

Landmarks Preservation Commission
March 22, 1988; Designation List 202
LP-1627

PUBLIC SCHOOL 20 ANNEX, 160 Heberton Avenue, Borough of Staten Island. Built 1891 and 1897-1898; Architect, 1891 section, unknown; 1897-1898 section, James Warriner Moulton.

Landmark Site: Borough of Staten Island Tax Map Block 1020, Lot 1 in part consisting of the property bounded by a line beginning at the northeastern corner of the lot, extending southerly two hundred feet, westerly one hundred feet, northerly two hundred feet, and easterly one hundred feet to the point of beginning.

On September 15, 1987, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of Public School 20 Annex, and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 3). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three witnesses spoke in favor of designation. Four witnesses spoke in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

One of Staten Island's few remaining nineteenth-century public school buildings, the Public School 20 Annex (originally District School 6 of Northfield Township) is a large and architecturally distinctive structure built in the 1890s in the northern, most densely populated section of the island. Essentially Romanesque Revival in style, P.S. 20 Annex also displays elements drawn from other stylistic traditions, most notably the neo-Classical. This stylistic eclecticism, which is essentially vernacular in spirit imparts to the building its special appeal. The school reflects the diversity of design which characterized Staten Island's late nineteenth-century public school architecture. During this period independent school district boards were responsible for the design, construction and maintenance of the building within their district. The district administrative system was eliminated on Staten Island, following the consolidation of Greater New York in 1898, standardized designs were then introduced throughout the entire city.

The original section of the building was constructed in 1891. The addition was begun in 1897 and designed by James Warriner Moulton. While adjusting his design to the earlier one, Moulton also attempted to give the addition what he termed greater "strength" and a "more manly character."¹ The result is an interesting architectural dialogue of similarities and contrasts.

History

A portion of the site of the P.S. 20 Annex was acquired by the trustees of School District 6 in 1842, and no doubt construction of a school followed soon after.² Located in the rapidly growing shorefront village of Port Richmond, it was one of the first schools on Staten Island to have more than one room. An 1860 alumna described it as a modest two-story brick structure with an exterior staircase.³ The school's enrollment significantly increased in 1875 when it was designated a "union free school", receiving students residing outside the school district boundaries. In order to accommodate the new students, a wooden stable building immediately to the north of the original building was purchased in 1876 and converted to a school for the lower grades. In 1883 both buildings were condemned for sanitary reasons.⁴

The lengthy interval between the condemnation of the original school buildings and their replacement by the 1891 building resulted from "opposition to educational interests" within the Port Richmond community.⁵ Financing was apparently a central concern. Despite the efforts of the president of the district's board of trustees, F. W. Hulsebus, it was not until 1890 that a new school became the subject of a series of well-attended public meetings. After "spirited," even "acrimonious" discussion, the town finally authorized the school board to issue bonds in the amount of \$30,000.⁶ By January, 1891, bids had been received and construction contracts signed.⁷

The source of the design selected by Hulsebus and trustees Lewis F. Wright and David A. Pero, who was a carpenter and builder, remains unknown. Contemporary accounts suggest it was modeled after school buildings in upstate New York.⁸ At this time the New York State Department of Public Instruction had become seriously concerned with school building design, and the plans for the new building may have been obtained from it.⁹

The old brick building was demolished, and the wooden structure moved to the northwest. The cornerstone was laid on May 19, 1891 and the new building completed and occupied by mid-December.¹⁰

Architectural Style of the 1891 School

The dominant feature of the 1891 school building is its four-story, semi-projecting, square bell tower crowned by a tall pyramidal roof atop a round-arched arcade, a characteristic element in the Romanesque Revival style. District School 6 was the first on Staten Island to boast such an impressive tower, one which was a highly visible feature in the community, a striking expression of civic pride.

Not only the tower, but also the style of the building, was intended to be impressive. The stylistic eclecticism of the design suggests a somewhat naive approach to this objective, but it is precisely this quality of essentially vernacular eclecticism which makes the 1891 section so appealing. Certain features are compatible with the Romanesque Revival style of the tower--the wide, round-arched main entrance, the rockfaced brick and terra-cotta trim--but other features derive from quite different sources. The massing, for example, with the tower off-center evokes the

Italian villa style. The window treatment suggests yet another source-- round-arched in the upper story, segmentally-arched at the second story, and square-headed at the first-- it evokes the fenestration patterns of Italian neo-Renaissance palaces. The decorative terra-cotta panels in the gable peaks, the terra-cotta inset panel below the windows on the eastern face of the tower, and the angled soldier course of the eastern chimney are motifs drawn from the Americanized Queen Anne style.

It is the ornament derived from classical sources plays an even more prominent role. The sculpted terra-cotta lunettes on the tower feature urns and a winged cherub head set against scrolled acanthus, while the classical moldings (egg-and-dart, bead-and-reel) on the tower and main doorway, as well as the pediments of the gables, also suggest classical inspiration, again, in a fresh and naive execution.

This stylistic eclecticism and the prominent tower were to play a determining role in the design of the addition.

The 1897-1898 Addition

Although far larger than the small brick schoolhouse, the 1891 building was, even from the beginning, unable to accommodate an ever increasing enrollment.¹¹ The old wooden building was soon in use again for the lower grades, and soon again, condemned.¹² On the eve of the 1898 consolidation of Greater New York and the imminent dissolution of the district school system, Port Richmond's residents convened to discuss an addition. As one observer noted, "It is dangerous to leave these improvements to the Greater New York as it may be difficult to obtain them when required."¹³ As in 1890, objections were raised, but by late June, 1897 an issuance of bonds totalling \$43,000 was approved and by late September the plans of architect James Warriner Moulton had been approved and construction begun.¹⁴

Little is known about Moulton's career.¹⁵ He maintained offices in Manhattan between 1884 and 1896. Beginning in 1893 he apparently moved to Staten Island and also maintained an office in the Princes Bay area. By 1899 he is no longer listed in Staten Island directories. He was an active founding member of the Staten Island Chamber of Commerce (1895), and a vigorous proponent of city consolidation. Interested in long-range planning, he was concerned with Staten Island's future growth in terms of parks, water supply, sewers, drainage and roads. He designed another public school on Staten Island for the south shore village of Huguenot.

Moulton's design for the 1898 addition, while paying tribute to its predecessor, nevertheless proclaims its own identity. Fronting on Vreeland Street and Veterans' Park, an historic public square dating from the 1830s, it commands a prestigious location, one which Moulton used to advantage. In a very detailed analysis published in a local newspaper, he explained that he had been "somewhat handicapped by the conditions of design imposed by the old brick building."¹⁶ Citing "the rockfaced texture of the walls and the alignment of belt courses, windows, etc." and the need to "conform pronouncedly to the Romanesque style," he also stated his intention to correct what he perceived as the "somewhat weak and veneered effect of the walls." He wished to give "the appearance of strength and massiveness to the new . . . a manly character to the whole building."

Aside from the purely practical considerations of joining his addition to the 1891 building (the connection of corridors and the extension of structural systems), Moulton perceived his task as a matter of compromise and improvement. This intentional dialogue with the older structure led to many of his design decisions, and ultimately to an intricately related pairing. His design simplifies and clarifies the 1891 plan and massing. Symmetrically disposed, with bolder and larger compositional elements--especially the treatment of the tower--the addition succeeds in suggesting greater "strength." In detail, this same quality appears; cornices and moldings are more deeply projected and elaborately articulated, the neo-Classical ornament more abundant and sculptural. Window treatment was simplified--the six-over-two sash of the 1891 section abandoned for one-over-one sash. The fundamental success of the design is in maintaining harmony with the earlier, more vernacular building.

Completed after the city's consolidation, the addition was first occupied in September, 1898. Renamed Public School 20, it was the third largest of the island's public schools, with an enrollment approaching eight hundred.¹⁷ The continuing growth of Port Richmond in the early twentieth century made additional classrooms a necessity. The New York City Board of Education had adopted a policy of architectural standardization and employed architect C.B.J. Snyder whose designs were utilized in all five boroughs. A third building in the P.S. 20 complex, a neo-Gothic structure, was constructed in 1915 according to his designs.

Description: 1891 Section

This section of the building is three stories in height above a basement story. Twelve identically-sized classrooms in four interlocking sections form an irregular pinwheel-shaped plan. The New Street principal facade is dominated by the off-center four-story tower topped by tall pyramidal roof, now with black asphalt shingles replacing the original slate. Immense projecting clock faces are located on three of the four roof slopes.

A setback three-bay wide gable-roofed wing lies to the east of the tower, its short end fronting on Heberton Avenue. Another gabled wing is located west of the tower, its short end fronting New Street. The setback here is minimal, and the tower is not the fully projecting structure one assumes in the view from Heberton Avenue. A third gabled section, its longitudinal axis paralleling New Street, is located at the rear of the building on the western side and projects one bay beyond the section to which it is attached. Covered by a hipped roof, the other rear section forms a setback on Heberton Avenue.

While the secondary elevations employ smooth-faced brick, originally red, now painted yellow, the primary elevations are executed in small rock-faced brick laid in running bond, the rosy-tan color now obscured by grime. The use of rose-colored mortar adds to the building's general reddish cast, contrasting with the yellowish coloration of the 1897-1898 addition. Smooth-faced polychrome brick--red, tan, black and gray-- is used in several combinations to form bandcourses, emphasize window openings and outline the arched openings in the upper story of the tower. Bright red smooth-faced brick forms the recessed round-arched surround of the main entry portico.

Terra-cotta trim, cast to imitate rough-cut stone, is used for the water table, window sills, framing of the first-story windows, sculpted lunettes, plaques, and the quoining at the second and third stories of the tower. Patterned terra-cotta tiles fill the gable peaks facing New Street and Heberton Avenue and form an inset panel on the eastern face of the tower.

The main entry landing and stairs are executed in dark gray granite (the bottom step replaced in concrete), as are the basement-story sills and lintels. Cornices, with small, closely set foliate brackets, are of metal, now painted yellow.

Single and double dormers, which appear on all elevations, are faced with wood paneling and contain decoratively detailed gables. The original dormer sash (its configuration is unknown) has been replaced.

Along with the tall brick original chimney is a taller one on the western side of the building, added at an undetermined later date. Fire-stairs and door openings at the landing platforms at each story are also later, twentieth-century additions. Other alterations include replacement of sash (the original sash was six-over-two) and changes to the original entryway doors and transom.

Description: 1897-98 Section

This addition is connected to the earlier building at the south by a three-story hyphen. Set some distance back from Heberton Avenue, the elaborate facade of this linking element, together with the flanking sections, forms a spacious entry courtyard. A two-story wing attached to the rear of the hyphen originally housed the principal's office at the first story, and a room for the teachers above. The main section of the addition accommodates twelve classrooms and an attic-level auditorium. Square in plan with a tall hipped roof, it is intersected at mid-point by a four-story gabled east-west wing. This wing provides a striking compositional foil for the imposing five-story facade tower which fronts on Vreeland Street.

Except for the three bays north of the intersecting wing, the secondary elevations, like those of the earlier structure, are of smooth-faced brick, originally red and now painted. Elsewhere the facing is similar but not identical to that used earlier. The small rock-faced brick, appears more yellowish than its predecessor, although the rose-colored mortar has been duplicated.

The earlier smooth-faced polychrome brick has been abandoned and replaced with a proliferation of terra-cotta detail. Terra cotta cast to imitate rock-faced stone appears at the water table and window sills. Classically-inspired terra cotta plays a much enlarged role. Concentrated on the tower and hyphen, it is also used throughout at the first and second story windows. Tall enframing lintels feature keystones adorned with idealized female heads. Sculpted lunettes are located above both main doorways. The Heberton Avenue panel includes putti surrounded by scrolled acanthus and the implements of learning--books, a slate, inkwell and a handbell. A mandorla flanked by putti and enclosing an idealized female face dominates the tower entryway lunette; the background is filled with

swags and ribbons. Other notable tower ornament includes the elongated Ionic capitals which serve as window sills, and the frieze-like zone punctuated by small square windows. This frieze section is bordered by classically inspired cornice moldings and contains swags and wreaths between the windows. The gable oculus of the Heberton Avenue elevation contains a hefty wreath and classical moldings encircling a bearded face.

Comparison with early twentieth-century views reveals several significant alterations. Balustrades at the base of the arched openings in the third story have been removed as have those along the catwalk between this level of the tower and the roof slope to the immediate south. The ridge cresting of the hipped roof has also disappeared. Paneled wooden doors in the tower entryway have been replaced by metal doors; the transom arrangement, if not the glazing, appears original. Similar alterations seem to have been made to the Heberton Avenue entrance.

Except for the brick dormer of the Heberton Avenue facade, the rooftop dormers repeat while enlarging the design of the 1891 dormers. Here too the dormers have lost the original sash and the arched openings have been altered to provide fire exits. The original sash throughout appears to have been one-over-one.

Exterior metal fire-stairs on the eastern and western elevations were apparently added at the same time as those of the 1891 section. The four-story stair tower on the western elevation is also an addition.

Report edited by:

Nancy Goeschel

NOTES

This report is a condensed and edited version of a fuller report researched and written by Dr. Shirley Zavín of the Survey Department of the Landmarks Commission. This original version is available in the Commission's research files, and should be consulted for additional information and bibliography.

1. "For a Fine Structure," The Staten Island, Oct. 2, 1897.
2. Richmond County, Deeds, vol. 9, p. 290. (August 1, 1842.) Two lots on Heberton Street conveyed from the estate of David Mersereau to the Trustees of School District 6, \$117.50. Since the school district had existed for a number of years prior to 1842, an earlier school building at another location be assumed. See: Board of Education of the City of New York, Staten Island: A Resource Manual for School and Community, (New York: Board of Education of the City of New York, 1964), p. 72.
3. "Mrs. A. E. Hillyer Member of the Class of 1860 , P.S. 20 Tells of Recollections of Old Days at the Little Old Red Schoolhouse." (Clipping from an unidentified newspaper, July 2, 1915, Staten Island Historical Society archives.
4. "The New Public School: Cornerstone Laid with Appropriate Exercises, " The Staten Islander, May 20, 1891.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. "Trustees of Port Richmond Union Free School Have Made the Various Contracts," The Staten Islander, January 31, 1891.
8. "The New Public School."
9. Beginning in 1887 the New York State Department of Public Instruction assumed an active role in promoting improved school architecture. A nationwide design competition that year solicited plans for a variety of schoolhouse types. The nineteen winning designs were published in a widely circulated booklet in 1888 and reproduced in the State Superintendent's Thirty-fifth Annual Report. Working drawings, specifications and estimates for these designs could be obtained on request from the Department of Public Instruction. The Superintendent reported widespread interest and requests received from across the country. See: State of New York: Department of Public Instruction, Thirty-fourth Annual Report of the State Superintendent, (Albany: James B. Lyons, State Printer, 1888).
10. "A School Building's Cost," The Staten Islander, December 5, 1891.
11. "Committee Appointed to See About an Addition to The Building," The Staten Islander, May 1, 1897.

12. "Port Richmond's Needs," The Staten Islander, June 19, 1897.
13. Ibid.
14. "To Enlarge the School," The Staten Islander, June 26, 1897. "For a Fine Structure," The Staten Islander, Oct. 2, 1897.
15. Information about James Warriner Moulton has been obtained from the following sources: Dennis S. Francis, Architects in Practice: New York City 1840-1900; (New York Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records, 1979), p. 56; Proceedings of the Staten Island Chamber of Commerce, (New Brighton: Standard Book & Job Print, 1895); In the Matter of the Hearing in Relation to "The Greater New York" Held Before the Sub-Committee of the Joint Committee on the Affairs of Cities; Transmitted to the Legislature February 25, 1896, (Albany and New York: Wynkoop, Hallenbeck Crawford Co., State Printers, 1896), pp. 620-623; "For Park Commissioner," The Staten Islander, May 22, 1897; Staten Island Institute of Arts & Sciences, Architecture Collection.
16. "For a Fine Structure." This anonymous article in The Staten Islander was either authored by Moulton or directly quoted from a presentation made by him at the time construction documents were signed.
17. New York City: Borough of Richmond School Board, Minutes of the School Board, (New York: Department of Education City of New York, January 5, 1899), p. 316.

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 Public School 20 Annex 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, the Public School 20 Annex is one of Staten Island's few remaining nineteenth-century public school buildings and is a large and architecturally distinctive structure built in the 1890s in the northern, most densely populated section of the island; that essentially Romanesque Revival in style, the P.S. 20 Annex also displays elements drawn from other stylistic traditions, most notably the neo-Classical; that this stylistic eclecticism, essentially vernacular in spirit, imparts to the building its special appeal; that the building, constructed prior to Staten Island's consolidation with greater New York in 1898, reflects the diversity of design which characterized Staten Island's late nineteenth-century public school architecture; that the original section of the building, constructed in 1891, is echoed by the 1897-98 section, designed by James Warriner Moulton; that the result is an interesting architectural dialogue of similarities -- including the harmonious adaptation and reuse of certain materials, as well as stylistic and structural features.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534, of the Charter of the City of New York and Article 25, Chapter 3 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark Public School 20 Annex, 160 Heberton Avenue, Borough of Staten Island and designates Tax Map Block 1020, Lot 1 in part consisting of the property bounded by a line beginning at the northeastern corner of the lot, extending southerly two hundred feet, westerly one hundred feet, northerly two hundred feet, and easterly one hundred feet to the point of beginning as its Landmark Site.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Board of Education of the City of New York. Staten Island: a Resource Manual for School and Community. New York: Board of Education of the City of New York, 1964.
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- "To Enlarge the School." The Staten Islander, June 26, 1897.
- "Trustees of Port Richmond Union Free School Have Made the Various Contracts." The Staten Islander, January 31, 1891.



Architect: Unknown
Built: 1891

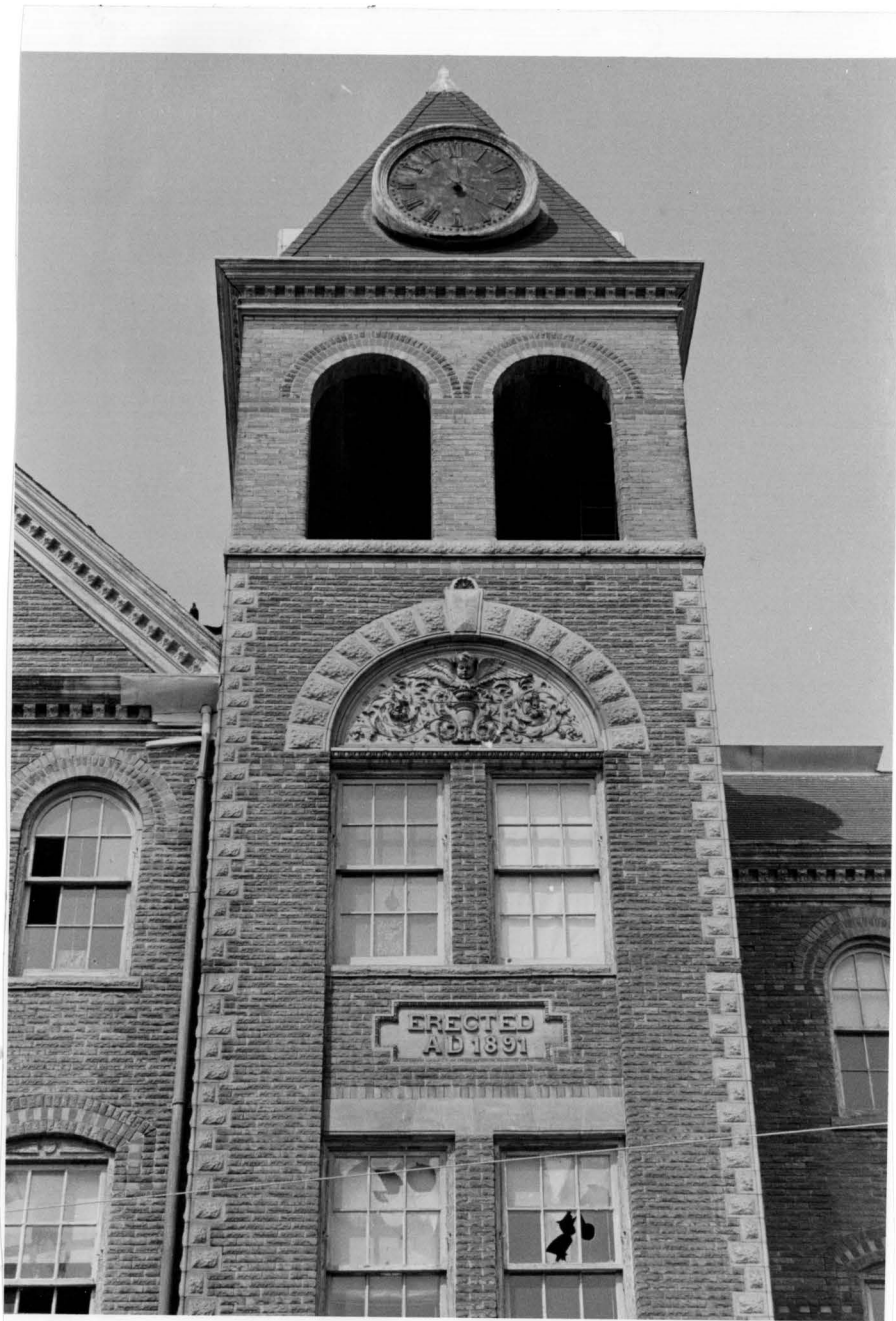
Public School 20 Annex: original building
160 Heberton Avenue
Staten Island

Photo credit: Carl Forster
Landmarks Preservation Commission

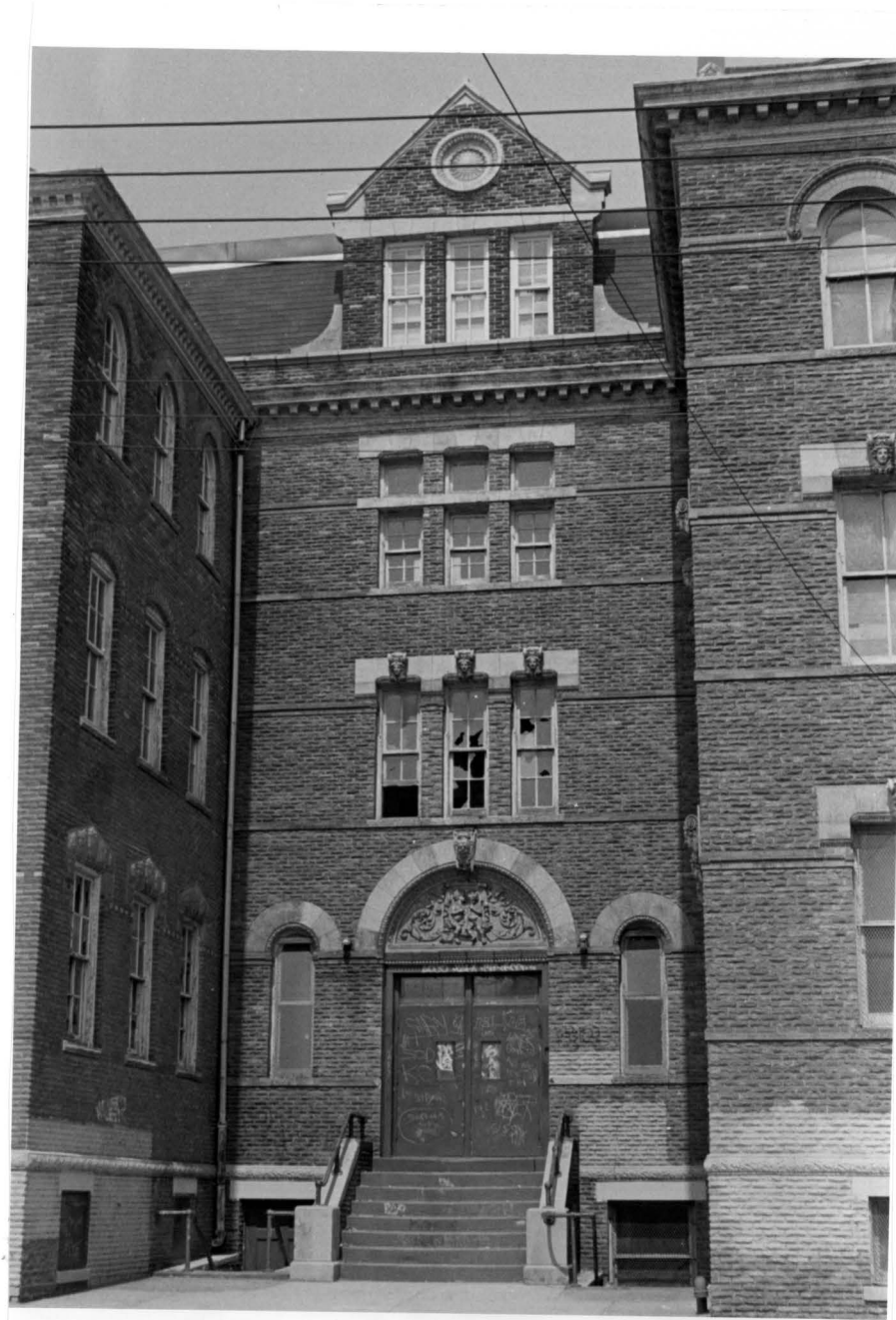


Architect: James Warriner Moulton Public School 20 Annex
Built: 1897-98 Addition
160 Heberton Avenue
Staten Island

Photo Credit: Carl Forster
Landmarks Preservation Commission



P.S. 20 Annex
Tower on the southern elevation of the 1891 building
Photo: Carl Forster



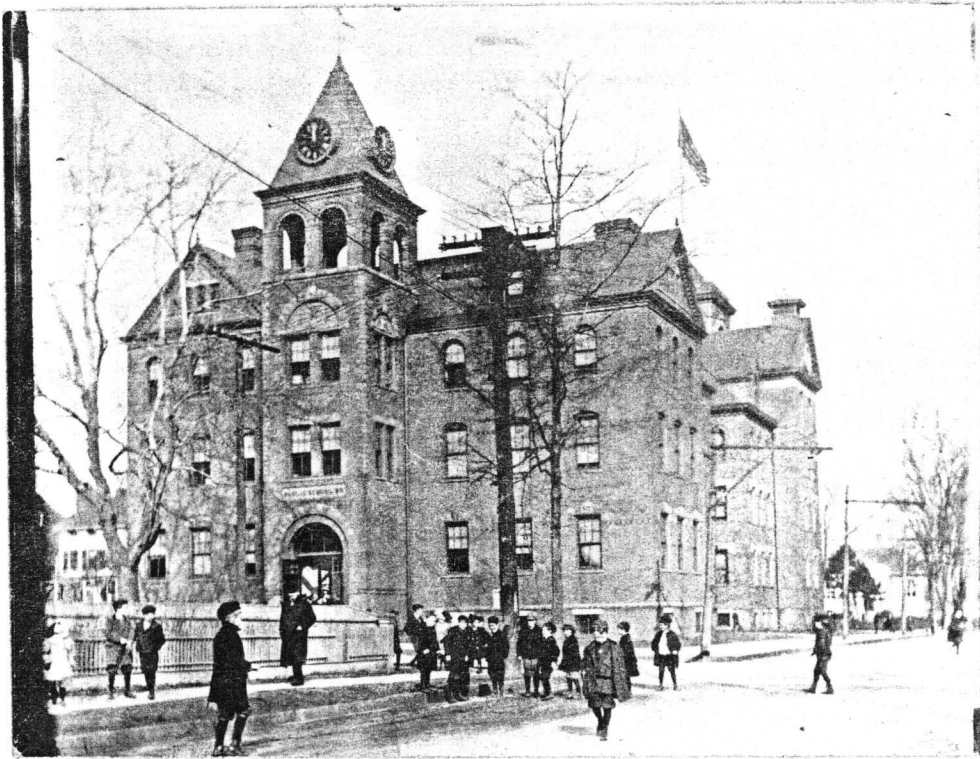
P.S. 20 Annex
Heberson Avenue entrance connecting the two buildings
Photo: Carl Forster



P.S. 20 Annex
Western elevations of the 1891 and 1897-1898 buildings
Photo: Carl Forster



P.S. 20 Annex
Heberton Avenue elevation (east) of the 1891 building
Photo: Carl Forster



P.S. 20 Annex
Old view of the 1891 building



P.S. 20 Annex
Detail of the tower entrance to the 1897-1898 building
Photo: Carl Forster

