

Landmarks Preservation Commission  
April 23, 1991; Designation List 235  
LP-1808

PUBLIC SCHOOL 86 (Irvington School), 220 Irving Avenue, Borough of Brooklyn.  
Built 1892-1893; architect James W. Naughton, Superintendent of Buildings of  
the Board of Education of the City of Brooklyn.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 3289, Lot 27.

On September 11, 1990, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of Public School 86 (Irvington School), 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. Three witnesses spoke in favor of designation. No witnesses spoke in opposition to designation. The Commission has also received a letter from the principal of the school in favor of designation, as well as many letters and other expressions of support from the pupils at the school.



Fig. 1, Public School 86

## Summary

Public School 86, a four-story brick and stone building erected between 1892 and 1893, was designed in the Romanesque Revival style by James W. Naughton, the Superintendent of Buildings for the Board of Education of the City of Brooklyn, and occupies an important position architecturally in the existing body of Naughton's work (fig. 1). Built to address the educational needs of children in the surrounding neighborhood of northern Bushwick which was developing as an urbanized residential area in the late nineteenth century, it is a handsome example of the urban school house which was an important and significant element in the nineteenth-century streetscape. Public School 86 is one of the few remaining nineteenth-century schools still standing within the city and used for its original purpose. It is an important building from a period of development when the American philosophy of education was evolving and the foundations for the educational system of today were being laid. Public School 86 is a reminder of the long history of commitment and dedication to public education by the people of Brooklyn.

## The Growth of Public Education in New York

The present public school system in New York, fully supported and maintained by public funds, developed slowly from the initial establishment under the Dutch of free, public elementary schools supported and jointly controlled by the civil authorities and the Dutch Reformed Church. For the Dutch, education was an important factor in colonial life and the presence of a school was an inducement for settlers in the New Netherlands colony. The first school was instituted on Manhattan Island in 1638.<sup>1</sup> Later, in 1649, the people of the colony, acting independently of the governor, Peter Stuyvesant, brought certain grievances about the governance of the New Netherlands to the States General of the Netherlands and advocated steps to improve conditions in the colony. Among the recommendations was the creation of a "...public school, provided with two good school masters."<sup>2</sup> The Dutch colony in Brooklyn consisted of six separate towns and each developed a separate though similar public education system. Bushwick, historically the town in which Public School 86 is located, hired its first school master in 1662.

...the magistrates of the village of Boswyck, appeared before the council (the colonial government), representing that they in their village, were in great need of a person who would act as clerk and schoolmaster to instruct the youth: and, that, as one had been proposed to them, viz.: Boudewyn Manout, from Crimpen op de lecq [a village in Holland] they agreed with him, that he should officiate as voorleser or clerk, and keep school for the instruction of the youth. For his [services] as clerk he was to receive 400 guilders in [wampum] annually; and, as schoolmaster, free house rent and firewood...<sup>3</sup>

The original school house in Bushwick stood on what is now the west side of Old Woodpoint Road between Conselyea Street and Skillman Avenue. New York City still has an example of such a school, the Voorleser House, a designated Landmark, in Richmondtown on Staten Island. Built about 1695, it is the oldest elementary school building in the United States (fig. 2).

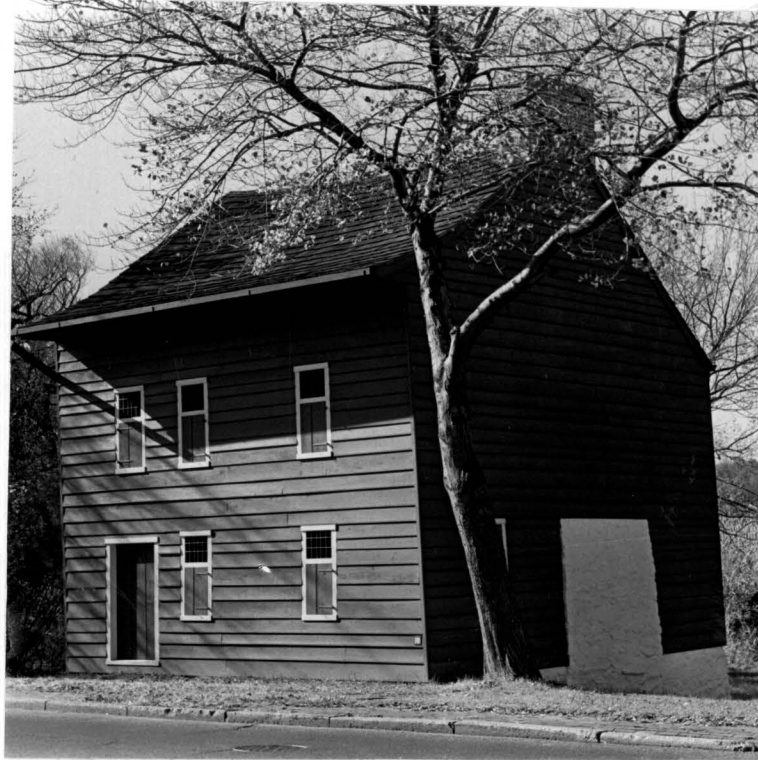


Fig. 2, Voorleser House

Under English rule, there was no system of publicly supported schools as there had been under the Dutch, rather, private academies appeared similar to those in England. These private academies were conducted in private residences, rented rooms, or in a building erected specifically for that purpose. Erasmus Hall Academy in Flatbush, Brooklyn, although it was built in 1786 after English rule, is an example of this building type. It is a designated New York City Landmark (fig. 3). It was not until after the American Revolution that New York State undertook the task of creating a public education system. In 1789, the New York State legislature set aside about 40,000 acres of public land for sale to provide funds for the support of schools in the state's townships. Six years later in 1795, the legislature set aside funds for "...encouraging and maintaining schools." In fact, during the period between the first meeting of the state legislature in 1777 and 1851, nearly 1000 pieces of legislation concerning education were passed. During this period it was established "...that the



Fig. 3, Erasmus Hall Academy

state is definitely responsible for the education of the people and must carry the financial burden of this education..." and a coordinated system of public education was instituted.<sup>4</sup>

The town of Bushwick became part of the City of Brooklyn in 1855 and its school system became the responsibility of the Brooklyn Board of Education which had been created twelve years before. The subsequent history of education in Brooklyn reflects the city's rapid population growth and industrialization. While coping with chronic shortages, overcrowding, and bureaucratic delays, the Board of Education promoted innovation in school design, improvements in school health and safety standards, and the steady improvement in the level of education of the youth of Brooklyn. When Public School 86 opened in December of 1893, Brooklyn enjoyed one of the most comprehensive and extensive public education systems of any city in the United States.

## The Development of the Public School Building in Brooklyn

In Brooklyn, it is possible to trace the architectural evolution of the public school as a building type from an early simple form which is an integral part of its surroundings to one which dominates its environment, thus indicating the prominent role education came to play in the community. During the 1850s, Brooklyn began to be transformed from a small, semi-suburban town dependent on the neighboring city of New York and the outlying farms of rural Long Island into a densely populated industrialized city. As it changed, so did the architectural character of its public institutions, such as public schools. The Brooklyn Board of Education was founded in 1843 and its first schools were simple, modest structures closely related to residential architecture. The earliest extant public school building is former Public School 8 (1846, 1860) on Middagh Street in the Brooklyn Heights Historic District. A plain brick building rendered in a vernacular combination of the Greek Revival and the Italianate styles, it stands three stories above a high basement, is three windows wide, and is crowned by a pediment (fig. 4).<sup>5</sup> It is quite similar to contemporary rowhouses. However, a feature which distinguishes it from its domestic neighbors is its side yards. Unencumbered open space around a school was essential to provide adequate natural light and ventilation for the interior spaces. Due to the high cost of land in urban areas, the size of school property was restricted. Whenever possible, the Board of Education at first would acquire corner sites for its schools which allowed for two facades to face the open space created by the streets. When larger schools were necessary, entire blockfronts were acquired.

Fig. 4  
former P.S. 8



By the end of the 1850s, particularly after 1858, the year in which Samuel B. Leonard was elected Superintendent of Buildings by the Board, public schools began to acquire a readily identifiable character as public institutional buildings. The style Leonard preferred at the time was the Rundbogenstil, a style related to the Romanesque Revival as expressed in contemporary German architecture.<sup>6</sup> Some of the qualities that recommended the style were: rapidity of construction, economy of material and workmanship, durability, ample fenestration, and the ease of adding extensions without gross violation to the original fabric. All these qualities made the style ideal for public schools. Former Public School 13 (1861) on Degraw Street in Cobble Hill, former Public School 15 (1860) on the northeast corner of Third Avenue and State Street, Public School 34 (1867, 1870, 1887-88), a designated New York City Landmark, on Norman Avenue in Greenpoint (fig. 5), and Public School 111 (1867, 1888), also a designated Landmark, on Sterling Place and Vanderbilt Avenue in Prospect Heights (fig. 6) are extant examples of Leonard's Rundbogenstil schools. Although they possess an institutional character, these buildings were in scale with their surroundings and did not overpower or overwhelm their neighbors; the schools blended with their environment rather than commanded it.

In the 1870s, Leonard change his style for schools and began to design in the French-inspired Second Empire style whose prominent characteristics are pavilions which add plasticity and verticality to the facade, and mansards which enhance the pavilions and create bold silhouettes. A new feature introduced at this time was the tall, central entrance tower (figs. 7,8). The neighborhood public school was now a symbol of cosmopolitan modernity recalling the grand buildings and palaces of Napoleon III's newly redesigned Paris. The mansarded public school with its tower now vied with the church steeple as the most prominent element in the skyline of a nineteenth-century residential neighborhood. The change in architectural style also marks a change in the attitude toward public education. The idea of publicly supported universal education which took firm root in the 1840s, was now one of the most important responsibilities of government and this new importance was reflected in the new architectural prominence of the public school building.

It was also during the 1870s that changes in teaching methods caused important changes in the interior planning of schools. Early teaching methods required large, undivided assembly spaces with smaller, ancillary classrooms. In the 1870s, there was a shift in emphasis to specialized instruction requiring more classrooms and less assembly space. Important advances were also made in fireproof construction and sanitary facilities. One of the first schools designed with this new plan was Leonard's Public School 24 (1873) in Bushwick (fig. 9).<sup>7</sup> Now demolished, it stood on the corner of Wall and Beaver Streets.

Fig. 5  
P.S. 34

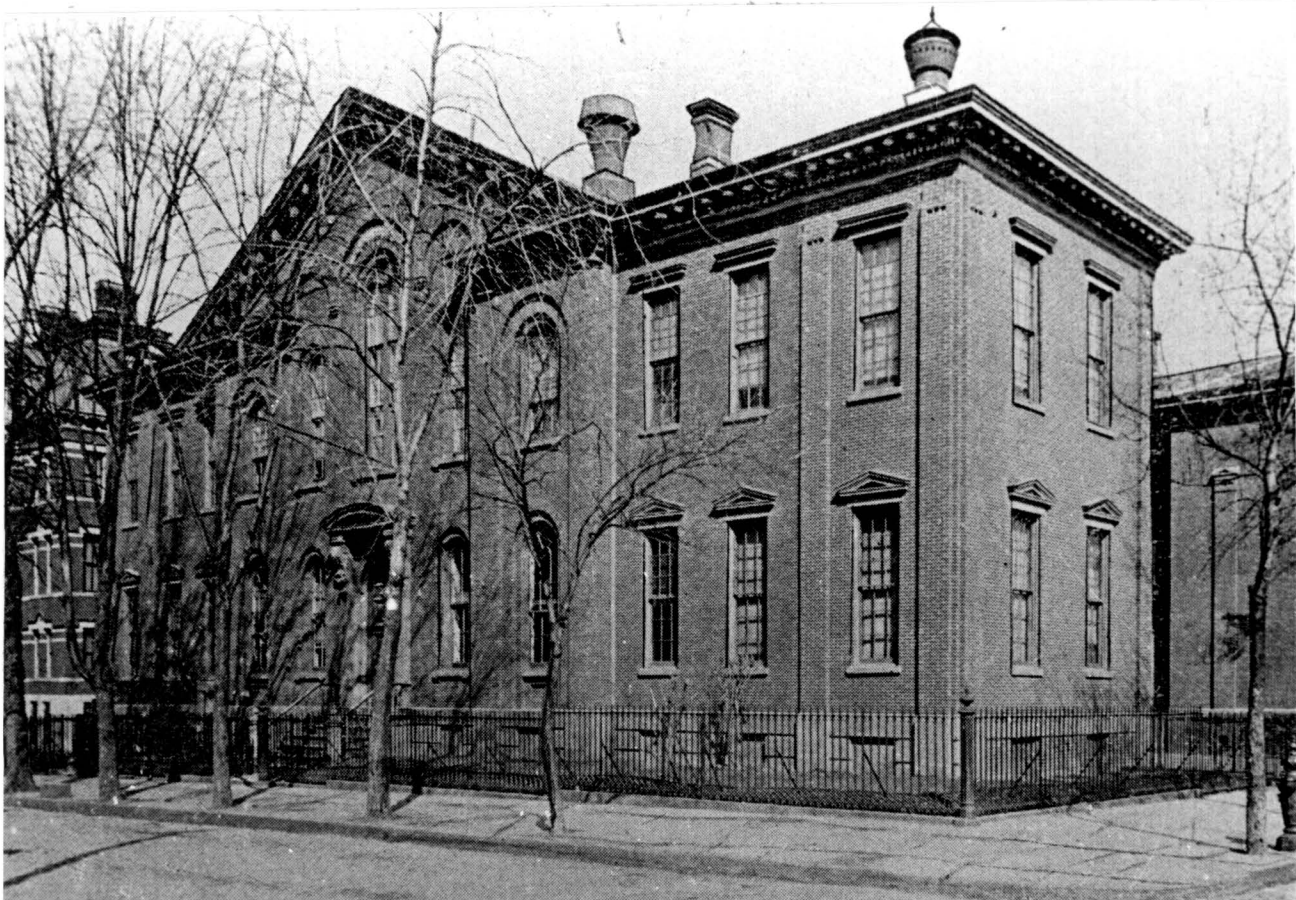


Fig. 6  
P.S. 111

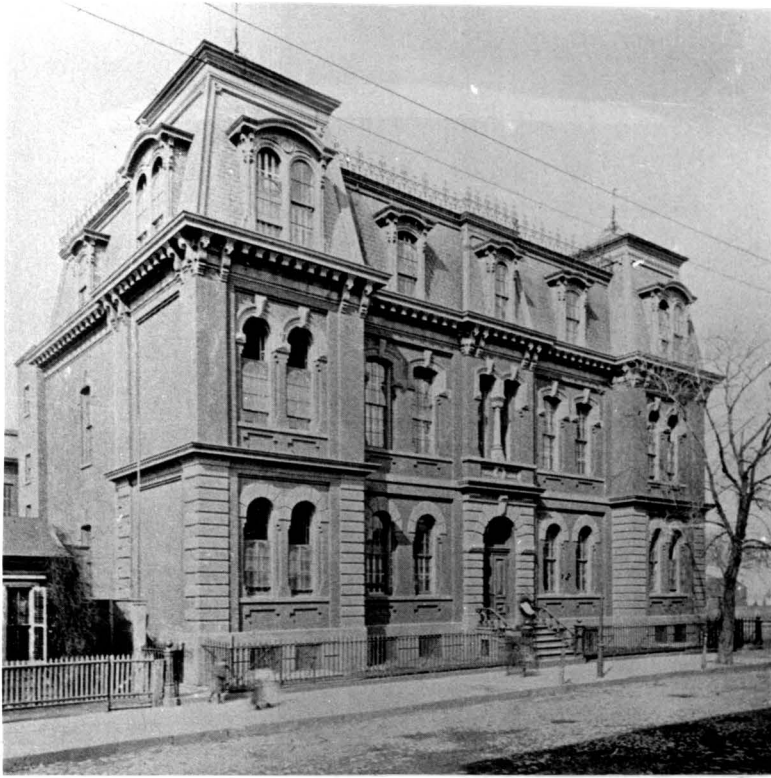


Fig. 7  
Public School 23  
Demolished

Fig. 8  
Public School 25  
Demolished

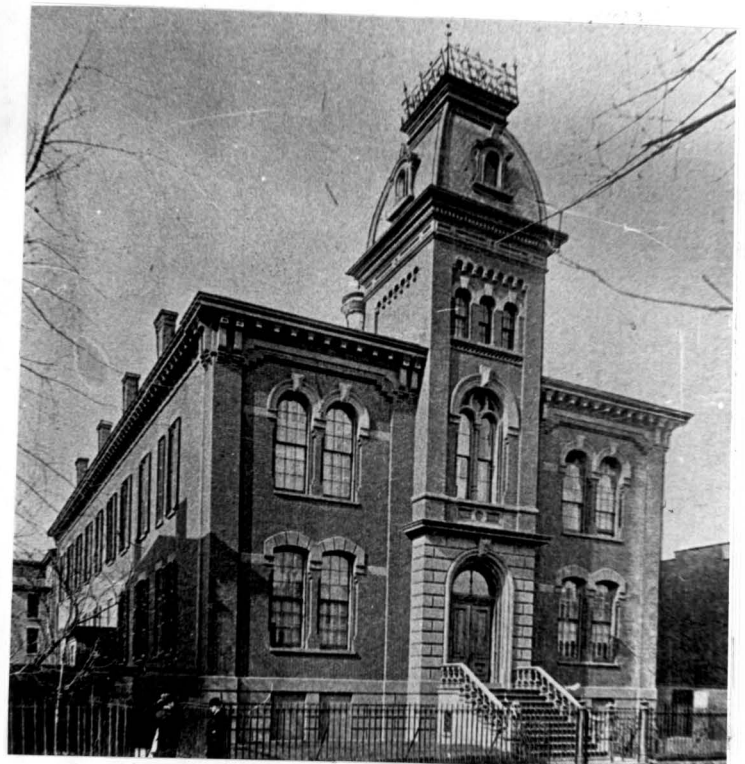


Fig. 9  
Public School 24  
Demolished

## The Architect<sup>8</sup>

James W. Naughton (1840-1898), the architect of Public School 86, succeeded Leonard as the Superintendent of Buildings for the Board of Education of the City of Brooklyn, serving from 1879 until his death on February 12, 1898. During this period, he was responsible for the design and construction of over 100 schools, over two-thirds of all public school buildings erected in the City of Brooklyn during the nineteenth century.

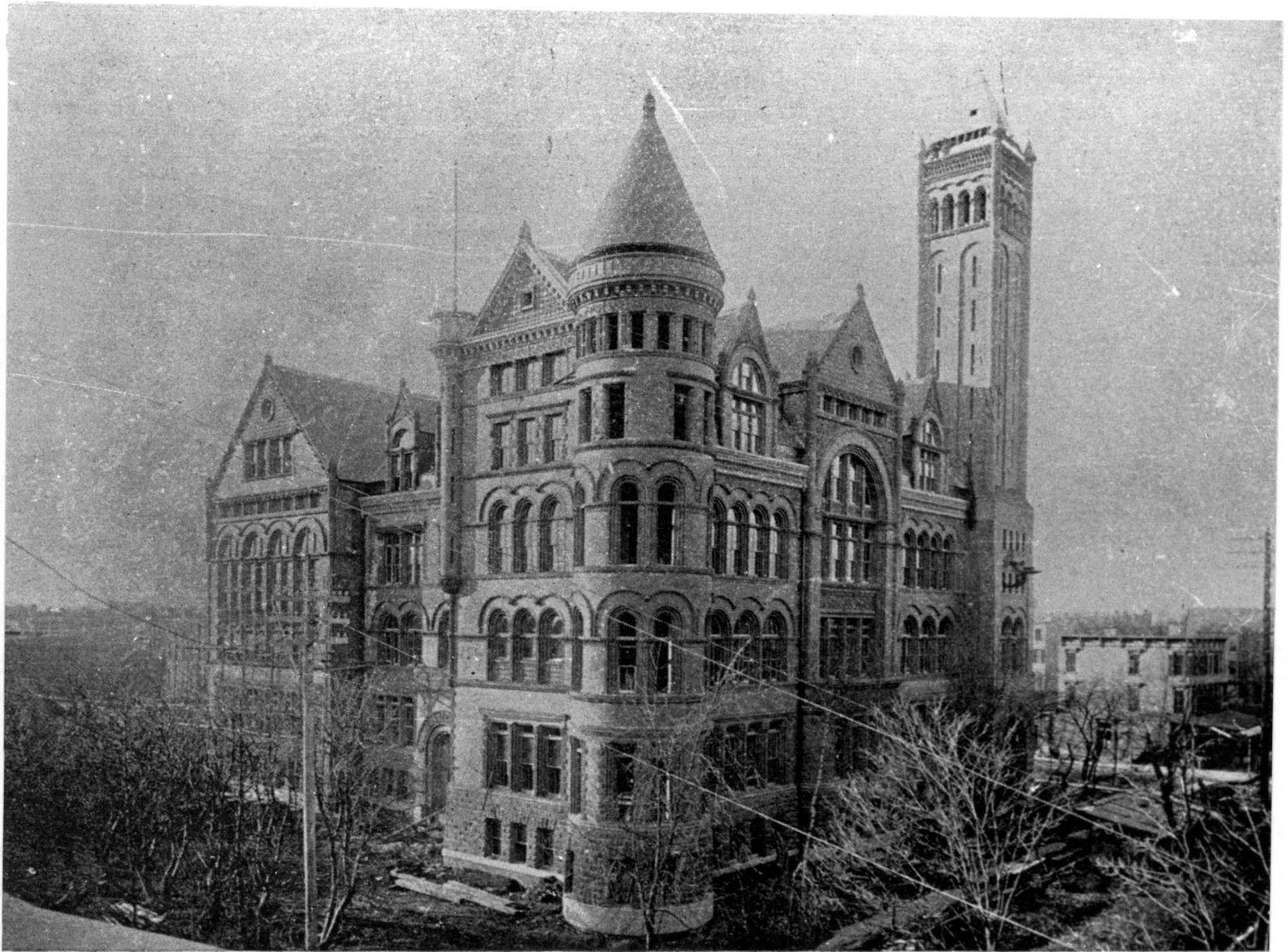
Naughton had been born in Ireland and brought to this country by his parents in 1848. Receiving his early education in Brooklyn, he apparently left school after his father died in 1854 and worked at the Brooklyn dry goods firm of Sweetzer & Bro. for about a year before migrating to Milwaukee, Wisconsin. There, in 1855, he began a four-year apprenticeship in the firm of J.A. Douglas, Architects and Builders, which had been started by James Douglas and his brother, Alexander, in 1847. When Naughton joined the firm, it enjoyed a well-established reputation in Milwaukee, having built the old City Hall, the first St. Gall's Church, Holy Trinity Church, and St. John's Cathedral as well as being involved in the construction of the first bridge over the Milwaukee River.<sup>9</sup> Undoubtedly, Naughton's years with the Douglas firm must have given him a thorough training and education in the building trades. While he was still with the firm, the founder, James Douglas, received a commission to design and build the Grace Episcopal Church (1855-58, 1870) in Madison, the state capital.<sup>10</sup> Naughton is reported to have studied architecture at the University of Wisconsin at Madison between 1859 and 1861 which, at that time, offered courses related to architecture in its Department of Science.<sup>11</sup>

In 1861, Naughton returned to Brooklyn and continued his architectural studies in the evenings at the Cooper Union in Manhattan while working in the building industry during the day.<sup>12</sup> He became active in Brooklyn politics and was elected a ward supervisor in 1871. In 1874, he was appointed Superintendent of Buildings for the city for two years and then served as Superintendent of Construction and Repair for Kings County until 1879 when he was elected Superintendent of Buildings for the Board of Education.

The schools designed while Naughton held tenure as the Superintendent were in a number of styles and in a free combination of those styles current during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. His schools also have architectural references to earlier nineteenth-century styles used by his predecessor, Samuel B. Leonard. Some of Naughton's schools follow the form of the "layered palazzo scheme"<sup>13</sup> developed in the 1850s from the Italianate style, with details such as pilaster strips and corbelling from the Rundbogenstil of the late 1850s and early 1860s, and incised ornament and brick panelling usually found in the neo-Grec of the 1870s. If the site was large enough, Naughton planned a school with a central section and flanking pavilions, a plan associated with the French Second Empire style. Two of his most famous schools both stylistically and because of their academic importance were the Girls' High School (1885-86; 1891 wing demolished; 1912) on Nostrand Avenue (fig. 10) and the Boys' High School (1891) on Marcy Avenue (fig. 11), both designated New York City Landmarks. Girls' High



GIRLS' HIGH SCHOOL.  
NOSTRAND AVENUE, CORNER HALSEY STREET.



BOYS' HIGH SCHOOL,  
MARCY AVENUE, CORNER OF PUTNAM.

Fig. 11

School exhibits a strong Victorian Gothic influence and Boys' High School is one of the finest Richardsonian Romanesque buildings in the city. Public School 9 (1895), a designated New York City Landmark, on the corner of Vanderbilt Avenue and Sterling Place is rendered with Renaissance Revival elements. Naughton was also responsible for enlarging many existing school buildings which had been constructed during Leonard's tenure.

### The History of the Neighborhood

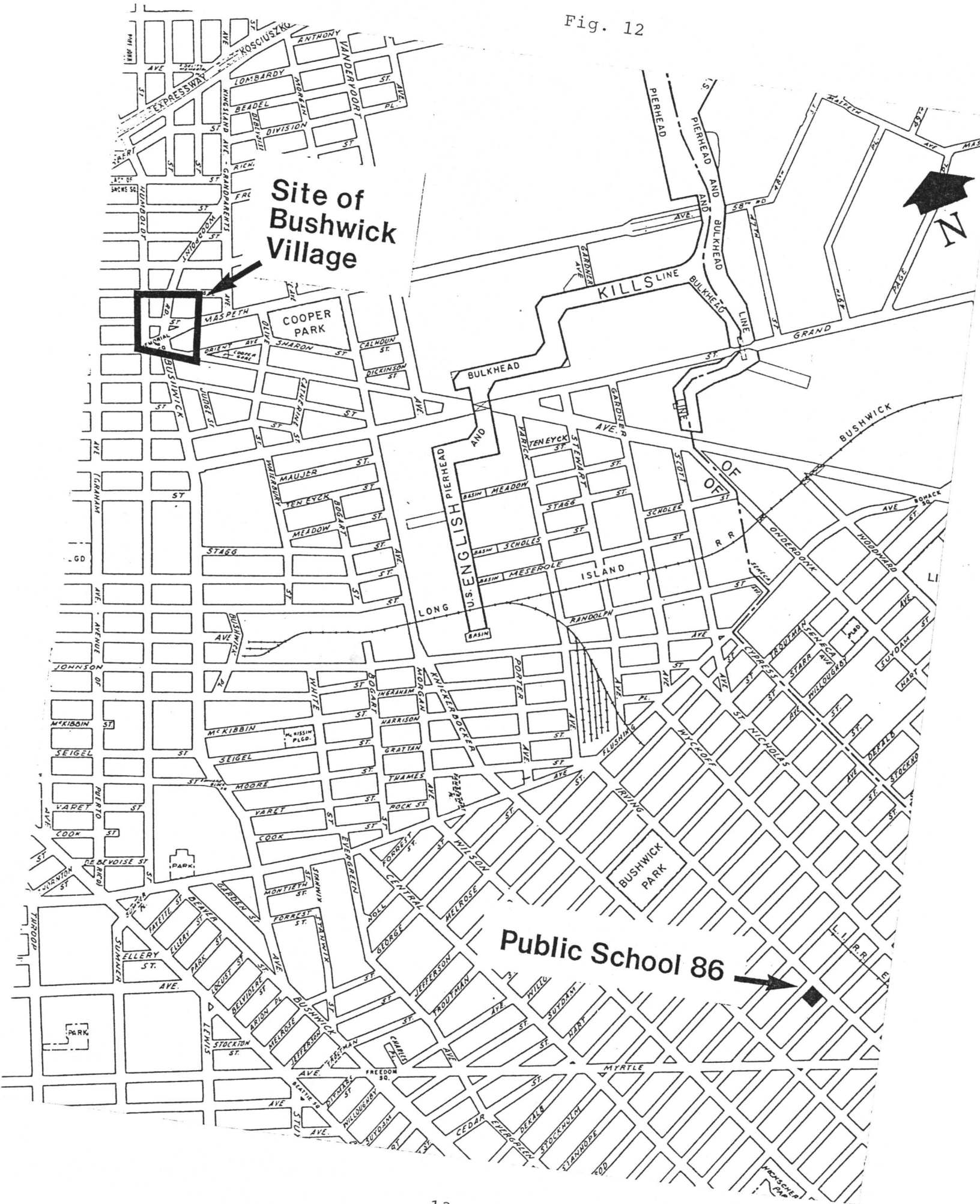
Public School 86 is located within the historic boundaries of the town of Bushwick near the present boundary line between Brooklyn and Queens. Bushwick is one of the earliest colonial settlements in New York, first occupied in the 1630s. One of the original six towns in Brooklyn, it remained a rural farming area until the mid-nineteenth century. The site of the center of the township, the village of Bushwick, is the present intersection of Bushwick Avenue, Old Woodpoint Road, Metropolitan Avenue, Maspeth Avenue, and Humboldt Street, which is northwest of Public School 86 (fig. 12). In 1852, Williamsburgh, the western and the most populous section of the township, became an independent city. Williamsburgh's municipal status ended three years later in 1855 when it and all of Bushwick were incorporated within the City of Brooklyn. Thereafter, until 1898 and Brooklyn's consolidation into Greater New York, Bushwick was known as Brooklyn's Eastern District.<sup>14</sup>

During the 1850s Bushwick began to lose its rural, agricultural landscape. Large numbers of Germans immigrated to New York following the political upheavals in central Europe in 1848. Many settled in Bushwick and began the development of Bushwick's most famous local industry, brewing. The area boasted a number of features attractive to the brewing industry: an abundant water supply, soil suitable for aging cellars, and convenient water and rail transportation. Henry R. Stiles, the notable Brooklyn historian, wrote in 1870:

That quarter of Brooklyn, the Eastern District...has been for some time the centre of the lager bier manufacturing interest in the Metropolitan District. Here are located some of the largest breweries in existence in the country. Surrounded by a population almost exclusively German...<sup>15</sup>

A second wave of development began after the construction of the elevated railroad along Myrtle Avenue in 1888, making the area an attractive alternative to congested downtown Brooklyn and lower Manhattan.<sup>16</sup> The present architectural character of the neighborhood of Public School 86 dates from this second phase of development, a twenty-year period between 1890 and 1910. The neighborhood consists primarily of three- and four-story multiple dwellings built of brick and rendered in the Romanesque Revival and the neo-Renaissance styles which were popular at the time. Public School 86 was built to serve the community that settled in the area during this second period of residential growth.

Fig. 12



Site of  
Bushwick  
Village

Public School 86

### Design and Construction

In October, 1890, the Board of Education passed a resolution authorizing the purchase of two lots on the southeast corner of Harmon Street and Irving Avenue as the site for Public School 86 at a cost not to exceed \$10,000.<sup>17</sup> The property was acquired the following month.<sup>18</sup> However, the start of construction was delayed for nearly two years. Preliminary plans and rough sketches of the school had been approved by the Board before January, 1892, and by the end of the year the building was under construction.<sup>19</sup> Public School 86 was completed and occupied in 1893.<sup>20</sup>

Public School 86 is important within the body of Naughton's work because it is the earliest of his extant public schools to draw upon the design of Boys' High School, and because Public School 86 itself became a successful prototype for later, much larger school buildings. At Boys' High School, the major elements of the main facade along Marcy Avenue are soaring end towers and a central section characterized by a monumental six-story high bay which breaks the cornice line and terminates in an expansive gable that embraces a full-story high round arch. This bay is flanked by arcaded sections crowned with monumental dormers (fig. 13). This central section is the basis for the design of Public School 86 which is rendered in simpler architectural terms appropriate for a neighborhood school house (fig. 14).



Fig. 13  
Boys' High School



Photo Credit: Teachers College

Fig. 14, Public School 86 (1931)



Fig. 15, P.S. 108  
Entrance Pavilion

The Romanesque Revival design of P.S. 86, like that of Boys' High, is characterized by a picturesque silhouette in which a broad central gable embraces a round arch and prominent dormers punctuate the roofline, by the combination of smooth and rough-faced materials, by the contrast of solids and voids, and by varied window arcades. Later buildings for which Public School 86 may have been the model include Public School 107 (1894) on Eighth Avenue in the Park Slope Historic District, Public School 108 (1895) (fig. 15), a designated Landmark, on Linwood Street in Cypress Hills, Public School 110 (1895) on Driggs Avenue in Greenpoint, and former Public School 113 (1896) on Evergreen Avenue in Bushwick.

## Description

Public School 86 is a four-story building of brick and stone, planned in the shape of the letter "I." The main facade facing Irving Avenue has rough-faced, rusticated stone at the first story, brick at the second and third stories, and brick at the fourth story within the hipped and peaked roof. The facade is divided vertically into a four-story, projecting central section that terminates in a gable above the cornice line and flanking sections that rise three stories to the cornice and are each crowned by a dormer. The central section is four windows wide and the flanking sections are three windows wide. At the base of the central section is the round-arched main entrance with a glass transom and non-historic, solid metal doors. The entrance is enhanced by a continuous bead molding and an arch of stone voussoirs carried on impostes carved in a Romanesque-inspired foliate design. On each side of the entrance is a flat-arched window with a carved foliate keystone. Above the entrance, the second and third stories are characterized by flat-arched brick arcades four windows wide and enhanced by voussoirs of brick laid in soldier courses and carved and rough-faced stone impostes. Between the second and third stories is a plaque with the legend "Public 86 School." The crowning gable which breaks the cornice line consists of a four-window wide round arch of brick voussoirs with stone extrados; there is a continuous stone sill with dentils. Above the arch in the peak of the gable are two diminutive square-headed windows with a stone sill and lintels. The gable has a simple, raking dentilled cornice and a stone finial.

At the first story of the side sections, the three square-headed windows are joined within a very shallow segmental arch. At the second story is a three-window wide arcade of brick flat arches similar to the central section. The third story has a three-window wide arcade of brick round arches with stone extrados. The brick dormers of the fourth story break the cornice. They have battered buttresses flanking paired square-headed windows and are topped by carved Romanesque capital blocks which support the dentilled cornices of the dormers' peaks. Within each peak is a bull's-eye window.

The side elevations of the school are simple and utilitarian in design. There are end pavilions with recessed central sections creating protected exercise yards. The north pavilions which are created by the main section of the school facing Irving Avenue have full-height paired chimneys that originally rose above the roofline and corner pilasters. Between the chimneys and the corner pilasters the facade is pierced by a window at each story. These windows are designed to recall the different window treatments of the front facade. The south or rear pavilions are each three windows wide and the recessed sections are six windows wide. There are square-headed windows with stone lintels at the first three stories and round-arched windows at the fourth story. Beneath the simple cornice are eye brow windows. All the windows have four-over-four, double-hung, wooden sash with minor exceptions at the round-arched window in the gable at the central section of the main facade.

## NOTES

1. I.N. Phelps Stokes, The Iconography of Manhattan Island, vol. 1, (New York: Robert H. Dodd, 1915), 19.
2. Ibid. , 31.
3. Henry R. Stiles, A History of Kings County Including the City of Brooklyn, 1683-1884, vol. 1, (New York: W.W. Munsell & Company, 1884), 276.
4. Elsie Garland Hobson, Educational Legislation and Administration in the State of New York From 1777 to 1850, (Chicago, c.1918), 37-51, 171-179; Frank P. Graves, "Development of Education Law in New York," McKinney's Consolidated Laws of New York, Annotated, Book 16, Education Law, 1 to 558, XI-XXI.
5. Public School 8 appears much larger in this picture than it actually is. The school is in scale with the masonry rowhouses of the 1840s.
6. The earliest example of the style in New York and one of the earliest examples in the country is in Brooklyn, Richard Upjohn's Church of the Pilgrims (1844-46) at Henry and Remsen Streets in the Brooklyn Heights Historic District.
7. Thomas W. Field, Historical Sketch of the Public Schools and Board of Education of the City of Brooklyn. (Brooklyn, 1873), 74-77.
8. James W. Naughton obituary, New York Times, February 13, 1898, 11:3.
9. National Register of Historic Places, Prospect Avenue Mansions Historic District, U.S. Department of the Interior, Heritage, Conservation and Recreation Services.
10. Sandstone Buffalo Robes, 3rd ed. (Madison, Wisconsin: 1985).
11. Catalogue of the Officers and Students of the Wisconsin State University, (Wisconsin: 1860 and 1861). Naughton is not listed in the catalogues as a registered student for the years 1859 to 1861. It is possible that he audited classes and would, therefore, not appear in the catalogues.
12. Naughton is not listed in the existing catalogues of the Cooper Union Institute for the 1860s. It is possible that he audited classes or was a registered student after the 1860s.
13. Sarah Bradford Landau, "The Tall Office Building Artistically Reconsidered: Arcaded Buildings of the New York School, c.1870-1890," In Search of Modern Architecture: A Tribute To Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Helen Searing, ed., (New York: Architectural History Foundation & M.I.T. Press, 1982), 156.
14. Stiles, 270-305.

15. Henry R. Stiles, History of the City of Brooklyn, (1867-1870), cited in Amy P. Schlagel, "Nineteenth Century Brewery Architecture in America, With Specific Reference to Brooklyn, New York," M.S. thesis (Columbia University, 1976), 20.
16. Joseph Cunningham and Leonard DeHart, A History of the New York City Subway System, Part II, Rapid Transit in Brooklyn, (New York: 1977), 9-13.
17. Proceedings of the Board of Education of the City of Brooklyn for the Year 1890, (Brooklyn: 1890), 769.
18. Cited in Annual Financial and Statistical Report of the Transactions of the Board of Education of the City of New York for the Fiscal and Calendar Years 1906-1907-1908, (New York: 1909), 137.
19. Proceedings, (Brooklyn: 1892), 67.
20. Thirty-Ninth Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of the City of Brooklyn for the Year Ending December 31, 1893, (Brooklyn: 1893), 6.

## 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 Public School 86 (Irvington 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, Public School 86, erected in 1892-93, is a handsome Romanesque Revival school building designed by James W. Naughton, the Superintendent of Buildings for the Board of Education of the City of Brooklyn, and occupies an important position architecturally in the existing body of Naughton's work; that, built to address the educational needs of the children of northern Bushwick which was developing as an urbanized residential area in the late nineteenth century, it is a notable example of the urban school house which was an important and significant element in the nineteenth-century streetscape; that Public School 86 is one of the few extant nineteenth-century schools in Brooklyn still used for its original purpose; and that, dating from a period when the American philosophy of education was evolving and the foundations for the educational system of today were being laid, Public School 86 is an important reminder of the long history of commitment and dedication to public education by the people of Brooklyn.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 (formerly Section 534 of Chapter 21), 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 Public School 86 (Irvington School), 220 Irving Avenue, Borough of Brooklyn, and designates Tax Map Block 3289, Lot 27, Borough of Brooklyn, as its Landmark Site.

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- Stokes, I.N. Phelps. Iconography of Manhattan Island. 6 vols. New York: Robert H. Dodd, 1915-1928.
- Thirty-Ninth Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of the City of Brooklyn for the Year Ending December 31, 1893. Brooklyn, 1893.