WADLEY HIGH SCHOOL FOR GIRLS / (now) WADLEY SCHOOL
215 West 114th Street, aka 203-249 West 114th Street and 226-250 West 115th Street, Manhattan.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1830, Lot 19.

On July 15, 1991, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Wadleigh High School for Girls and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 7). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Eight speakers spoke 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. One person expressed concerns about the designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

Built in 1901-02, the Wadleigh High School for Girls was designed by the prominent school architect C.B.J. Snyder, and is one of his most sophisticated and innovative secondary school designs. The first public girls' high school in New York City and one of the new high schools built in New York after the five boroughs were incorporated and the Board of Education was consolidated in 1898, it was named after Lydia F. Wadleigh, who pioneered in the movement of higher education for women in the last half of the nineteenth century in New York City. With its tall side tower, the building is a handsome example of the Collegiate Gothic style, a style which Snyder introduced for public school architecture. He gave it additional distinction with such Americanizing elements as shields with stars, stripes and ribbons and gabled wall dormers in the early French Renaissance style. The building continued in use as a girls' high school until 1953-54 when the school underwent some alterations and was converted as a co-educational junior high school (I.S. 88, opened in 1956). A complete recent renovation and restoration has insured the long term future of this building for educational use. Once again the building is an architectural centerpiece in this central Harlem community.

Development of Harlem

That part of New York known as Harlem embraces generally the area of Manhattan north of 110th Street. The original village of Harlem was established in 1658 by Peter Stuyvesant and named Nieuw Haarlem after the Dutch city of Haarlem. Rich farms were located on the region's flat, eastern portion, while some of New York's most illustrious early families, such as the Delanceys, Bleeckers, Rikers, Beekmans, and Hamiltons, maintained large estates in the western half of the area, helping Harlem retain its rural character beyond the middle of the nineteenth century.

It was the advent of new and better forms of transportation, as well as the rapidly increasing population of New York, which brought about the change in Harlem from a rural village (with a
population at mid-nineteenth century of approximately 1500) to a fashionable middle- and upper-class neighborhood. As the population of New York City swelled after the Civil War, mounting pressures for housing pushed the development of neighborhoods further northward. Although the New York & Harlem Railroad had run trains from lower Manhattan to Harlem beginning in 1837, service was poor and unreliable, and the trip was long. The real impetus for new residential development in this area came with the arrival of three lines of elevated railroads which, by 1881, ran as far north as 129th Street.

Between the 1870s and 1910 Harlem was the site of a massive wave of speculative development which resulted in the construction of record numbers of new single-family rowhouses, tenements, and luxury apartment houses. Almost all the rowhouses which stand in Harlem today were built during that time. Commercial concerns and religious, educational, and cultural institutions were established to serve the expanding population.

When the Wadleigh High School was built in 1901-02, the surrounding blocks in this area of Harlem were built up with rows of four and five-story flats, constructed a few years earlier. The school, located on a through-block site, is surrounded by these flats buildings and on the east end of the block by two brick six-story apartment houses (1912).

Schools in Greater New York

In 1898 the Charter of the City of Greater New York was implemented, incorporating the five boroughs. A major effect of the new charter was to create a unified educational system out of numerous independently administered school districts with a variety of curricula, grade divisions, educational policies, and standards for personnel selection. This endeavor was hindered initially by a tremendous shortage, both in number and quality, of school buildings, created primarily by two factors: new laws making the education of children mandatory, and huge waves of immigration at the end of the nineteenth century which increased the population density of numerous areas of the city.

This problem was noted even before consolidation, in 1896, in the Board of Education’s Annual Report:

Insufficient school accommodations have furnished cause for very general complaint on the part of the citizens of New York during the past ten years. The unprecedented growth of the city, together with unexpected movements of population, rendered it almost impossible to keep pace with the demands in given localities or to anticipate the needs of certain sections of the city that speedily outgrew the accommodations that were provided. During the past year...the question of increased and improved school accommodations was kept constantly in mind.

Between 1884 and 1897, the Board of Education acquired 125 new sites in Manhattan and the Bronx to provide space for more than 132,000 new students. Yet, it was not enough. By July of 1899, just after consolidation, schools in Manhattan and the Bronx accommodated 232,931 students, many in half-day sessions, but many more children had to be turned away for lack of space. Further, Dr. William Maxwell, the first superintendent of education for the consolidated city, recommended the unification of high school departments, until that time operating as adjuncts to grammar schools, into their own school buildings.

C.B.J. Snyder and His Work

The architect who planned and was responsible for building all the new and expanded schools was the Board of Education’s Superintendent of School Buildings, C.B.J. Snyder (1860-1945). Snyder had been appointed to the position in 1891 when the Board oversaw only Manhattan and those parts of the Bronx which constituted nineteenth-century New York. He remained in the position until his retirement in 1923, with responsibility for school buildings in all five boroughs after the city’s consolidation. Little is known of Snyder’s background. He was born in Stillwater, New York, and studied architecture with William Bishop. His architectural accomplishments focused on school buildings, and in this area he was a recognized leader. In a 1905 architectural periodical it was noted:

Possibly it was not the best, probably it was not the most economical, certainly it was not the most expeditious way to have all the school-houses [in] the city ...
designed and built by the official architect to the Department of Education. But since that method had to be followed, it is a matter of wonderful good fortune that the official architect chanced to be such a man as is Mr. C.B.J. Snyder, who not only at the outset showed such distinct capacity for his task, but has proved himself a man able to grow as his opportunities opened before him.7

Snyder was particularly concerned with making his schools as safe and healthful as possible for the students, and focused attention on the development of fire protection, ventilation, lighting, and reduced classroom size. One of the main problems in the design of many of the city's public schools was the need to accommodate the requirements of students and teachers on relatively small sites which were necessitated by the high cost of land acquisition. In searching to overcome this problem in Manhattan as well as in other boroughs, Snyder concentrated much effort on efficient and economical school planning, utilizing an H-plan for floor layouts, which provided increased light and better ventilation and also permitted adequate space for safe recreation areas.8

Snyder's precedent-setting use of the H-plan was confined to elementary school designs. After 1897 when the Board of Education appointed him to design the first three high schools in the City in one of the leading proponents of this style and did much to publicize and popularize it. Numerous articles by and about Cram and other architects of this style appeared in the professional press. It is little wonder then that these same building forms were adopted by many designers of public school buildings, including C.B.J. Snyder. Snyder's concerns also embraced architectural style. Unlike the designs of many New York schools built after his retirement, Snyder's work was inventive, solid, and handsome. His earliest designs continued the Romanesque Revival style of the architect who was his predecessor as Superintendent of School Buildings, George W. Debevoise. Snyder later moved into Gothic idioms, and was credited with the introduction of the Collegiate Gothic style to New York public school architecture.

Collegiate Gothic architecture, also called English Collegiate,10 was inspired by, and modelled after, buildings at Eton and Cambridge and especially Oxford Universities. This late Gothic Revival (as differentiated from the early Gothic Revival which began to appear by the second quarter of the nineteenth century) began to be used on schools and churches in the United States in the early 1890s, due, in part, to a reaction against academic classicism. Finding acceptance because of the eclectic spirit of the period, this form of Gothic building provided a picturesque and romantic setting for intellectual pursuits.11

Introduced on college campuses in the United States in 1893 by architects Cope & Stewardson at Bryn Mawr, University of Pennsylvania, and Princeton University, the style was quickly adopted by numerous other schools throughout the country. Other early major examples include: Charles B. Haight's Vanderbilt Hall at Yale (1893-94), Henry Ives Cobb's plan for the University of Chicago (1893), and Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson's designs for the campus of West Point (1902). The style became so widespread, in fact, that by the time the City College of New York (1897-1930, George B. Post) opened its new campus at Morningside Heights in 1907, an observer could state that "one might say that Collegiate Gothic is the proper and only dress for a home of learning."12

At the same time, this style was being employed for private preparatory schools such as St. Paul's and Groton, designed by Henry Vaughan in the 1890s.13 Ralph Adams Cram was one of the leading proponents of this style and did much to publicize and popularize it. Numerous articles by and about Cram and other architects of this style appeared in the professional press. It is little wonder then that these same building forms were adopted by many designers of public school buildings, including C.B.J. Snyder. It was not long after this style began appearing in the architectural press that Snyder began using certain characteristic elements of it in his schools.
In an 1894 school on Edgecombe Avenue between 140th and 141st streets, the few Gothic details gave some suggestion of his future direction. P.S. 27 and P.S. 28, built in 1896, are square, block-like buildings, but high gables (some pointed, some stepped) rise up at the roofline as on later works. In P.S. 31 (1897-99) in the Bronx, Snyder first successfully integrated numerous details into an overall late Gothic composition. Among his finest Gothic style designs were Erasmus High School (1901-03) in Brooklyn, Morris High School (1901-03) in the Bronx, and Curtis High School (1902-04) in Staten Island (the last two are designated New York City Landmarks). These buildings display numerous details of ornamentation and massing which can readily be compared to some of the prominent early Collegiate Gothic buildings on university campuses, such as Princeton's Vanderbilt Hall (1893-94). In several innovative school designs he combined the tradition of the Collegiate Gothic with elements from other styles. Two of the most interesting of these are Dewitt Clinton High School (1904-1906), Tenth Avenue and West 59th Street in Manhattan which incorporates elaborate Flemish gables at the roofline, and, of course, the Wadleigh High School for Girls, which draws upon early French Renaissance sources.

Snyder's long tenure as Superintendent of School Buildings resulted in the creation of a large body of distinguished New York public school buildings. Snyder's schools form architectural centerpieces for many of the neighborhoods in which they were built, and, as a group, those surviving constitute a series of monuments to New York's tradition of public education.

The Wadleigh High School for Girls

The Wadleigh High School for Girls (1901-02) was the first girls' public high school and one of the new high schools constructed in New York soon after consolidation (1898). During the planning stages the City of New York Board of Education decided to name its academic high schools after individuals, thus differentiating them from the commercial and manual training high schools. The girls' high school was named for Lydia F. Wadleigh (d. 1888), who was a pioneer in the movement for higher education for women in the last half of the nineteenth century. In the face of bitter opposition, Wadleigh founded the 12th Street Advanced School for Girls' in 1856. By 1870 she entered the realm of girls' college education when she assumed the position of "Lady Superintendent" at the New York Normal College (today Hunter College).

When the Board of Education established New York City's first official girls' high school in 1897, it located the school in the building of Wadleigh's 12th Street Advanced School for Girls (1856, Thomas Jackson) at 34-1/2 East 12th Street (then known as Grammar School No. 47). Girls' High School was renamed after Wadleigh on June 20, 1900. In 1902 when the new high school building in Harlem was completed, the girls' high school moved uptown to its present address.

When the new Wadleigh High School for Girls was dedicated in February 1903, the New York Times called it "the finest high school building in the world ..." The massive five-story brick building housed eighty classrooms, over a dozen laboratories, executive offices, two elevators, three gymnasia, an auditorium (with 1500 seats), a library, a large boiler and engine room, two study halls, and numerous lavatories and ventilated cloakrooms. The building Superintendent of Schools pronounced it "a triumph of architectural skill."

The building incorporated the most inventive and innovative design features of any school building known at that time. It was the first to have electric elevators. It was Snyder's most sophisticated use of the H-plan at that point in his career. His use of steel-skeleton framing allowed him to provide broad banks of windows. These provided increased light and air but also contrasted with the smaller windows of previous schools which utilized masonry wall bearing construction. Intended to accommodate between 2,500 and 3,000 students, the total cost for building, furnishings and equipment came to $900,000. In 1901, when the construction of the Wadleigh School was about to be bid, the Manhattan Borough President, Randolph Guggenheimer, was mounting a campaign against what he called the unnecessary and expensive ornament of H-plan school buildings. The Report of the Superintendent of School Buildings for 1902 recounts the events regarding the girls' high school:

When the award of contract for the general construction of the Wadleigh High School, 114th Street, near Seventh Avenue, Manhattan, was placed before the Board of Estimate and Apportionment for approval, one of the members raised the question as to the so-called excessive ornament, alleging, from his standpoint as a layman, that there was fully $100,000.
of extra ornament which could be eliminated and not in any way injure the appearance of the building. ... 22

The concerned board member handed the drawings and specifications over to his own architect who in turn reported back and the following decision was reached:

The plans were not revised as no one desired that the City should erect a high school building which would be the subject of the scorn and ridicule of the entire country, especially when it was shown that the cost of the completed building per pupil would be less than one half of the cost of high school buildings in other cities. 23

Snyder's own comparative research also claimed that a new Philadelphia high school, which was designed to accommodate 1,500 pupils, cost over $1,000,000. In Boston the cost to accommodate 2,500 pupils was $1,228,000, as compared to $600,000 for the same number in New York (for example, in Wadleigh and Morris High Schools). 24

Description

The Wadleigh High School for Girls is a five-story building with red brick walls and trim in a buff limestone. The most imposing feature of the building is the 125-foot-high square, off-center corner tower with pyramidal roof, cresting, and gabled dormers. The tower, combined with the steep gabled roof rising above the surrounding lower five-story residential buildings and apartment buildings, gives the school building a commanding presence despite its mid-block location. Banked groups of six-over-six, wood-sash windows (replacing nine-over-nine sash) are used uniformly around the facades. 25 The exceptions are the nine-over-nine sash in the four gable ends of the facades in the legs of the "H." Window banks are set off by stringcourses above the first and third floors. Most windows have keyed surrounds and lintels in lighter stone and the same stone is also used for corner quoining on the building and on the square tower. First-story windows and entrance doors set in three-centered arches are surmounted by drip lintels set on corbels. Drain spouts and gutters are copper.

The two main entrances are located in the two corner towers in the recessed area of the H-plan on the south side of the building facing West 114th Street. The original wooden double doors have been replaced with plain metal doors. The polygonal tower at the east corner is topped by a balustrade. The ornate gabled roof dormers in an early French Renaissance style at the fifth story and at the top of the square tower have two double-hung six-over-six sash windows each and identical terra-cotta decorative shields incorporating patriotic motifs in the dormer gables. The iconography of these Americanizing motifs includes ribbons and three stars and stripes. The designs and their location in the dormers were repeated from an earlier grammar school, P.S. 165, at 225 West 108th Street (1898).

The four wings of the H-plan terminate in gable ends with a small central window in each peak. On the north side of the building at West 115th Street, the original two-story auditorium building is located in the void of the recessed opening. The exterior of this extension is the same Collegiate Gothic style as the main body of the school. 26

There have been relatively few exterior alterations through the years. Minor work included restoration of the tower in 1943 and other restoration work in 1953. Recently, much needed renovation work by the School Construction Authority included complete reconstruction of the steel structure of the main tower. Exterior work included cleaning the masonry and replacing the original slate roof with a copper one. The original entrance doors were replaced. All windows have replacement sash; most are six-over-six below a metal grill. The original sunken garden area in the recessed section of the H entrance section has been recently paved and planted, restoring its park-like setting. During interior renovations the third and fourth story gymnasiums were converted into classrooms, and a new two-story annex gymnasium was built to the west of the existing building on West 115th Street. The annex, which is sited on a separate tax lot, is not part of the present designation. 27

Subsequent History

When the Wadleigh High School for Girls opened in 1902, this area of Harlem was a fashionable middle-and-upper class, mostly white, neighborhood. Although accounts of the time noted that there were several "negros" in each class, "Harlem's emergence as a black enclave was a generation away." 28 Wadleigh continued as a girls' high school until the close of school year of
1953-54; the change reflected a general shift to co-education. At that time the building underwent some restoration and alteration in its conversion for use as a co-educational junior high school, opened in 1956; subsequently it was renamed Intermediate School 88.

By 1988 the building had deteriorated to such an extent that the new agency created by New York State, the School Construction Authority, rated Wadleigh as one of the most decrepit schools in the city. A complete renovation costing some forty-seven million dollars was carried out by URS Consultants of New York.

When the school reopened in September 1993, it included grades six through ten (to be expanded after two years to grades six through twelve) and incorporated three separate and specialized schools (writing and publishing, the arts, and a school of science and technology) in the High School of Communications Media and Technology. Since its beginnings the Wadleigh School has through a dedicated staff maintained high standards of academic achievement and graduates have been successful in all professional fields. The architectural renovations and the new academic programs have once again made Wadleigh a centerpiece in this central Harlem community.

Report prepared by
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NOTES


9. G.W. Wharton, "High School Architecture in the City of New York," School Review, June 2, 1903, p. 459. The first three high schools were established on September 13, 1897, prior to consolidation. These were Boys High School (DeWitt Clinton) and Girls High School (Wadleigh) in Manhattan, and Mixed High School (Morris) in the Bronx. While Snyder began planning the schools in 1897, construction took place over several years.


16. As early as 1893 the editors of *Educational Review* decried the lack of a high school in the "... largest and richest city in the country." The decision to organize the high schools, as opposed to high school departments in grammar schools, resulted from several meetings of the Board of Education in 1896. One of these conferences included the presidents of the City College and the Normal College, and faculty members from City College. "The colleges were involved because they served as quasi-high schools at the time, absorbing students directly from the grammar schools." Because of this the two city colleges had not been able to expand in the previous twenty years and could no longer handle the demand for education above the elementary school level. From Editorial, *Educational Review* 6 (June 1893), 98; and Gary Hermalyn, "The Creation of Morris High School: 1896-1904, First Public High School in the Bronx," PhD. Diss., Columbia University, Teachers College, 1985, 77, 159. The City of Brooklyn had organized boys' and girls' high school departments as part of the Central Grammar School in 1878; Brooklyn Girls' High School was built in 1885-86, and Brooklyn Boys' High School was built in 1891-92.

17. "In Memory of Miss Wadleigh," *NYT*, November 11, 1888, p.16.

18. The school building was constructed under New York City, Department of Buildings, Manhattan, New Building application 1900-488.

19. *NYT*, March 1, 1903, p. 28.

20. *Ibid*.


25. As shown in a 1908 photograph, original windows were six-over-six sash below a rectangular diamond-paned transom. See C.B.J. Snyder, "Public School Buildings in the City of New York," *American Architect and Building News*, Part II, no. 1675 (Jan. 29, 1908), plate 19.

26. As with the other early city high schools, the interior of the auditorium is in the Gothic style. Although the ceiling has been dropped and covered, the original stage has been restored and the balcony with columns also remains.

27. Other interior features such as stair railings were retained. Several opalescent stained-glass windows from the early twentieth century were restored. These were made by the Gorham Studios, the D'Ascenzo Studios of Philadelphia, and the Lederle Studios of New York, which crafted the Lydia Wadleigh Memorial Window.


29. One of the programs to foster academic achievement has been the Wadleigh Scholarship Program, Inc., a nonprofit organization established in 1964 to identify and motivate minority students who demonstrate excellent academic potential. Since its inception, over 300 students have received scholarships to prestigious private secondary boarding schools and universities.
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 the Wadleigh High School for Girls / (now) Wadleigh 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, the Wadleigh High School for Girls was the first public girls’ high school in New York City and one of new high schools built in New York after the five boroughs were incorporated and the Board of Education was consolidated in 1898; that the building (1901-1902) is a striking example of Collegiate Gothic style of architecture as designed by C.B.J. Snyder, the talented Superintendent of Buildings for the Board of Education, who introduced this style to the city’s public schools; that the building incorporated the most innovative design features of any school building at the time, particularly with regard to the use of the H-plan and steel skeleton framing; that it was the first school building in New York constructed specifically for a girls’ secondary school and was named after Lydia F. Wadleigh, who pioneered the movement of higher education for women in the last half of the nineteenth century in New York City; that a complete recent renovation and restoration has insured the long term future of this building for educational use; and that once again the building is an architectural centerpiece in this central Harlem community.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3021 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 the Wadleigh High School for Girls/ (now) Wadleigh School, 215 West 114th Street, aka 203-249 West 114th Street and 226-250 West 115th Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1830, Lot 19, as its Landmark Site.
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Fig. 1: Sanborn, Borough of Manhattan (1993-94), plate 128.
Fig. 2: Wadleigh High School for Girls/Wadleigh Secondary School (1901-02).
Square tower of West 114th Street Facade.

Photo Credit: Carl Forster.

Fig. 3: Wadleigh High School for Girls (1901-02). Polygonal tower of West 114th Street facade.
Photo Credit: Carl Forster.
Fig. 4: Wadleigh High School for Girls (1901-02). 1908 Photograph from American Architect and Building News, Jan. 29, 1908, plate 19.
Fig. 5: Wadleigh High School for Girls (1901-02). Detail of entranceway in squared tower on West 114th Street. Photo Credit: Carl Forster.

Fig. 6: Wadleigh High School for Girls (1901-02). Detail of dormers. Photo Credit: Carl Forster.
Fig. 7: Wadleigh High School for Girls (1901-02). Auditorium on 115th Street.
Photo Credit: Carl Forster.