

GIRLS HIGH SCHOOL, 475 Nostrand Avenue, Borough of Brooklyn. Built 1885-86; architect James W. Naughton; 1912 addition; architect C.B.J. Snyder.

Landmarks Site: Borough of Brooklyn, Tax Map Block 1844, Lot 1.

On May 19, 1981, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Girls High School and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 12). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. One witness spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

#### DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Girl's High School, one of the first public secondary schools in New York City, is an architecturally distinctive structure occupying the entire blockfront on the east side of Nostrand Avenue between Halsey and Macon Streets in the Bedford section of the Bedford-Stuyvesant area of Brooklyn. Designed in a striking and dynamic combination of the Victorian Gothic and the French Second Empire styles by James W. Naughton, it was erected in 1885. An addition, standing along the Macon Street or southern facade of the original building, was opened in 1912, and was designed by C.B.J. Snyder in the Collegiate Gothic style.<sup>1</sup>

Major development of Bedford-Stuyvesant took place in the mid to late nineteenth century when speculative builders and real estate developers transformed the rural community known as Bedford or Bedford Corners into an urban residential area of rowhouses for the middle and upper middle classes. In 1884, Henry Stiles, the noted historian of King's County and the City of Brooklyn, wrote that Bedford had "lately and reluctantly yielded its charms to the rude embrace of city improvements" from "a simple forest-environed cluster of ancient, low-browed Dutch houses presenting a scene of quiet beauty."<sup>2</sup> The hamlet of Bedford Corners can be traced back to 1663 and was located at the intersection of three important roads: the Brooklyn and Jamaica Turnpike, one of the oldest roads in Kings County which connected the Fulton Ferry with the towns of Jamaica and Hempstead; the Cripplebush Road which ran north to Newtown in Queens; and the Clove Road which extended south to Flatbush. The location of where the hamlet was in approximately the present intersection of Bedford Avenue and Fulton Street. Bedford was never recognized as a separate town and, with the establishment of Brooklyn as an independent city in 1834, it formed the city's seventh and ninth wards.<sup>3</sup>

Urban development of the area began about the time of the Civil War and was spurred by the extension of rapid transit facilities which provided easy access to downtown Brooklyn and the ferries to Manhattan. And, as the economy began to recover from the financial crash of 1873, groups of rowhouses began to fill the empty land throughout the section. By the time that Girl's High School, originally the Central Grammer School, was opened for its first class in 1886, there was a definite urban character to the neighborhood.

Although the City of Brooklyn had maintained an extensive system of public grammar schools from the time of its incorporation, it was nearly 50 years before progressives in the field of education began to agitate for continued higher ed-

ucation. Although there had been discussions concerning the establishment of a high school by the Brooklyn Board of Education as early as 1849, it was not until 1878 that a compromise was reached between those advocating higher education and those who thought that public funds should only be spent on providing a basic education for the population. The result was the formation of a central grammar school in which the basic courses could be supplemented and more thoroughly taught. The school was initially housed at Court and Livingston Streets until the new building of the Central Grammar School was completed on Nostrand Avenue in 1886. However, before the building was opened, it was realized that the new facility would be inadequate to house the growing number of students, so it was agreed that only the female students would be moved. When the school opened in September of 1886, it held the Girl's Department of the Central Grammar School and the Boys' Department remained in the original building at Court and Livingston Streets. In 1891, separate administrations and names were established for both Departments and they became officially known as Girls' High School and the Boys' High School.<sup>4</sup> Thus Girls' High School is the oldest public high school building erected as a high school in New York. One of the city's finest Romanesque Revival buildings was opened on Marcy Avenue a few blocks north of the Girls' High School for the Boys' High School in 1892. It was designated a New York City Landmark in 1975. These two institutions are the first public secondary schools in New York City, and they served as the prototypes for the first high schools built later in Manhattan.<sup>5</sup>

Both Girls' and Boys' High Schools were designed by James W. Naughton, the Superintendent of Buildings for the Board of Education of the City of Brooklyn. Naughton (1840-98), born in Ireland, was brought to Brooklyn by his parents at the age of eight. He received his early education in the public and private schools of Brooklyn. At the age of fifteen, Naughton went west settling in Milwaukee where he worked as an apprentice in the architectural firm of J. & A. Douglas. In 1859, having completed his apprenticeship, he entered the University of Wisconsin at Madison to study architecture. After two years, he returned to Brooklyn and continued studying architecture at Cooper Union in Manhattan. He was active in Brooklyn politics and, for two years between 1874 and 1876, he served as Superintendent of Buildings for the City of Brooklyn. He succeeded Samuel B. Leonard as Superintendent of Buildings for the Board of Education in 1879 and held that position for nearly twenty years until his death in 1898.<sup>6</sup> All the schools built in Brooklyn during this period were designed by Naughton.

Girls' High School is a symmetrically massed structure consisting of three pavilions; two projecting end pavilions are connected to the central towered entrance pavilion by three-window wide recessed sections. This three-dimensional composition is typical of the French Second Empire style and adds greatly to the character of a design, creating verticality, plasticity, and a dynamic play of light and shadow.

The use of a dramatic central entrance tower appeared in New York City school design in 1868 when the Second Empire was first used to render a school in the Chelsea section of Manhattan. This architectural feature remained a prominent element of school design into the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> In Girls' High the Victorian Gothic mode was manifested in the treatment of the roofs and some of the windows while neo-Grec influence is obvious in some of the window lintels and cornice brackets. The three-and-one-half story structure is faced with red brick with contrasting stone trim and rises above a rough-faced stone basement.

The two end pavilions are crowned by steeply pitched hipped roofs covered with patterned slate and pierced by two-window wide pedimented dormers with Gothic arches that break the cornice line. Below the dormers are three-story bays of paired windows. The rusticated bases of the bays at the first floor terminate in decorative stone quoins and Florentine arches that crown the windows. The segmental-arched windows of the second floor are topped with distinctive shouldered lintels, and the flat-arched third floor windows have lintels with stylized "ears" and neo-Grec incising. The rusticated stone entrance at the base of the central pavilions is protected by a stone Corinthian portico capped with a balustrade that serves as a balcony for the arched windows above. This pavilion is topped by a tall sloping mansard above which is a square belfry with three round-arched openings in each face. Over the belfry is a soaring slate spire. The pavilion is further enhanced by the use of decorative plaques, including one with the date, panels and polychrome tiles. The recessed sections connecting the pavilions have a similar window treatment. A "T"-shaped section extends from the rear of the structure and has all of the design features of the main block. All windows in the original section have four-over-four sash. A substantial rear extension, also by Naughton, was added in 1891 nearly doubling the size of the original building. It contained 28 classrooms, a library, a lecture room, and an auditorium with seats for 1800 but has been demolished.<sup>8</sup>

In 1912, another addition to the school was opened along the southern or Macon Street facade of the building. Constructed of red brick with stone trim, it was designed in the Collegiate Gothic style by C.B.J. Snyder who was then Superintendent of Buildings for the Board of Education for the City of New York. Snyder had been appointed to that position in 1891 and, after incorporation in 1898, was head architect for school buildings in all five boroughs. Snyder is also responsible for introducing the Collegiate Gothic style to public school architecture in New York.<sup>9</sup>

The addition which harmonizes with the original in massing and materials is set back from the main plane of the original building and is one bay wide along Nostrand Avenue and three bays along Macon Street. At the ground floor are tripartite pointed-arched windows while the second and third floor windows are arranged in groups of four and are square-headed. Drip moldings enhance the second floor bays. All windows have multi-paned sash typical of the Collegiate Gothic style. Above the stone cornice rise tall, pedimented dormers with three pointed-arched windows in each. These dormers recall those on the 1885 building. A hipped slate roof is crowned by an ornamental fleche. The first two floors of this addition contain classrooms while the third floor is a gymnasium and the fourth contains a running track.

Girls' High School is an outstanding example of 19th century school architecture by one of the major practitioners in that field and it also represents an important step in the development of a comprehensive publicly supported education system. The secondary education established at Girls' and Boys' High Schools served as the prototype for high schools later built in Manhattan and throughout the city. The building is also an important link with Brooklyn's past and a symbol of the concern for quality education shown by the people of Brooklyn since its earliest settlement.

FOOTNOTES

1. Board of Education of the City of New York, A Centennial Resource Collection, Boys and Girls High School, vol. I (New York: Board of Education of the City of New York, 1979), 16-17, 214-218.
2. Henry R. Stiles, ed., The History of the County of Kings and the City of Brooklyn, New-York (New York: W.W. Munsell & Co., 1884), 155.
3. Landmarks Preservation Commission, Brooklyn Survey: Beford-Stuyvesant Proposed Historic District (New York: Landmarks Preservation Commission, 1978), 13-24.
4. The Centennial Resource Collection, 12-19.
5. Ibid., 24.
6. Henry B. Howard, ed., The Eagle and Brooklyn: History of the City of Brooklyn From its Settlement to the Present Time (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 1893), 726.
7. Board of Education of the City and County of New York, Twenty-Seventh Annual Report of the Board of Education of the City and County of New York, for the Year Ending December 31, 1863 (New York: Evening Post Steam Presses, 1869).
8. The Centennial Resource Collection, 25.
9. "Summary," The American Architect and Building News, 88, (No. 1544, 1905), 33.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that Girls' High School 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 Girls' High School is an outstanding example of 19th-century school architecture designed by James W. Naughton, one of the major practitioners in that field; that the building displays a striking and dynamic combination of the Victorian Gothic and French Second Empire styles with a compatible Collegiate Gothic addition; Girls' High School, originally known as the Central Grammar School, housed the Girls Department of that institution; that the curriculum established at the Central Grammar School provided the first publicly funded secondary education in New York City and served as a prototype for all later public high schools in the city; that Girls' High School represents an important advancement in the development of a comprehensive, publicly funded education system; that Girls' High School is the oldest public high school building erected as a high school in New York; that it is an important link with Brooklyn's past; and that it is a symbol of the concern for quality education shown by the people of Brooklyn since its earliest settlement.

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, Girls' High School, 475 Nostrand Avenue, Borough of Brooklyn and designates Tax Map Block 1844, Lot 1, Borough of Brooklyn, as its Landmark Site.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- "Summary." The American Architect and Building News. 88, (No. 1544, 1905), 33.

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GIRLS HIGH SCHOOL  
475 Nostrand Avenue

Architect: James W. Naughton  
Built: 1885-86