

Fire Hook & Ladder Company No. 14 (now Fire Engine Company No. 36)

120 East 125th Street, Borough of Manhattan.
Built 1888-89; architects Napoleon LeBrun & Sons.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1773, Lot 62.

On July 15, 1991, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of Fire Hook & Ladder Company No. 14 (now Fire Engine Company No. 36) and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 5). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of eight speakers testified in favor of this as well as other items on the calendar at the hearing, but urged the Commission to continue its work in Harlem. Three speakers declined to take a position regarding this proposed designation until such time as that work continues.

Summary

Fire Hook & Ladder Company No. 14, built in 1888-89, was designed by the architectural firm of N. LeBrun & Sons in the Romanesque Revival style. Between the years of 1880 and 1895, N. LeBrun & Sons helped to define the Fire Department's expression of civic architecture, both functionally and symbolically, in more than 40 buildings. Hook & Ladder No. 14 is characteristic of N. LeBrun & Sons' numerous mid-block firehouses, reflecting the firm's attention to materials, stylistic detail, plan, and setting. Built on the site of an earlier volunteer fire company, and then a professional suburban company, this firehouse also represents nearly 150 years of the New York Fire Department's history. Since 1975, it has been the home of Fire Engine Co. No. 36.



DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Fire Department of the City of New York¹

The origins of New York's Fire Department date to the city's beginning as the Dutch colony New Amsterdam. Leather fire buckets, first imported from Holland and later manufactured by a cobbler in the colony, were required in every household. Regular chimney inspections and the "rattle watch" patrol helped protect the colony during the Dutch period. By 1731, under English rule, two "engines" were imported from London and housed in wooden sheds in lower Manhattan. The Common Council authorized a volunteer force in 1737, and the Volunteer Fire Department of the City of New York was officially established by an act of the state legislature in 1798. As the city grew, this force was augmented by new volunteer companies. Between 1800 and 1850, seven major fires occurred, leading to the establishment of a building code and the formation of new volunteer fire companies on a regular basis. The number of firemen grew from 600 in 1800 to more than 4,000 by 1865.

Intense rivalries among the companies developed, stemming in large part from the Volunteer Fire Department's role as a significant political influence in municipal affairs. The Tammany political machine was especially adept at incorporating the fire department into its ranks. Since the 1820s it was common knowledge that "a success in the fire company was the open sesame to success in politics."²

During the peak years of Tammany's power, increasingly intense competition among companies began to hinder firefighting, creating public exasperation with the volunteer force. Brawls among firemen at the scene of fires and acts of sabotage among the companies became commonplace. In the 1860s, an alliance between the Republican controlled state legislature (which wanted to impair Tammany Hall's political control) and fire insurance companies (who wanted more efficient firefighting) played on this public sentiment to replace the volunteers with a paid force. On March 30, 1865, the New York State Legislature established the Metropolitan Fire District, comprising New York and Brooklyn. This act abolished New York's Volunteer Fire Department and created the Metropolitan Fire Department, a paid professional force under the jurisdiction of the state. By the end of the year, the city's 124 volunteer companies with more than 4,000 men had

retired or disbanded to be replaced by thirty-three engine companies and twelve ladder companies operated by a force of some 500 men.

With the creation of a professional Fire Department in 1865, improvements were immediate. Regular service was extended to 106th Street in Manhattan, with suburban companies further north, and its telegraph system was upgraded. Early in 1865 there were only 64 call boxes in New York, none of them located above 14th Street. Within the next year and a half, the number had increased to 187.³ Horse-drawn, steam-powered apparatus were required for all companies.⁴ The firehouse crews were standardized at twelve men (as opposed to a total of up to 100 men per firehouse under the volunteer system), and the Department took on a serious, disciplined character.⁵

In 1869, "Boss" William Marcy Tweed's candidate for New York State governor was elected, and he quickly regained control of the Fire Department through the Charter of 1870 (commonly known as the "Tweed Charter"). Only three years later, this charter was revoked when Tweed was sentenced to prison for embezzling millions from the city. Permanently under city control after 1870, the Fire Department (separated into a New York Department and a Brooklyn Department) retained its professional status and proceeded to modernize rapidly. While no new buildings were built until 1879-80 (the last one built prior to this was the Fireman's Hall in 1854⁶), the companies continually invested in modern apparatus and new technologies.

Firehouse Function and Planning in the LeBrun Era⁷

With the creation of the Metropolitan Fire Department in 1865 -- and the supposed removal of Tammany control of the companies -- the Common Council hoped to filter out remaining Tammany influence by banning any firehouse construction for five years. The ban, for reasons unknown, lasted until 1879, when, under Fire Chief Eli Bates, the department embarked on a major campaign for new firehouse construction throughout the city, but especially in northern sections.

N. LeBrun & Sons designed all of the Fire Department's forty-two structures built between 1880 and 1895. It is not clear exactly why the LeBrun firm was commissioned by the Fire Department to serve as its sole architect during these years. Napoleon LeBrun had a personal interest in

promoting the use of professional architects rather than contractors for municipal building projects. In 1879, LeBrun was the representative of the American Institute of Architects on the Board of Examiners of the Building Bureau of the Fire Department, a position he held for eighteen years. This position may well have led to the commission by the Fire Department, which ultimately did set a standard for firehouse design in New York.

With the professionalization of the firefighting force in 1865, the spatial requirements of the firehouse were established.⁸ The ground floor functioned primarily as storage for the apparatus, and the second and third floors housed the dormitory, kitchen, and captain's office. While the basic function of the house had not changed by 1880 (and is essentially the same today), LeBrun is credited with standardizing the main program components, while introducing some minor, but important, innovations in the plan.

For example, when horses were first introduced into the system, they were stabled outside behind the firehouse. Valuable time was lost in bringing them inside to the apparatus. LeBrun's firehouses included horse stalls inside the building, at the rear of the apparatus floor, and some houses had special features related to the horses' care and feeding.⁹ The LeBrun firehouses also neatly accommodated the necessity of drying the cotton hoses after each use, incorporating an interior hose-drying "tower" which ran the height of the building along one wall, thus economizing valuable space in the firehouse.

History of Hook & Ladder Company No. 14¹⁰

Because northern Manhattan was sparsely populated in 1865, the Metropolitan Fire Department established suburban companies to serve that area. These companies, both engine and ladder, functioned slightly differently than their counterparts downtown. The suburban firefighters had a lighter work schedule and received less pay, and the companies were assigned hand-drawn apparatus instead of the horse-drawn steamers and trucks assigned to the regular companies. In October 1865, Suburban Ladder No. 14 was established at 120 East 125th Street, inheriting the property and equipment of the volunteer Mechanics No. 7.¹¹ The city grew rapidly northward, and less than three years later, on January 1, 1868, the Fire Department closed all suburban companies. Hook & Ladder No. 14 replaced Suburban Ladder No. 14. It continued to operate out of the old volunteer firehouse at 120

East 125th Street until 1888, when a new building was constructed in response to Harlem's growing population.

As reported in the Fire Department's *Annual Report* of 1889, the department recognized the need to prepare for the encroaching development of the city northward in Manhattan:

There is also imperative need of a number of additional companies north of One Hundred and Tenth Street, where no increase in the fire-extinguishing force has been made since the organization of the Department, to keep pace with the large growth in population and buildings.¹²

The new structure for Hook & Ladder No. 14, designed by the architectural firm of N. LeBrun & Sons, was erected in 1888-89.¹³ In the first year in its new home, the company was staffed by twelve firemen and three horses for its hook and ladder truck; it responded to 146 alarms and fought 93 fires. The structure was home to Hook & Ladder Company No. 14 until 1975. No. 14 relocated to 2282 Third Avenue, and Engine Company No. 36 relocated here from 1849 Park Avenue.

Built in the middle of the fifteen-year period in which the LeBrun firm designed for the Fire Department, Hook & Ladder No. 14 is representative of the firm's approach to firehouse design during a highly politicized period for the Fire Department and a time of intense urbanization for the city at large. The LeBrun era facade designs reflected the firehouses' surroundings in scale, materials, adherence to the street wall, and stylistically as well. Because the firehouse was home to the firemen, these designs project a certain domesticity within their functional character; this is particularly true for Hook & Ladder No. 14, as expressed in the mansard roof and attic gable.

While Hook & Ladder No. 14 reflects its context in scale and composition, but is also distinguished as both a civic and a utilitarian structure. East 125th Street is comprised mainly of commercial buildings built near the end of the nineteenth century. The Queen Anne-Romanesque Revival Mount Morris Bank (Lamb & Rich, 1883-85, 1889-90, designated New York City Landmark) at East 125th Street and Park Avenue is the grandest of these, although it is now in a state of serious neglect. The surrounding residential neighborhood includes numerous rowhouses from the same period, reflecting Harlem's early development as an affluent community. The Hook & Ladder No. 14 is a

significant reminder of that period, and along with the Mt. Morris Watch Tower (1855, designated New York City Landmark) and the Harlem Courthouse (Thom & Wilson, 1891-93, designated New York City Landmark), is an important symbol of the city's municipal development in the nineteenth century.

N. LeBrun & Sons, Architects¹⁴

Napoleon Eugene Charles LeBrun (1821-1901) was born to French immigrant parents in Philadelphia. At fifteen years of age he was placed in the office of classicist Thomas Ustick Walter (1804-1887), where he remained for six years. LeBrun began his own practice in 1841 in Philadelphia where he had several major commissions -- including the Cathedral of SS. Peter and Paul (1846-64) and the Academy of Music (1852-57) -- before moving to New York in 1864. His Second Empire Masonic Temple competition submission of 1870 did much to establish his reputation in New York. In the same year his son Pierre joined him and the firm became Napoleon LeBrun & Son in 1880. In 1892 the firm became Napoleon LeBrun & Sons in recognition of his youngest son, Michel. All three were active members of the American Institute of Architects.

Napoleon LeBrun was first commissioned by the Fire Department of the City of New York in 1880. Until 1895, N. LeBrun & Sons designed more than 40 buildings for the Fire Department throughout Manhattan, including many firehouses, a warehouse, and a fire pier.

The firm's fifteen-year building campaign resulted in an average of two to three firehouses each year. In some cases, nearly identical buildings were erected; Hook & Ladder No. 14 has a twin in Engine Company No. 56 at 120 West 83rd Street (1888-89, located in the Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic District).¹⁵ Most of the designs used classical detailing and overall symmetry (in part dictated by the large vehicular entrance on a narrow lot), but provided a wide range of aesthetic expression.

The firm created two large, elaborate buildings for the Fire Department during this period: the Fire Department Headquarters at 157-159 East 67th Street (now Engine Company No. 39/Ladder Company No. 16, 1884-86) and Engine Company No. 31, 87 Lafayette Street (1895, a designated New York City Landmark). The Headquarters building is a strong expression of the Romanesque Revival style, and in the years following its completion,

several smaller houses were designed in a subdued version of the style. Hook & Ladder No. 14 is one example.

Engine Company No. 31, the firm's best known firehouse design, is the least representative of its tenure with the Fire Department and marks a transition between the restrained, classical elegance of the majority of its firehouses and the increasingly monumental designs of other architects which followed at the turn of the century. Engine Company No. 31 is a freestanding structure for a triple engine company modeled on sixteenth-century Loire Valley chateaux. It was a distinct departure from the firm's usual "storefront" design and is considered the firm's most impressive civic design. Also of note was the firm's acclaimed Hook & Ladder Company No. 15 at Old Slip (1885, demolished), which was designed in the style reminiscent of a seventeenth-century Dutch house.

While they are best known in New York City for the firehouses, the LeBrun's designed several churches including the Church of the Epiphany (1870, demolished), Saint John-the-Baptist (1872), 211 West 30th Street, and St. Mary-the-Virgin (1894-95, a designated New York City Landmark), 133-145 West 46th Street. At the turn of the century, N. LeBrun & Sons achieved renown for office building design in Manhattan, most notably the home office of the Metropolitan Life Building at 1 Madison Avenue (1890-92, and annex tower, 1909, designated New York City Landmark)¹⁶ and the Home Life Insurance Company Building, 256-257 Broadway (1892-94, a designated New York City Landmark).

Building Description

Hook & Ladder Company No. 14 is a four-story brick and stone structure. Through its composition, colors, and subtle texture, the building expresses the Romanesque Revival style.

Base: The first story is dominated by the vehicular entrance, which is framed in cast iron and set in the center of a rusticated brownstone surround. Modest fish-scale and flame-shaped motifs ornament the cast-iron piers, transom bars and lintel. The vehicular entrance is a wood-paneled overhead door painted red. The pedestrian entrance is placed within the cast-iron frame on the west side of the building. The house watch window with historic wood sash is symmetrically placed on the east side

of the frame. "Engine 36" is painted on the top panel of the cast-iron frame.

Upper stories: A brownstone molding separates the base from the upper stories. The second and third floors are faced in brick. Between the second and third stories is the identifying tablet listing the presiding Fire Department Officers and names N. LeBrun & Sons as the building's architects. Curved brownstone edges frame the building above the base, providing the effects of quoins and terminating in carved, knobbed finials at the fourth story gable. At the second and third stories are tripartite windows with transoms; a single arched window is centered in the gable. Small one-over-one windows have been added to the east side of the second and third story to provide light and air for bathrooms. All the windows have historic wood sash.

Fourth story: The gable is the most detailed element of the composition, featuring a decorative brownstone gableboard, and a heavily-carved ovolo

molding which forms the window's arch. The window has historic multi-pane wood sash. The gable itself is a stepped pattern, trimmed in brownstone and capped with a finial, set into mansard roof with multicolored slate tiles. The wrought-iron jib used for hauling hay to the attic storage room, remains in place above the gable window.

Several integral interior features are intact, such as the circular iron staircase, the brass sliding poles, the interior hose drying "tower," and the pressed-tin ceiling. (The interior is not included in this designation.)

Report prepared by
Laura Hansen
Landmarks Consultant

NOTES

1. The following sources were consulted for this section: John A. Calderone and Jack Lerch, *Wheels of the Bravest, A History of Fire Department of New York Fire Apparatus 1865-1992* (Staten Island, New York: Fire Apparatus Journal Publications, 1984); Augustine E. Costello, *Our firemen, A history of the New York fire departments, volunteer and paid* (New York: A.E. Costello, 1887); Kenneth Holcomb Dunshee, *As You Pass By* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1940); "A Festival of Firehouses," *Architectural Record* 176 (March 1988), 110-125; Fire Department of the City of New York, "The Midnight Alarm," performance souvenir program (November 23, 1935); Fire Department of the City of New York, "Fiftieth Anniversary of the Organization of the Fire Department of the City of New York, review and presentation of medals for 1914," (June 15, 1915); Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Engine Company No. 7/Ladder Company No. 1* (LP-1719), report prepared by Charles Savage (New York: City of New York, 1993); Lowell M. Limpus, *History of the New York Fire Department* (New York: Dutton, 1940); Daniel Pisark, "Old New York and Brooklyn Firehouses: Their Evolution, Architecture, and Preservation" (unpublished typescript, New York Landmark Scholar report, 1976).
2. "Fiftieth Anniversary...", p. 34. The most famous political career to have begun in -- and benefitted greatly from -- the Volunteer Fire Department was William M. "Boss" Tweed. He served in four companies before forming his own, the Americus Co. 6 in 1848. Ten years later, the infamous "Tweed Ring" (included Tweed and three city officials) controlled Tammany, and effectively, New York.
3. The first telegraph fire alarm system, for police and fire, was installed in 1851. The city was divided into eight districts, each with a strategically located watch tower. The Mt. Morris Watch Tower (1855, designated New York City Landmark) served the area around Hook & Ladder No. 14 until the 1870s. The Fire Alarm Telegraph system was upgraded in 1884 to serve all of Manhattan; its Central Office was located in the new Headquarters Building at East 67th Street. Telephones were installed in firehouses in the 1890s.

4. There was widespread resistance to horses and steam engines by the volunteer companies. The firefighters felt the new apparatus diminished their status and strength, which was proudly displayed by racing the hand-pulled apparatus through the streets to a fire.
5. A significant reminder of that period is the military personnel terminology, which is still in use today. The department was organized into divisions and battalions; titles of rank changed from chief engineer to colonel, from foreman to captain, from engineer of steamer to sergeant, etc.
6. This building, located at 153-157 Mercer Street, within the SoHo-Cast Iron Historic District, no longer functions as a firehouse.
7. The following sources were consulted for this section: Christina Huemer, "Visible City," *Metropolis* (May 1986), 47-48; Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Fire Engine Company No. 65* (LP-1545), prepared by David M. Breiner (New York: City of New York, 1990); Amy C. Martin, "Facades and Reality: Firehouses of N. LeBrun and Sons" (M.A. thesis, Columbia University, 1993); U.S. Department of Interior: Heritage, Conservation, and Recreation Services, National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form, "New York City Firehouses: National Register Thematic Group" (Form prepared by Christopher Gray for the New York City Landmarks Conservancy, 1980); Daniel Pisark; Donald Martin Reynolds, *The Architecture of New York City* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1984); John Tauranac, *Elegant New York, the Builders and the Buildings 1885-1915* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985); Rebecca Zurier, *The American Firehouse, An Architectural and Social History* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1982).
8. Boss Tweed was responsible for introducing living quarters in the firehouse. Tweed recognized the firehouse's potential as an ideal place for political gatherings, and constructed the Henry Street firehouse for his Americus Co. 6 to include meeting space as well as a dormitory, library, kitchen and other comforts. The firehouse as a place to store equipment gave way to the firehouse as a social center; this transition cemented the Fire Department's influence in New York City politics.
9. The time it took for a company to respond to a fire alarm was critical to firefighting success. During the late nineteenth century, numerous innovations (many invented by firemen) helped decrease the response time. These included the brass sliding pole (which quickly became a standard feature that is still in use today); a "quick hitch" handing harness for the horse team; and steam pipe systems which would automatically disconnect from a departing engine; among others. Reynolds, 292-293; Zurier, 102-107.
10. The following sources were used for this section: American Society of Planning Officials, "Fire House Location Planning," *Advisory Service Information Report No. 98* (May 1957); John A. Calderone, *Services Not Required* (Staten Island, New York: Fire Apparatus Journal Publication, 1996); Charles Lockwood, *Manhattan Moves Uptown* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976); *Report of the Fire Department of the City of New York*. (1889, 1890, 1891); *Robinson's Atlas of the City of New York*. (1885, 1890). The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Jack Lerch and Dan Maye, librarians at the New York City Fire Department Library, and Firefighter Michael Boucher.
11. While no record was found regarding the organization of the Mechanics No. 7 volunteer company, the property at Block 1773, Lot 62 was conveyed to the Mayor, Aldermen and Commonality of the City of New York on November 19, 1857. New York County, Office of the Register, Section 6, Liber Deeds and Conveyances, Liber 741, p. 644.
12. One firehouse siting consideration through the end of the nineteenth century was the distance at which a team of horses could run at full speed, which suggests that the distance between these firehouse locations was based on this response time factor. Nearly all firehouses built in this period were located in middle and working class residential neighborhoods.
13. During construction, from November 1888 to June 1889, the company relocated to a firehouse on East 122nd Street.

14. The following source were consulted for this section: Constance M. Greif, "Napoleon LeBrun," *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects*, Adolf K. Placzek, ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1982); Landmarks Preservation Commission, *(Former) Home Life Insurance Company Building (LP-1751)*, report prepared by Charles Savage (New York: City of New York, 1990); Montgomery Schuyler, "The Work of N. LeBrun & Sons," *Architectural Record* 27 (May 1910), 365-381.
15. The new building applications for these firehouses were submitted on the same day, and the Fire Department Annual Report of 1889 notes that both were completed and occupied in that year. The firehouse on East 125th Street was constructed under NB 513-1888.
16. The firm served as architects to the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company from 1876 until at least 1909.

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 Fire Hook & Ladder Company No. 14 (now Fire Engine Company No. 36) has a special character and a 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, Fire Hook & Ladder Company No. 14, built in 1888-89, was designed by the architectural firm of N. LeBrun & Sons in the Romanesque Revival style; that between the years of 1880 and 1895, N. LeBrun & Sons helped to define the Fire Department's expression of civic architecture, both functionally and symbolically, in more than 40 buildings; that Hook & Ladder No. 14 is characteristic of N. LeBrun & Sons' numerous mid-block firehouses, reflecting the firm's attention to materials, stylistic detail, plan, and setting; that among its significant features are the carved brownstone ornament and intricately detailed cast-iron vehicular entrance; and that built on the site of an earlier volunteer fire company, and then a professional suburban company, this firehouse also represents nearly 150 years of the New York Fire Department's history.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 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 Fire Hook & Ladder Company No. 14 (now Fire Engine Company No. 36), 120 East 125th Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1773, Lot 62, as its Landmark Site.



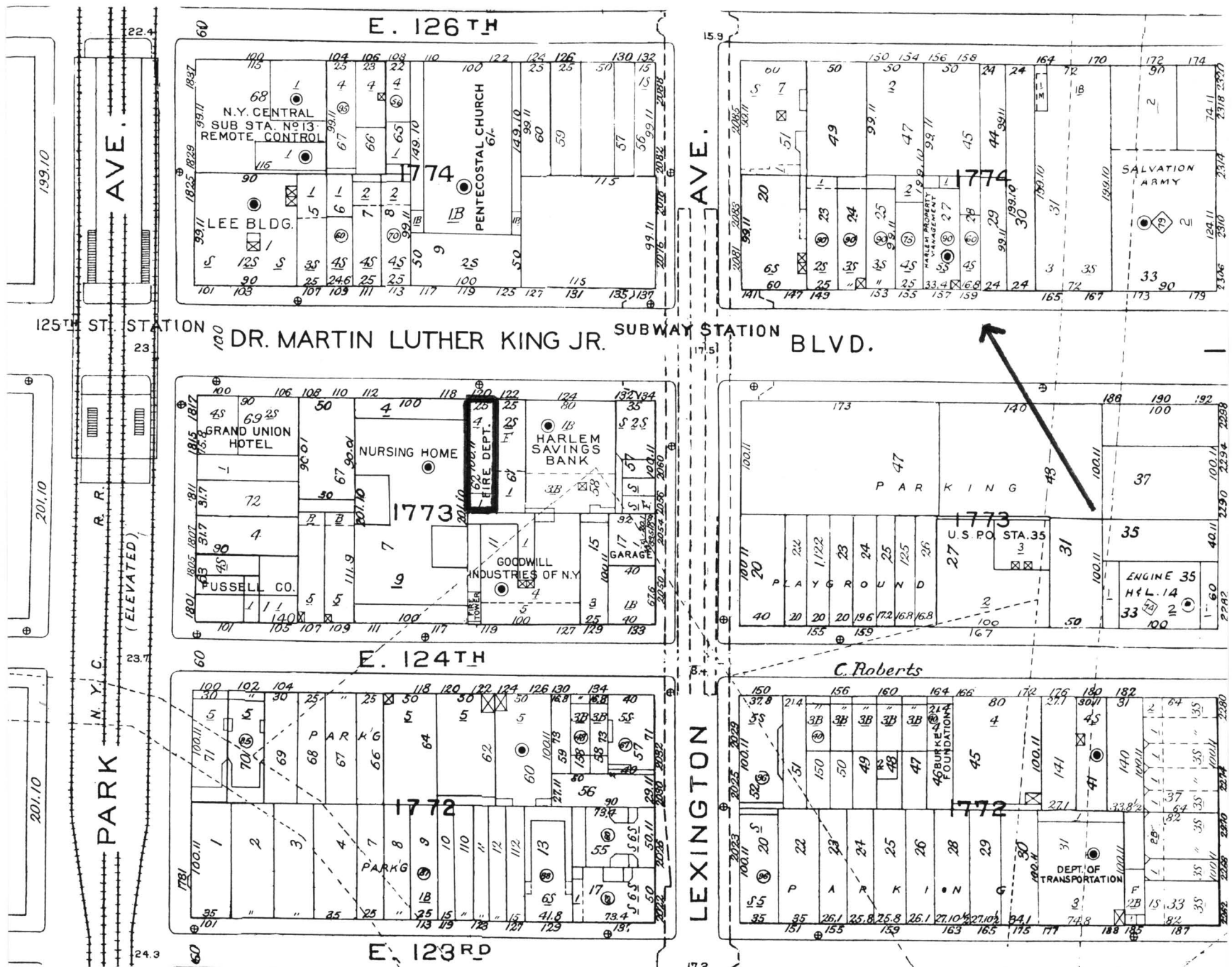
Fire Hook & Ladder Company No. 14 (now Fire Engine Company No. 36), 120 East 125th Street, Manhattan
Photo: Carl Forster



Fire Hook & Ladder Company No. 14 (now Fire Engine Company No. 36)
Detail of wrought-iron jib used for hauling hay
Photo: Carl Forster



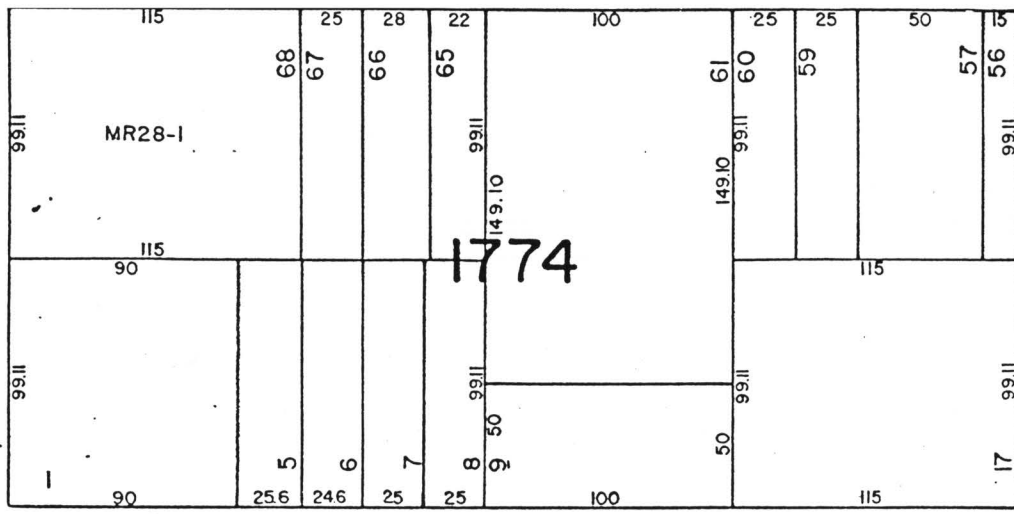
Fire Hook & Ladder Company No. 14 (now Fire Engine Company No. 36)
View of base
Photo: Carl Forster



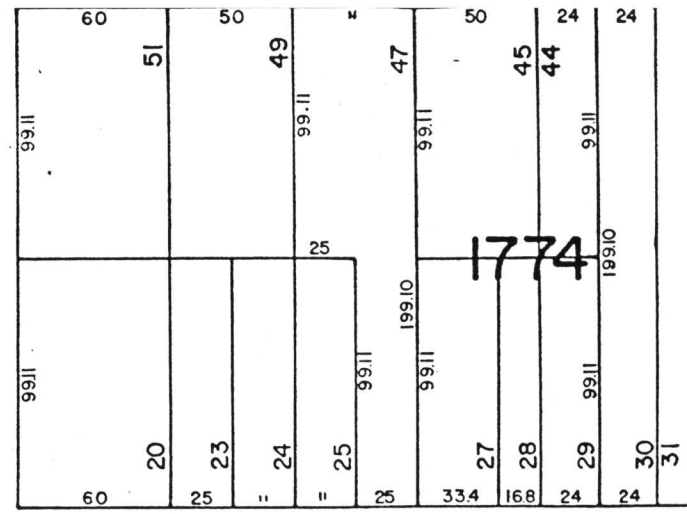
Fire Hook & Ladder Company No. 14 (now Fire Engine Company No. 36), 120 East 125th Street, Manhattan
 Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1773, Lot 62
 Source: Sanborn Manhattan Landbook, 1996-1997, pl. 142

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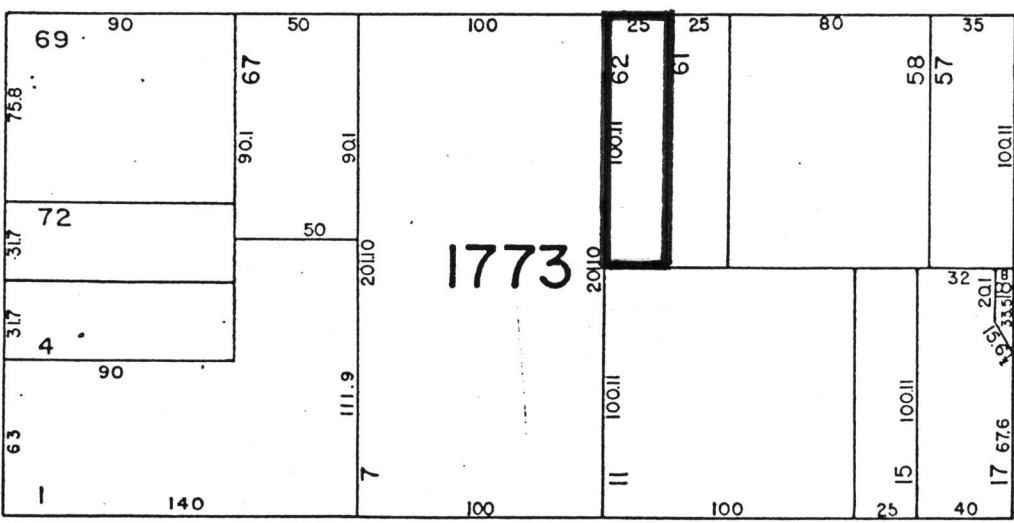


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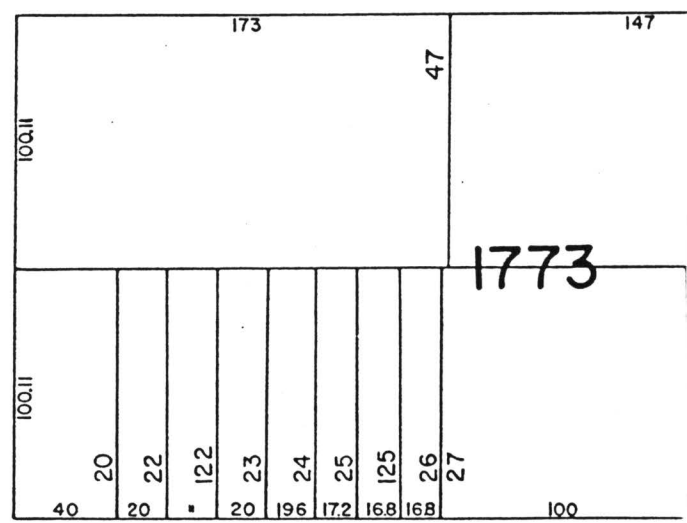
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Fire Hook & Ladder Company No. 14 (now Fire Engine Company No. 36), 120 East 125th Street, Manhattan
 Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1773, Lot 62
 Source: Dept. of Finance, City Surveyor, Tax Map