.
9. C.B.J. Snyder, "Public School Buildings in New York City," The American Architect and Building News, 93, (No. 1681, 1908), 83-85.

#### 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 Curtis High School has 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, Curtis High School was Staten Island's first public secondary school when it opened in 1904; that by making secondary education widely available, the construction of Curtis High School marked a major turning point in the history of public education on Staten Island; that the early history of the site upon which the school stands, and the person in whose honor the school is named, George William Curtis, are linked with the history of American landscape gardening and the emergence of American landscape architecture; that it is one of the first New York City schools to be designed in the Collegiate Gothic style; that the architect of Curtis High School, C.B.J. Snyder, Superintendent of School buildings for the Board of Education between 1891 and 1923, introduced this style for New York City public schools; that the north and south wings of Curtis High School, designed by Snyder in 1919, are harmonious additions in the style of the original building; that the Curtis High School complex demonstrates an evolving Gothic sensibility in Snyder's school designs; that the north wing auditorium/gymnasium, modelled after English Perpendicular Gothic chapels, is one of the most unique school auditoriums constructed in New York City; and that Curtis High School today continues its dedication to public secondary education in Staten Island.

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 designated as a Landmark Curtis High School, Borough of Staten Island, and designates Tax Map Block 22, Lot 1 in part consisting of the land on which the school buildings are situated, as its Landmark Site.

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