

Landmarks Preservation Commission  
August 29, 1989, Designation List 220  
LP-1563

ENGINE COMPANY NUMBER 23, 215 West 58th Street, Borough of Manhattan.  
Built 1905-06; architect Alexander H. Stevens.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1030, Lot 23.

On November 12, 1985, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of Engine Company Number 23 and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 8). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Two witnesses spoke in favor of designation; two letters were received in support of designation. No one spoke against the proposed designation.

#### DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

##### Summary

Engine Company Number 23, built in 1905-06, was designed by Alexander H. Stevens in a straightforward Beaux-Arts style that served as a model for subsequent firehouse design. The symmetry of the three story facade, its materials -- Indiana limestone and red brick laid in Flemish bond with dark headers, and its consistently ample fenestration successfully combine to give it its official character. The repetition of architectural elements and their functions -- segmental door and window heads, compatible window head and entablature, the sill course, keystones, bracket stone and key consoles -- combine to create a sophisticated and cohesive facade design. From this firehouse this engine company has continued to fulfill its mission of protecting the lives and property of the citizens of New York.

##### Neighborhood History & Context

Engine Company 23 (Plate 1) is the only edifice on this section of West 58th Street still housing a function directly related to its original purpose. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, contemporary landbooks indicate that private stables stood on many of the lots along the street's north side. There were commercial liveries as well: the Bennett Livery Stable was at 221 West 58th Street; there was a small livery on the northwest corner at Seventh Avenue; and on the southwest corner there was the Central Park Stables. On Seventh Avenue just north of the small livery there was a Riding Academy. The presence of a firehouse on this block was appropriate and compatible: the steam engine, the hose and the fuel wagons, and the chief's buggy were all horse drawn; and as much as the residents nearby required stabling for the horses they hired and/or maintained for their own use, they relied upon the protective presence of the Fire Department (Plate 2). The warehouses west toward the Hudson River and the tenements to the south and northwest were equally or more susceptible to fire as the first class residential buildings and hotels along Fifth Avenue and Central Park South.

## History - Engine Company 23

Engine Company 23 was organized on October 6, 1865, two months after New York City's paid, professional Fire Department was established.<sup>1</sup> Each of the older volunteer companies was replaced by a resident professional company. Originally Engine Company 23 was Harry Howard Volunteer Company 36, a company established in 1810 as Equitable Company 36 in response to the demands of the fledgling fire insurance industry. Equitable 36 changed its name about 1858 when Howard, the popular Chief Engineer of the volunteer department, suffered a paralytic stroke in performance of duty.

Engine Company 23 has been on West 58th Street more than 100 years. The current building at West 58th Street is its second home; the company moved from West 68th Street, between Broadway and Tenth Avenue (now Amsterdam), to a new firehouse at 233 West 58th Street (demolished 1939) in 1884.<sup>2</sup>

A glance through the Company 23 log books suggests the routine of firehouse life as well as the difficulties of the fireman's vocation. The daily routine of deliveries (oats, straw, bran, meal and salt; coal for the furnace, coal for the steamer), the maintenance of the apparatus (horses exercised, stalls flushed, harness repaired, wagon axles greased, and the steam kept up), the round of hydrant and building inspections (serving notices for blocked tenement fire escapes or noncompliant use of kerosene), may have been somewhat alleviated by the regimented goings and comings (watch reliefs, one hour meal times or a visit to the barber) or by the evening theater inspections (the Majestic and Carnegie Hall) -- ever since the disastrous fire at The Brooklyn Theatre in December 1876. The logs record the occasional, miscreant fireman (hounded by creditors or intoxicated and unfit for duty) as well as the responses to Departmental damage surveys -- collisions and hose cuttings perpetrated by the Metropolitan Street Railway. Certainly there were times -- July 4th for example -- when the company knew that it would be busy. But it was the sudden interruptions of this routine which more than balanced the tedious hours of preparation: the time the pole pin broke on the way to a fire and the horses separated from the apparatus (making Company 23 six minutes late at the site of the fire); or in December 1904 with the heroic rescue of Miss May Grant from an upper story of a burning building at 164 West 54th Street by Firemen Rau and Harney.<sup>3</sup> There is no reason to believe that firehouse life became any less arduous after 1907 and the introduction of motorized apparatus (Plate 3).

Entries in the company's log book are evidence that the 1884 firehouse was in poor condition by 1904: the wooden apparatus floor was rotted away and caving in; the horse stall drains leaked into the basement; a new furnace was needed; and there was plaster loss on the apparatus story and third story.<sup>4</sup> A new firehouse was begun in 1905. Special Order (#78) from Fire Department Headquarters, dated June 30, 1906 notified the force that Engine Company 23 would be in its new quarters down the street "from and after 8 o'clock AM, July 2, 1906."<sup>5</sup>

### General Firehouse Design

Only after 1853 and the publication of Marriott Field's City Architecture was a general effort made to differentiate architecturally the firehouse, with its associations of civic responsibility, from the conventional urban stable building type. Field advocated a more heroic architecture and appropriate symbolic ornament -- flambeaux, trumpets, hooks, ladders and hose. The city's Fire Department contracted with the firm of Napoleon LeBrun & Son to design firehouses from 1880 to 1895. Except for the last, a French Renaissance-inspired battalion headquarters (1895) near the center of municipal government (Engine Company 31, a designated New York City landmark), the firm's straightforward use of materials -- brick, stone, iron and terra cotta -- and sparingly integrated ornament affirmed that the LeBruns' sequence of variants upgraded the basic stable elevation with a sense of sober purpose consistent with the disciplined companies of professional firefighters who resided within them. When subsequently the Fire Department awarded individual firehouse commissions to prominent, individual firms, firehouse elevations assumed a more elaborate character. The Beaux-Arts facade of Flagg's Engine Company 33 (1898, a designated New York City landmark), is a good example.<sup>6</sup> Although the department continued to commission individual architects, by 1904 a program of 'in-house' firehouse production was introduced by Alexander H. Stevens, departmental Superintendant of Buildings.<sup>7</sup> Engine Company 23 is one of these and Stevens is credited with its design, a design which appears to inform subsequent firehouse designs well into the 1920s (Plate 4).

In the context of the neighboring stable fronts Engine Company 23's facade demonstrates how far the firehouse had evolved within the urban stable type. A survey of the lot carried out in 1904 shows the lot to have been vacant though flanked by brick stables -- to the west a stable of two stories and to the east the recently completed Helen Miller Gould stable designed by York & Sawyer(1901-02).<sup>8</sup> Stevens' three story facade is rendered in a utilitarian Beaux-Arts style, a synthesis of the LeBruns' earlier architectural sobriety and the recent, more elaborate commissions, particularly Horgan & Slattery's Engine Company 6 (1902-03) on Beekman Street. The symmetry, the choice of materials --brick dressed with ashlar limestone, and the generous scale of Engine Company 23's elevation suggest a public structure. The uniform height and breadth of the upper story fenestration indicate an offical function not apparent on the elevations of the private and public stables along this section of West 58th Street.<sup>9</sup> Though devoid of Field's recommended ornamental allegory, Stevens' relatively spare facade denotes a sense of civic pride and duty.

### The Architect

Very little is known of Alexander H. Stevens, his background or his architectural training, except that he was Superintendant of Buildings for the Fire Department in the early years of this century. Among his duties he was responsible for the renovation of existing firehouses.<sup>10</sup> He may have assembled the programmatic specifications for the commissions that the Department awarded architects outside the department and subsequently supervised the work through construction. The similarity of the four firehouses he is credited with designing -- Hook & Ladder Company 28 and

Engine Company 69 at 248-50 West 143rd Street (1903-04); Hook & Ladder Company 8, 10-14 North Moore Street (1904-05); Hook & Ladder 23 and Engine Company 80, 503 West 139th Street (1904-05); and Engine Company 23 -- is not surprising. All are three stories with limestone basements and limestone dressed brick above. Although there is a slight variation in the articulation of individual facades, the general composition of a broad, centrally vertical bay, and the vocabulary of ornament are the same.<sup>11</sup> Remarkable, however, is their similarity to the basic composition of Horgan & Slattery's Engine Company 6, when pared of its considerable and elaborate Beaux-Arts embellishment.<sup>12</sup>

#### Description<sup>13</sup>

The home of Engine Company 23 is constructed of load bearing brick with iron cross-bridging. It is three stories on a full basement (Plate 5). The facade, Indiana limestone and red brick laid in Flemish bond with dark headers, is articulated as a single, vertical bay comprising the apparatus entrance and above it the windows of the second story officers' room and third story chief's office. Flanking these broad central elements are relatively narrow apertures: the personnel entrance on the left of the apparatus door and a window (now blocked) on the right; and on both the second and third stories a window on the left and toilet room window on the right. All of these have deep reveals. The bay containing a service entrance of the adjacent thirteen story apartment building at 221 West 58th Street is set back from the building line, creating a return (approximately five feet) of what had been the firehouse's western party wall.<sup>14</sup>

The first story is faced with ashlar limestone above a granite water table. The segmental-arched apparatus entrance is the central and dominant element. Its intrados and the lower portion of its extrados are protected by wrought-iron plates extending down to the granite spur stones. The window (now blind) embrasure to the right (Plate 6) has become a flat niche and contains a seated lion, sculpted in marble, supporting with his right paw a shield on which "23" is displayed in low relief.<sup>15</sup> Two gold colored metal lanterns flank the apparatus door. Three bronze plaques have been affixed to the ashlar to the right of the apparatus entrance, two of them one above the other, between the entrance and the flat niche and the third to the right of the flat niche.<sup>16</sup> The ashlar wall surface is capped by a limestone belt course on which "23 ENGINE 23" is affixed in raised, bronze numbers and letters. A large bronze plaque occupies the central position of the limestone frieze above this course.<sup>17</sup>

The large second story window's ashlar surround is keyed into the adjacent bond. Thick limestone mullions subdivide it into a wide central window and two narrow side windows, each with a transom above. The windows are one over one, double-hung sash; the transoms pivot horizontally. A large, limestone scroll keystone and two conventional brackets support the balconet above. The sides of these brackets are articulated with panels containing horizontal reeding. Both of the small flanking windows are one over one, double-hung sash.

Like the window below, the large third story window's limestone surround is both keyed into the adjacent brick bond and subdivided by limestone mullions. Again the sash configuration is one over one, double-hung and the transom lights pivot horizontally. But unlike the window

below, this window is defined by an eared architrave interrupted only by the large limestone key console. The balconet supports the projecting architrave blocks to which the ends of the long, wrought iron grille fronting the window are attached (Plate 7). The pattern within the grille is a foliated one; the central medallion frames an open work fleur-de-lis. A flagpole projects out from below this iron grille. This window is flanked by two smaller windows also; they have one-over-one, double-hung sash. The entablature is limestone. Except for its limestone coping and limestone end blocks the parapet is of brick.

A pair of halogen lamps has been placed to the upper left and the upper right of the ground story ashlar. A second pair of halogen lamps has been placed at the extreme ends of the frieze above and attached to each of these is a spotlight directed up toward the flagpole. The physical fabric of the firehouse facade has remained unchanged.

#### Subsequent History

Engine Company 23 has resided at 215 West 58th Street since 1906 and it is from this firehouse that "2-3" has sped to fight some of the most notable fires in New York City. Those in recent memory include: the steamship Normandie, 1940; the Empire State Building airplane crash, 1945; the Times Tower, 1960; Mayflower Hotel, 1960; the 23rd Street and Broadway loft building fire in which twelve firemen lost their lives, 1966; the Telephone Company at Third Avenue and 13th Street, 1975; the Trump Tower when under construction, 1980, -- Engine Co. 23's Firemen Wehr and Pierotti rescued the crane operator trapped high above the burning site and subsequently were decorated; 499 Park Avenue, 1983; and the MGM transformer vault fire at Sixth Avenue and 53rd Street, 1989.<sup>18</sup>

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### Footnotes

1. Since 1731 New York City had relied upon volunteer firefighting companies organized under a chief Engineer responsible to the Common Council. As the city, grew property owners, business leaders and the growing insurance industry became dissatisfied with the political polarities in the volunteer companies, the inter-company feuding and the volunteers' reluctance to modernize. The volunteers themselves continued to draw their hand operated pump wagons on foot, refusing to consider horsepower. (Only during the 1832 Asiatic cholera epidemic were horses temporarily used to draw the apparatus.)
2. On the "Engine Company 23" card, Fire Department library catalogue, it is recorded that the company moved to quarters vacated by Engine 33. But that its commanding officer, Capt. Connor, visited a new building is clearly stated in these log entries: Engine Company 23 Log Book, 38 (1883), 311, 357, 377.
3. Engine Company 23 Reports, (Feb.1, 1904 - April 19, 1908), 64, 241.
4. Original order courtesy of Battalion Chief Lawrence E. Sloan.
5. Reports, (1904-08), 111.
6. R. H. Robertson, Percy Griffin, and Horgan & Slattery also received firehouse commissions.
7. It has been suggested that this in-house design effort was a cost-cutting measure. Office of Metropolitan History, New York City Firehouses, New York Landmarks Conservancy, (1979), M-55, 2, Item 20. Perhaps it was. However, the services of the following architects were recorded in the Department's 1905 Annual Report, concurrent with the construction of Engine Company 23: Francis Kimball for a firehouse on 161st Street, west of Amsterdam Ave.; M.J. Garvin for one at 589-91 East 143rd Street; Bernstein & Bernstein for one on 135th Street west of Lenox Ave.; and Werner & Windolph for one on the south side of West 63rd Street near Amsterdam Ave. Annual Report, Fire Department of New York City, (1905), 170. Trowbridge & Livingston's firehouse at 100 Duane Street should be included; it is dated 1904-05.
8. This survey, rolled with the original plans for Engine Company 23, was completed September 2, 1904 and is located at the Fire Department's Building Section.
9. The large second story window lights the officers' sleeping quarters; the firemens' dormitory is beyond, separated by a partition of florentine glass. The large third story window lights the chief's office; a glazed partition (florentine glass) separates this office from the company's recreation room beyond.
10. It was Stevens who, in 1904, sent heating stoves over to Company 23 (then still located at 235 West 58th Street), one for each floor

because the furnace installed eleven years earlier had been out of service for a year. It was to Stevens that a letter from the company's foreman, Captain Kuss, was addressed (Aug. 7, 1907) when the flush tank in the main floor w.c. fell at 12:15 PM, slightly wounding Engineer Henry Eckes. Reports, 241, 454.

11. This elevation was modular enough so that it could be doubled when a firehouse accommodated both an engine company and a hook & ladder company. Originally, the firehouse on North Moore Street had a second bay but this eastern half of the building was demolished in 1914.
12. A closely observed comparison of Horgan & Slattery's Engine Company 6 elevation with the subsequent designs of Stevens' four firehouses suggests that the later are pared down variations of the former. The original plans for Engine Company 23, initialled by draftsman E.A.K., are undated. The only date, that of the survey rolled with and apparently contemporary with these plans, is September 2, 1904. The lot was not purchased until nine months later. It is likely that Stevens supervised the construction of Company 6.

Following his victory over the Tammany incumbent Augustus van Wyck in 1901, reform mayor Seth Low organized a well-publicized attack on the corrupt practices of his predecessor. The firm of Horgan & Slattery was perceived as the Tammany architect and its municipal contracts were cancelled. Perhaps among these abandoned projects were plans for more firehouses. (Recall that the LeBruns, under contract to the Fire Department, had supplied at least fifteen designs for firehouses.)

Rather than "in-house" designs, Stevens' may be "cost-cut" resurrections from the Horgan & Slattery office.

13. Please see Landmarks Preservation Commission Research file for a more detailed description of building conditions as well as architectural features at the time of designation.
14. Up to a height just short of an earlier two story stable building parapet, the return is surfaced with concrete; the firehouse's limestone quoins are not covered with the concrete. Above the silhouette of this now vanished parapet, the limestone quoins continue to the firehouse's entablature. Keyed into the quoins is a vertical strip of red brick laid in Flemish bond with dark headers about two feet in width extending up to the height of the firehouse's parapet coping. Beyond this repetition of the facade's fabric, the western party wall is made of common brick laid in American bond.
15. The marble lion was found in 1979 down by the Hudson River, below the West Side Highway and the old Pennsylvania Railroad yards, where the company was on drill. It was discolored with the pigments of refuse. Students from the Art Students' League, Engine Company 23's neighbor across West 58th Street, removed the grime with a poultice and worked the company's number into the face of the shield. The lion has now become a company symbol.

16. The first two plaques commemorate the members of the company who made the supreme sacrifice in discharge of their duties protecting life and property in the City of New York. These names appear on the first plaque: Firemen Jacob Stiegler, Sept 8, 1872; James Plunkett, Sept 24, 1873; Patrick Clark, Jan. 1, 1880; Edward Tobin [Capt.], Jan. 24, 1900. The second plaque is dedicated to the memory of Fireman John J. King, Dec. 12, 1961.

The third plaque is dedicated to the members of the company, past, present and future by the members serving in 1979: Capt. Lawrence E. Sloan; Lt.s Robert J. Broderick, Christian T. Heeg, John P. Morello; Firemen Julio Acuria, Robert Bender, Donald Brunner, Kevin Frail, Vincent Guido, Warren Hastings, Edward Kaminski, Charles Sullivan, Richard Lutz, Kevin Masterson, Vincent Molinari, Larry Nekola, Roger Olin, Joseph Pierotti, Joseph Rachuta, William Rosenbaum, Michael Rossidis, Louis Salzano, John Sullivan, Thomas Van Doran, Alexander Warren, Harry Wehr, Robert Westerberg, Valentine White.

17. This plaque contains the names of officers of the Fire Department, the contractor, the dates of the company's organization and the building's erection: John O'Brien, Fire Commissioner; Hugh Bonner and Charles C. Wise, Deputy Fire Commissioners; Edward F. Croker, Chief of the Department; Alfred M. Downes, Secretary; Alexander Stevens, Superintendant of Buildings; and Thomas B. Leahy Building Co., contractors. The company was organized in 1865 and the building erected in 1906.

18. The cooperation beyond the call of duty offered by Fire Battalion Chief Lawrence Sloan is gratefully acknowledged.

## 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 Engine Company Number 23 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, Engine Company Number 23, built in 1905-06, was designed by Alexander H. Stevens in a straightforward Beaux-Arts style that served as a model for subsequent firehouse design; that the symmetry of the three story facade, its materials -- Indiana limestone and red brick laid in Flemish bond with dark headers --and its consistently ample fenestration successfully combine to give it its official character; that the repetition of architectural elements and their functions -- segmental door and window heads, compatible window head and entablature, the sill course, keystones, bracket stone and key consoles -- combine to create a sophisticated and cohesive facade design; and that from this firehouse this engine company, has continued to fulfill its mission of protecting the lives and property of the citizens of New York.

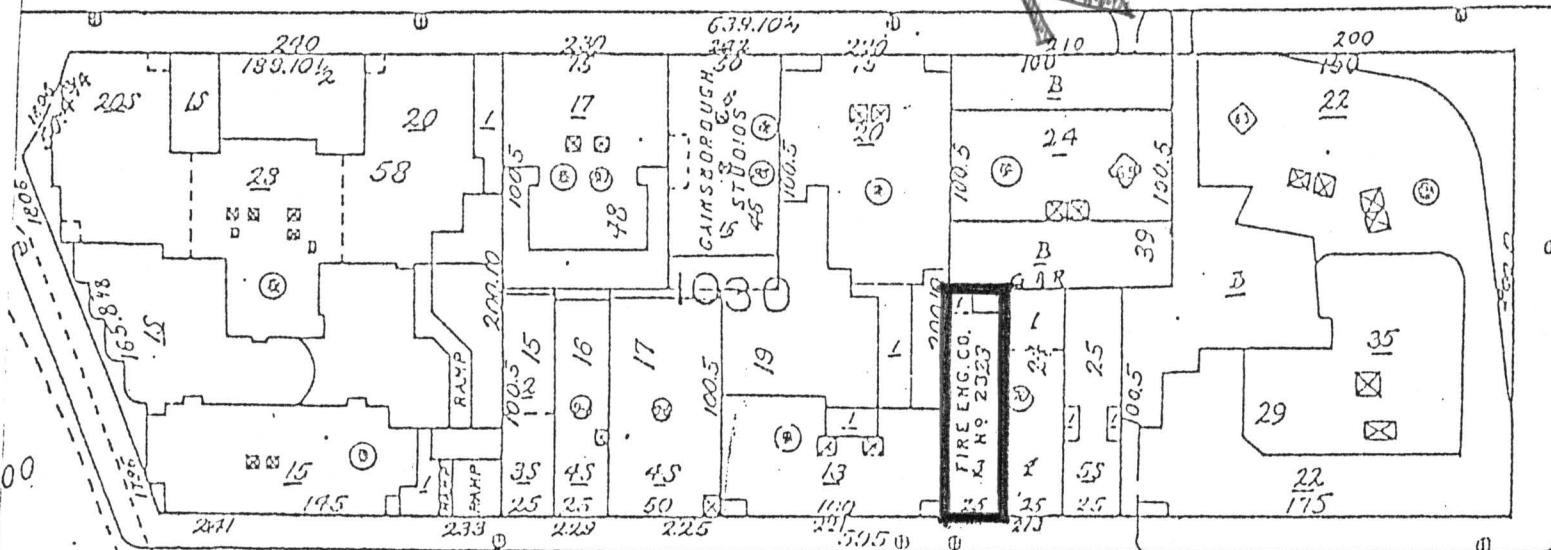
Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark Engine Company Number 23, 215 West 58th Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 1030, Lot 23, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark site.

### Bibliography

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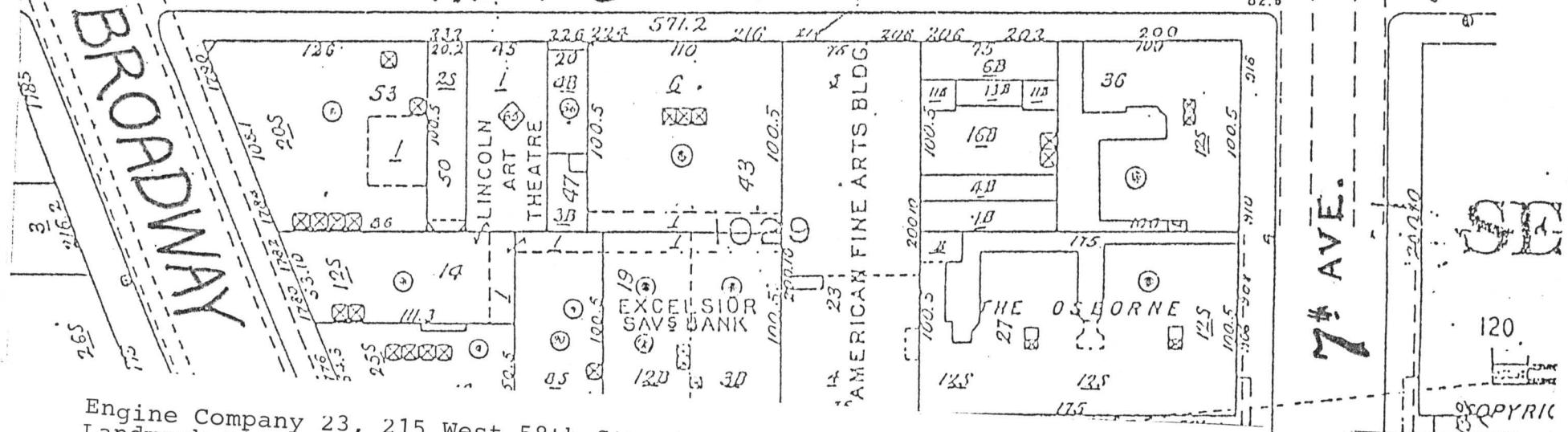
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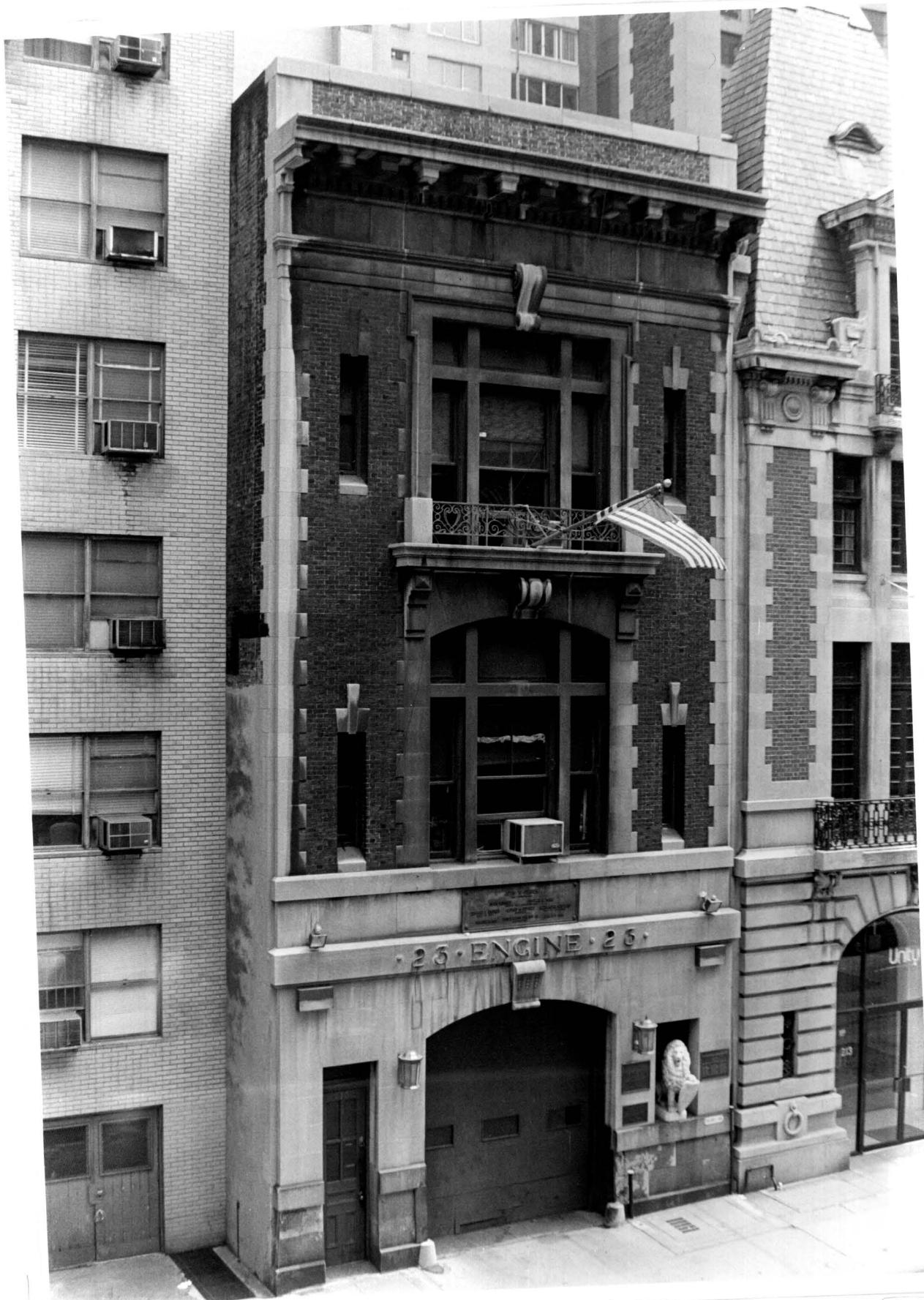
SOUTH

WEST 58<sup>TH</sup> ST.



Engine Company 23, 215 West 58th Street  
Landmark Site

Sanborn Manhattan Landbook  
1988-89



(Carl Forster)

Plate 1. Engine Company 23, 215 West 58th Street.

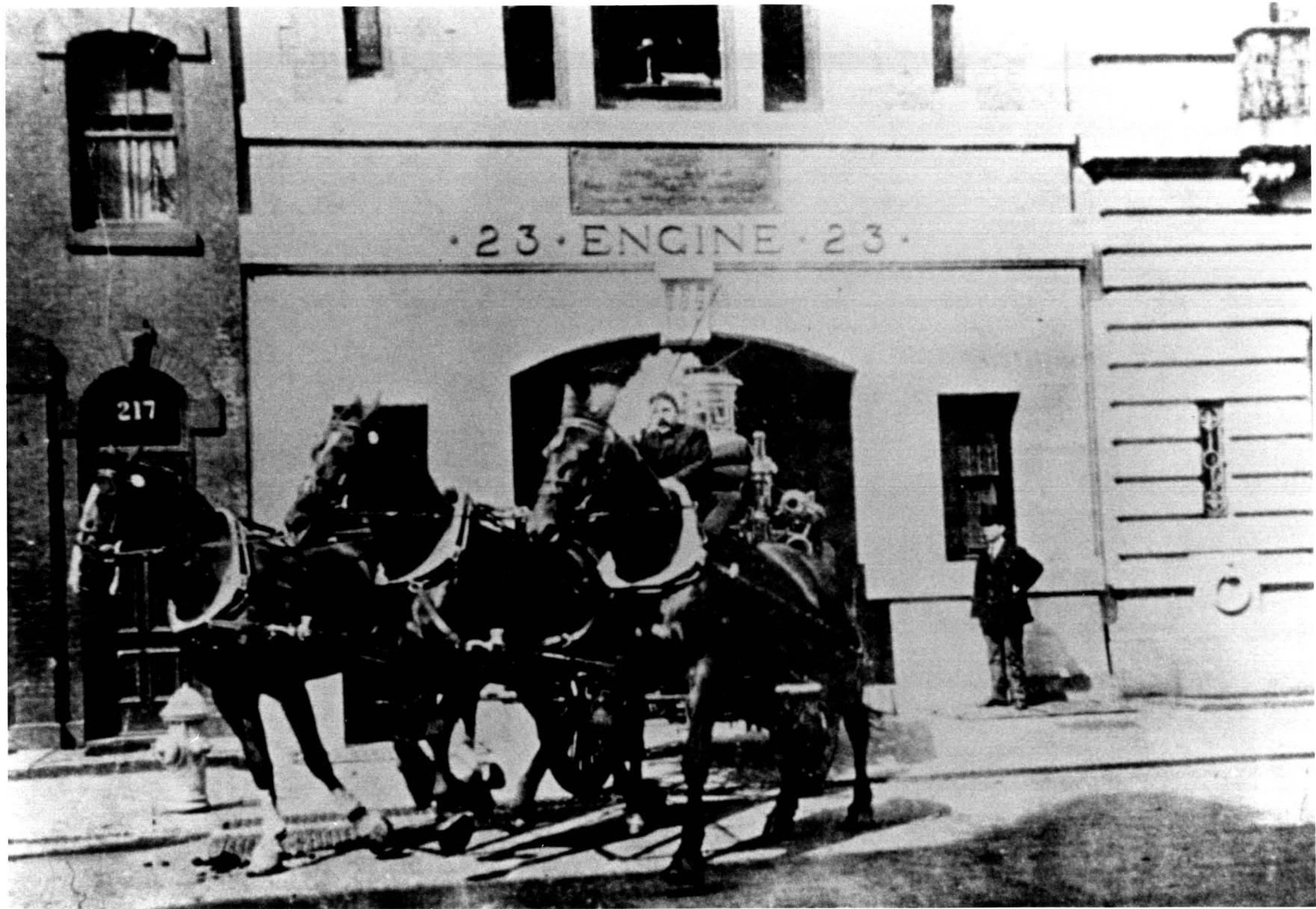


Plate 2. Engine Company 23, c. 1907.

(Collection: Batt. Chief  
Lawrence Sloan)

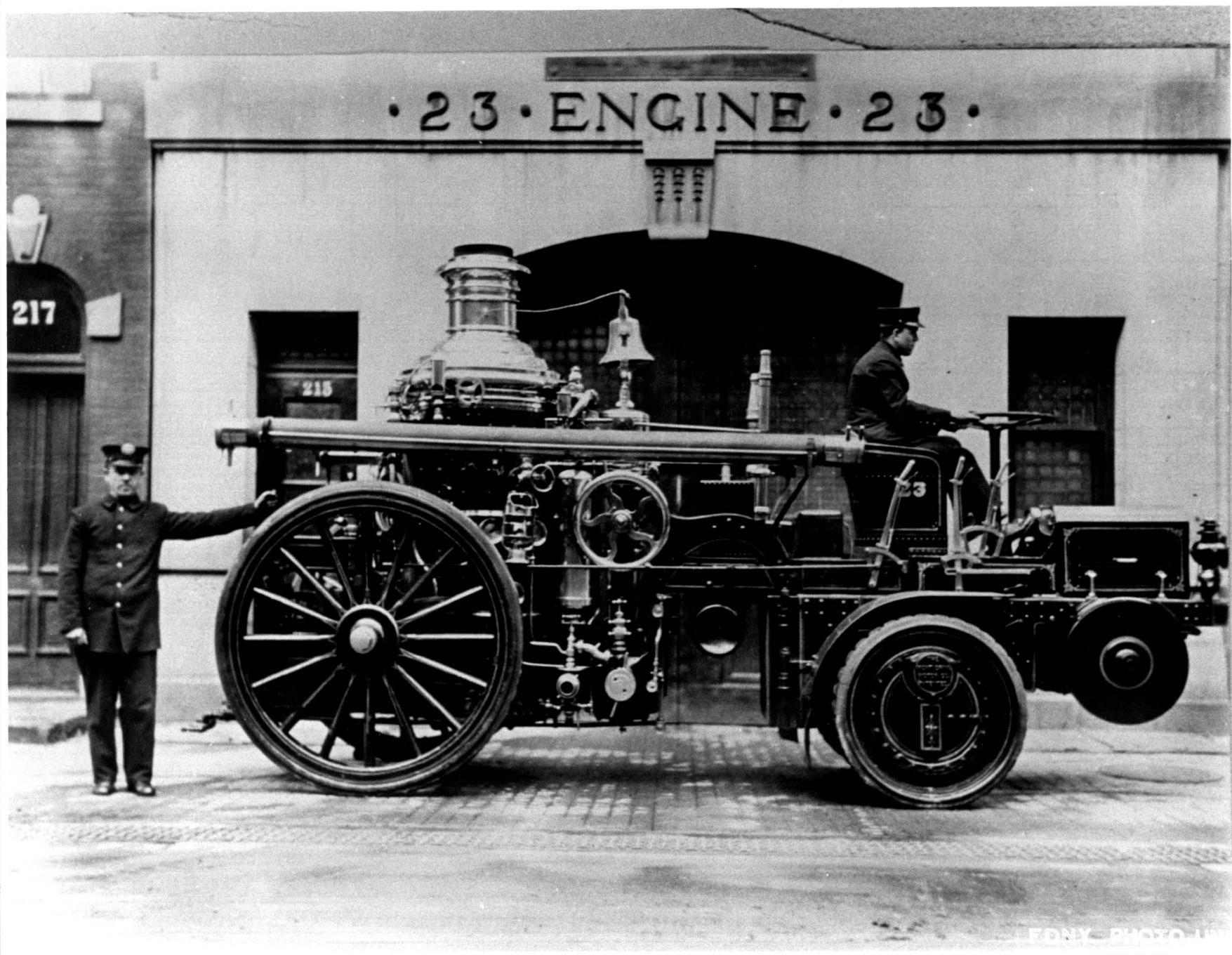
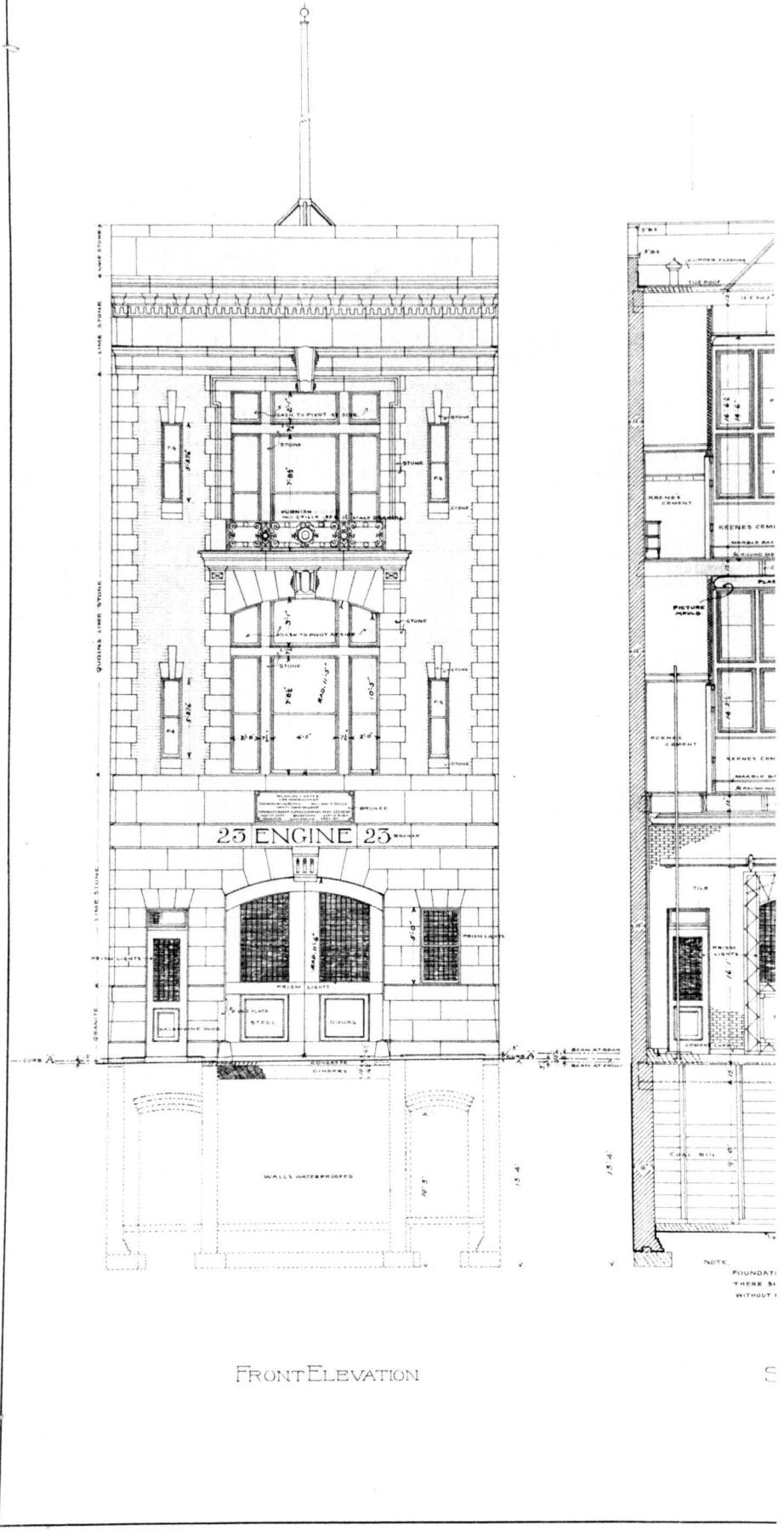


Plate 3. Engine Company 23, c. 1910.

(Collection: Batt. Chief  
Lawrence Sloan)



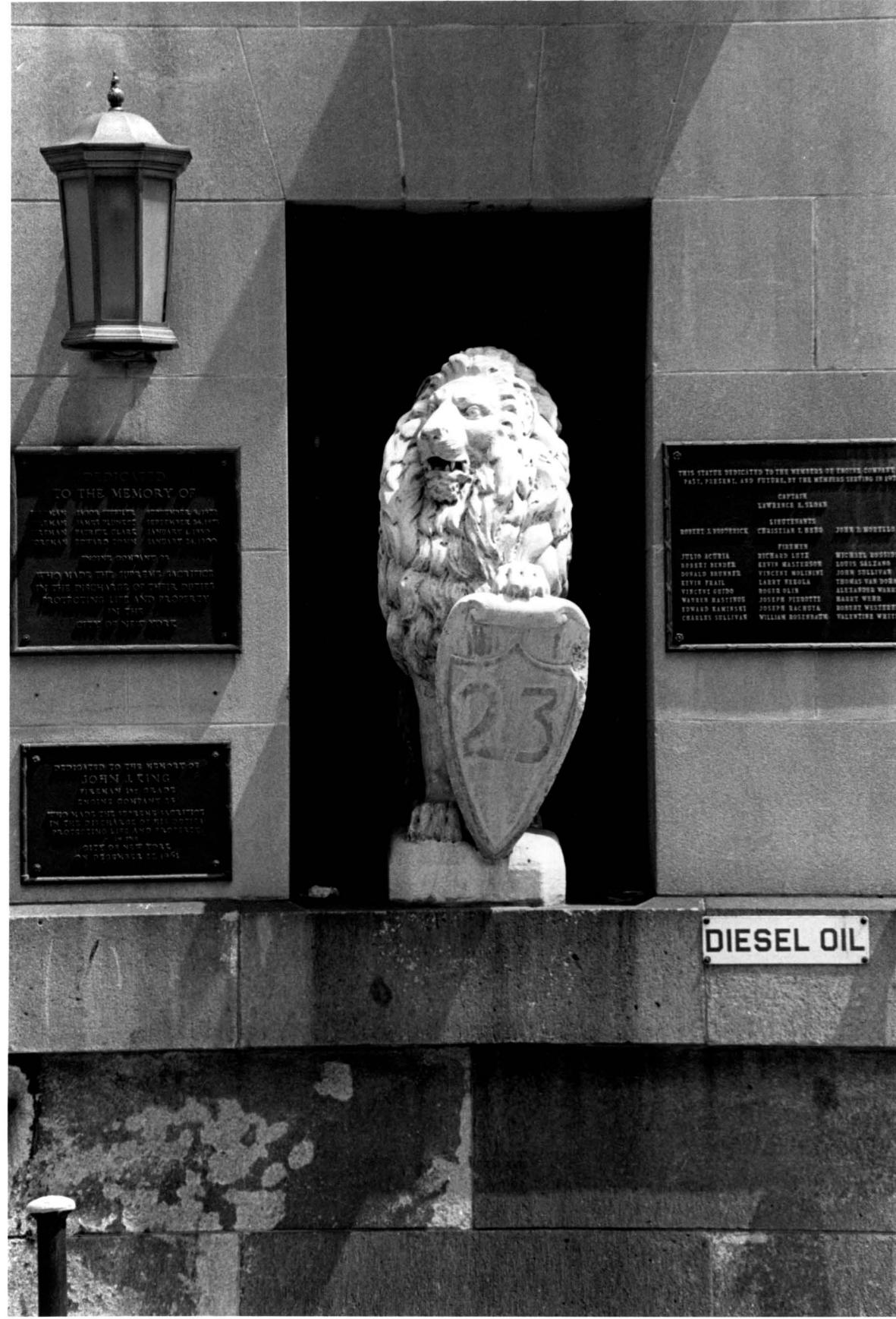
(Buildings Division,  
NYC Fire Department)

Plate 4. Drawing, front elevation, Engine Company 23, 1904.



(Carl Forster)

Plate 5. Engine Company 23.



(Carl Forster)

Plate 6. Detail, first story right hand (now blind) window embrasure and Engine Company 23's marble mascot.



(Carl Forster)

Plate 7. Detail, third story, entablature and parapet,  
Engine Company 23.