

WILLIAMSBURGH SAVINGS BANK (BROADWAY) (now Republic National Bank), FIRST FLOOR INTERIOR consisting of the main (175 Broadway) entrance vestibule; the 1875 banking room, including the dome; the balcony above the main entrance vestibule; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces; floor surfaces; doors; balustrades; railings; ventilation grilles; decorative metalwork; clocks; the exterior of the vault in the 1875 banking room; and attached decorative elements; 175 Broadway, aka 161-175 Broadway and 834-844 Driggs Avenue, Borough of Brooklyn. Built 1870-75; architect, George B. Post; mural decoration, Peter B. Wight.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 2457, Lot 28.

On June 15, 1993, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as an Interior Landmark of the Williamsburgh Savings Bank, first floor interior with the spaces and features listed above and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 6). The hearing was continued to September 21, 1993 (Item No. 6). The hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. One witness spoke in favor of the designation; there were no speakers in opposition. A representative of the owner expressed concerns about the proposed scope of the designation and indicated that the bank wished to have its experts prepare a master plan before taking a position on the designation. The Commission has received a number of letters and other expressions of support for this designation.¹

Summary

The great banking hall of the Williamsburgh Savings Bank at 175 Broadway is one of the most monumental public spaces surviving in New York from the post-Civil War era. Erected between 1870 and 1875, this imposing building housed one of Brooklyn's wealthiest and most influential financial institutions. An early work of the renowned New York architect George B. Post, the Williamsburgh Savings Bank was one of the first examples of French academic classicism in American architecture. Inspired by Renaissance models, the centrally-planned, domed banking room is a precursor to the temple banking halls which came into vogue in the period following the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. A rare intact example of a mid-nineteenth century ornamentation scheme, the banking hall features a mixture of Renaissance and Néo-Grec motifs and contains an abundance of rich materials and elaborate polychromy. Dominating the space is the soaring cast-iron dome which rises 110 feet above the banking floor and is capped by a beautiful painted vault with an unusual abstract design. The decorative painting at the Williamsburgh Savings Bank is the only known surviving mural decoration by the important architect-designer Peter B. Wight, while the banking hall is one of the few remaining interiors by Post, a major figure in the development of American architecture.



DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Williamsburg and the Williamsburgh Savings Bank

At the close of the Revolutionary War, the area that developed into the town of Williamsburgh was mostly open farmland.² In 1802, Richard M. Woodhull, a prosperous Manhattan merchant, purchased a thirteen-acre tract at the foot of present-day North 2nd Street which he named Williamsburgh after its surveyor, Colonel Jonathan Williams. The village of Williamsburgh continued to develop, spurred by the opening of the Wallabout and Newtown Turnpike, which connected Williamsburgh with downtown Brooklyn. Williamsburgh was incorporated in 1827, and the village limits were extended in 1835. Ferry lines provided convenient connections to Manhattan, and industries established along the East River waterfront created jobs for local workmen and commercial opportunities for small businesses. The population of Williamsburgh more than doubled between 1840 and 1845 and grew at an even greater rate during the late 1840s and early 1850s when a large number of Germans began settling in the area. In April 1851 the State Legislature granted Williamsburgh a charter as a city; at that time it had 35,000 inhabitants and was twentieth in population among American cities. It remained an independent municipality for only a few years before being consolidated with the City of Brooklyn on January 1, 1855.³

As Williamsburgh grew in size and importance during the early 1850s, it began to develop a number of institutions to serve its burgeoning population and thriving businesses. These included the Williamsburgh Savings Bank (organized in 1851), the Farmers and Citizens Bank, the Williamsburgh City Bank, Williamsburgh City Fire Insurance Company, and the Williamsburgh Medical Society (organized in 1852). According to its charter, the Williamsburgh Savings Bank was founded for the purpose "of affording a safe and beneficial place of deposit for the savings of Tradesmen, Mechanics, Clerks, Apprentices, Laborers, Miners, Servants and others."⁴ Advertisements seeking depositors also indicated that women "whether married or single" were to have "the same rights as other parties." Among the founders of the bank were a number of the city's most prominent citizens, including William Wall, a prosperous manufacturer and important political figure, who served as the bank's president from 1851 to 1865; Samuel M. Meeker, Counsellor to the City of Williamsburgh, who served as the bank's counsel for many years; Edmund Driggs, President of the Williamsburgh City Fire Insurance Company; and George Ricard, a shipbuilder and government official, who succeeded Wall as president of the bank. The bank's first quarters were located in the basement of All Souls' Universalist Church at the corner of Fourth (Bedford Avenue) and South Third Streets. It outgrew

the space within a year and commissioned a new three-story Italianate building on a neighboring site at Bedford and South Third Streets, which opened in January 1854. As the population of Williamsburgh grew and the area became increasingly prosperous, the bank flourished. The Civil War and post-war business boom brought even greater growth. By 1867, the Williamsburgh Savings Bank was "one of the wealthiest and most popular in the State of New York" with deposits in excess of \$5,000,000 and over 16,000 depositors.⁵ In March 1867, the trustees decided to erect a large, new building, and a committee was appointed to secure a new site.

Bank records indicate that shortly after the committee was established, it determined that the northwest corner of Broadway (then South Sixth Street) and Driggs Avenue (then Fifth Street) was "the very best location" for the new building.⁶ Broadway, the main thoroughfare from the Grand Street and Roosevelt Street ferry terminals, was the most important commercial Street in Williamsburgh. Most of the buildings along the street were single-family dwellings which had been altered for commercial use. During the post-war boom a number of these converted dwellings were replaced by new commercial buildings, including the Kings County Savings Bank at Broadway and Bedford Avenue, designed by King & Wilcox and erected between 1867 and 1868.⁷ As commercial development increased, it became more difficult to acquire new building sites, and it was not until March 1869 that the Williamsburgh Savings Bank was able to announce that it had purchased all the land needed for the new building.

The Williamsburgh Savings Bank Project⁸

Immediately after acquiring the new site, the trustees of the Williamsburgh Savings Bank invited the architects James H. Giles, Gamaliel King, Peter B. Wight, and George B. Post to submit designs for the new building.⁹ Of the four proposals, the majority of trustees preferred Post's striking Renaissance Revival design; Wight's more conventional Second Empire style project placed second.¹⁰ At the close of December 1869, Post submitted his working drawings and estimates, together with a watercolor perspective of the building as seen from across Broadway. In a letter accompanying the drawings Post wrote:

I think that I can promise that if the structure be erected as designed, the interior will equal the exterior in beauty and that the Bank will be possessed of the most substantial, complete, and elegant edifice of any similar institution in the country.¹¹

Post subsequently reworked his elevations for the bank, making the dome more prominent and

enhancing the Renaissance character of the design. These changes, together with delays caused by the contractors and the bank's desire to slow down its payment schedule following the financial panic of 1873, led to an unusually protracted building period, extending from 1870 to 1875, with much of the interior design and construction taking place in 1873-74. P. B. Wight, who was a well-known designer as well as an architect, supplied the designs for the banking hall's extensive program of painted decoration. As Wight was then living in Chicago, Thomas Stent, an architect who had worked with Wight in New York, was retained to supervise the execution of the work by Guille, Sarre & Lepelly, a New York painting firm.¹²

Bank Design in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century

From the beginning of the nineteenth century, the paradigm for American banks had been Benjamin Latrobe's Bank of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (1799-1801, demolished), a freestanding temple-fronted building with a central banking room surmounted by a dome.¹³ Around 1850, the expansion of commercial activity, the enormous value of land, and the desire for office space in downtown districts led to the adoption of a new building type, the multi-story commercial palazzo incorporating both banking and rental office floors. Initially these new banking houses were designed in the Italianate style. Following the Civil War, the majority of such buildings were executed in the Second Empire style.¹⁴ Typically, these bank-office buildings had rectangular banking rooms which were lit by side windows and surmounted by coved or vaulted ceilings.

In establishing the program for the Williamsburgh Savings Bank building, the trustees chose to erect a building for the bank's exclusive use.¹⁵ Post's design also had the practical advantages of having an open plan, free of interior columns, and excellent natural lighting from the windows in the dome and on three sides of the banking hall. But, perhaps most important from the bankers' point of view, Post's design with its grand banking hall and high dome dominating the Williamsburgh skyline made a statement about the Williamsburgh Savings Bank's wealth and importance.¹⁶ To a certain extent, his solution was a return to the temple banking type which had predominated earlier in the century. Post reinterpreted the form in the light of contemporary French Romantic Rationalist architectural theory, producing a design combining Renaissance and Néo-Grec forms that is generally considered to be one of the earliest examples of academic Renaissance classicism in American architecture. In the period following the Columbian Exposition of 1893, when classic architecture came into general use, the monumental temple bank type was revived; the Williamsburgh Savings Bank, popularly known as "the

temple" was regarded as precursor to such buildings as McKim Mead & White's Bowery Savings Bank of 1893-95.¹⁷

The Romantic Rationalists and the Classical Tradition¹⁸

The architectural styles and theories of the French Romantic Rationalists were brought to America by Richard Morris Hunt who had studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris between 1845 and 1852 and had been one of Hector Lefuel's assistants at the New Louvre from 1852 to 1855. In 1857 Hunt established an atelier in New York where he offered instruction in the system of architecture he had learned at the Ecole to a group of young students that included Post and his future partner Charles D. Gambrill, Frank Furness, Henry Van Brunt, and William Ware.¹⁹

As Post established his own practice in the late 1860s and early 1870s, his designs were greatly influenced by contemporary French architectural theory and design. At the Williamsburgh Savings Bank, the balanced, formal composition and monumental scale are typical of Beaux-Arts planning. Post's choice of the centrally-planned churches and chapels of the fifteenth-century Florentine architect Filippo Brunelleschi and his followers as a model for the banking room reflects the tendency among French Rationalist architects to use early Renaissance models as a starting point for their designs. In this case Post modeled his use of pilasters, friezes, and archivolt on Brunelleschi, but employed compound arches and pilasters to emphasize the areas of functional importance and structural stress in accordance with French Rationalist design principles. The eclectic mixture of French and Italian Renaissance and Néo-Grec ornament is inspired by the designs of such contemporary French architects as Gabriel Davioud who amalgamated the Néo-Grec with the new taste for heavy massing, rich surface treatment, and late Renaissance models that had come into vogue in the 1850s and 1860s with such works as Lefuel's additions to the Louvre and Charles Garnier's Paris Opera.²⁰

In an address to the AIA in 1876, A. J. Bloor observed that "outside of governmental and ecclesiastical structures, there is probably no more monumental ... building in this country than the Williamsburgh Savings Bank."²¹ The building's design, which Bloor characterized as "Renaissance tinged with Neo-Grec feeling,"²² was among the most stylistically advanced in America, perhaps comparable only to Richard Morris Hunt's no longer extant Lenox Library (1870-77).²³ Post's design differs from Hunt's in one important respect, however, for it seems to be much more consciously based on specific historic prototypes. In this, the Williamsburgh Savings Bank can be viewed as a harbinger of the American Beaux-Arts movement. That Post's building was planned more than a decade prior to

McKim, Mead & White's Villard Houses (1882-85) and Boston Public Library (1887-95), and twenty years prior to the 1893 Columbian Exposition, makes his achievement all the more remarkable.²⁴

The Designers

George Browne Post (1837-1913) was born in New York and educated at New York University where he earned a B.S. degree in civil engineering in 1858.²⁵ After graduation he studied in Richard Morris Hunt's atelier for about two years. In 1860 Post and Charles D. Gambrill formed a partnership and established their offices at 93 Liberty Street. The architects were associated for about six years though Post was away from the office sporadically during the Civil War, serving as a captain in the New York State National Guard. After the dissolution of the firm, Gambrill worked for six years in collaboration with Henry H. Richardson, and Post practiced alone.

In 1868 Post was called in as a consultant when the original design of the Equitable Life Assurance Building by Gilman & Kendall proved too expensive to build. Post used his training as an engineer to redesign the structure of the building, lightening the loads and increasing the rentable space through the substitution of columns and iron beams for load-bearing walls. As Post's work on Equitable building was finishing, he received two other major commissions, the Williamsburgh Savings Bank and the Troy Savings Bank and Opera House Building (1871-75), which brought him considerable recognition. Post's early skyscraper, the Western Union Telegraph Building (1872-75, demolished), is generally considered to be the first design to provide a solution to the problem of designing a tall building and was a prototype for the development of early corporate headquarters. His Renaissance-inspired Long Island Historical Society Building (now the Brooklyn Historical Society), of 1878-79, was the first building in New York to make extensive use of ornamental terra cotta. In the 1880s Post was responsible for such important New York business buildings as the Mills Building (1881-83, demolished), the New York Produce Exchange (1881-85, demolished), the New York Cotton Exchange (1883-85, demolished), the New York Times Building on Park Row (1888-90), and the Pulitzer or World Building (1889-90, demolished). Post also designed the mansion of Cornelius Vanderbilt (1889 and 1895, demolished) at the northwest corner of 57th Street and Fifth Avenue and the Huntington Residence (1890-94, demolished) on the southeast corner of 57th Street and Fifth Avenue, two important commissions from very prominent clients. The largest exhibition hall at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago was Post's Manufacturers and Liberal Arts Building. In 1897 he won the competition for the City College of New York which occupies an imposing site in Upper Manhattan. His most famous structure is the

temple-fronted New York Stock Exchange (1901-04). In 1905, Post's two sons, James Otis and William Stone, became partners in his firm which was renamed George B. Post & Sons. James collaborated with his father on the design of the Wisconsin State Capitol (1906-17). Among the many honors bestowed on Post during his long and distinguished career were the American Institute of Architects Gold Medal and the French Legion d'Honneur.

Peter Bonnet Wight (1838-1925) was born in New York and educated at the Free Academy (City College of New York).²⁶ He apprenticed with Thomas R. Jackson in 1856-57 and then worked briefly for the New York architect Isaac G. Perry and the Chicago firm of Carter & Bauer, returning to New York in 1859; from 1863 to 1868 he worked in an informal partnership with Russell Sturgis, later an influential architect and critic. Wight rose to prominence in 1861 when he placed first among a prestigious field of contestants in the competition for the design of the National Academy of Design in New York. Constructed between 1863 and 1865, this richly embellished polychromatic building was one of the first buildings in America to embody the architectural and artistic ideals of John Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites and played a major role in establishing the High Victorian Gothic style in this country. Wight also employed the Victorian Gothic style for the Yale School of Fine Arts (1864-66, altered) and for the Brooklyn Mercantile Library (1867-69, demolished). At the library Wight was responsible for every aspect of the building's design, including the furnishings and fixtures and the stenciled patterns of the walls and ceilings. His stylized designs, influenced by the reform ideals of such English designers as Owen Jones and Christopher Dresser, established his reputation as one of America's most talented designers.

After the Great Fire of 1871, Wight returned to Chicago where he entered into a partnership with Asher Carter and William H. Drake. The firm was extensively involved in the rebuilding of the city, producing designs for over fifty buildings between 1871 and 1873. During the 1870s, Wight continued to pursue his interest in interior design and was responsible a number of important projects, including the interior decoration at the Ottawa (Ill.) Opera House (1875), the Immanuel Presbyterian Church (1873-75) in Milwaukee, and Gambrill & Richardson's American Express Building (1872-74) in Chicago for which he also did engineering work and superintended construction. During the 1880s Wight directed his interest in technical problems to the formation of the Wight Fireproofing Company, which specialized in hollow tile construction and porous tile cladding of metal structural beams and columns and was responsible for "fire-proofing" over 200 buildings. After his business was dissolved in 1891, Wight earned his living as a journalist, writing for

major architectural periodicals and editing the journal *Fireproof* from 1904 to 1907.

The Design of the Williamsburgh Savings Bank Interior

Post's program for the Williamsburgh Savings Bank incorporated a grand entrance vestibule, a great banking hall containing a U-shaped tellers' counter, and, opening off the rear of the banking hall, a massive vault, private offices for the president and cashier, the president's washroom, and a grand staircase leading to the upper floors.²⁷ The second floor of the rear wing contained a committee room and the directors' meeting room, while the third floor housed the officers' dining room and a pantry. The clerks' dining room, kitchens, lockers, and washrooms were located in the basement. (None of the spaces beyond the banking hall are included in this designation.)

The original vestibule (subsequently altered) occupied the area beneath the balcony and was separated from the banking room by wood and glass partitions. Its floor was covered with English encaustic tiles; its ceiling was painted with a design by P.B. Wight in "deep, warm" tones and featured a bronze chandelier with "richly colored glass shadings."²⁸ Visitors would have passed through doors on the sides of the main vestibule to the two corner bays extending off the main banking room where they would have been directed towards the aisles on either side of the U-shaped tellers' counter at the center of the banking room.²⁹

The monumental banking hall features an open plan with side and top lighting, crowned by a soaring cast-iron dome. The decoration is opulent and richly colored with effects created both by the materials and the polychromatic paint scheme. The lower portion of the walls and columns are faced with marble and polished granite inlays while boldly styled Néo-Grec polished bronze grilles conceal the heat registers beneath the windows. (These materials were echoed by marble and granite facings and bronze grilles of the original tellers' counter). Dark polished granite columns feature delicately carved white marble capitals and bases. Decorative details include swagged relief panels, French Renaissance motifs, and such typical Néo-Grec elements as channeled pilasters, and arch surrounds enriched with bosses or rondels. The decorative focal point of banking hall is an elaborate three-tiered fronton over the vault at the center of the north wall.³⁰ An element of French Gothic Revival taste is present in the banking room in the brightly painted, elaborately decorated, safe which a nineteenth-century critic said resembled "a first class menagerie wagon."³¹ English encaustic tile floors (now concealed by carpeting) also added color and pattern to the design. It appears that the original color scheme has been preserved on the drum of the dome.

Painted Decoration³²

P.B. Wight's contribution to the Williamsburgh Savings Bank included his famous abstract design for the mural on the vault of the dome featuring a radial pattern of rays (Wight called them "points"), a complementary color scheme for the cast iron drum and cornice,³³ the beautiful anthemion and lotus and rinceau frieze decorations, and patterned ceiling designs for the entrance vestibule and balcony. (The vestibule and balcony ceilings have been painted over.)³⁴ These designs reflect Wight's grounding in the English principles of aesthetic decoration espoused by Owen Jones and the design school of the South Kensington (now Victoria and Albert) Museum in London. Among the "English" qualities of his designs are the flat, unshaded, boldly-outlined colors which emphasize the two-dimensional qualities of the wall surfaces and the geometric constructions and conventionalized representations of flowers and other natural objects. The anthemion frieze design and rinceau pattern may have been inspired by similar designs in Owen Jones's *Grammar of Ornament* while the delicate, abstracted iris forms suggest that Wight was familiar with the botanical drawings of the designer-naturalist Christopher Dresser which were just coming into wide circulation in the late 1860s and early 1870s. In addition there are a number of forms such as the stylized flowerpots, curving leaf forms, and spiraling tendrils which seem to derive from French Néo-Grec sources.³⁵ Today, the decorative painting at the Williamsburgh Savings Bank is the only surviving mural decoration by this important designer.

Description of the Interior of the Williamsburg Savings Bank* Banking Room

The banking hall is a large unobstructed square room measuring about seventy-five feet per side. This space is divided into three zones: the lower trabeated zone, articulated by pilasters and crowned by an entablature; the arcuated attic zone with its semi-circular walls, pendentives, and Roman bath windows; and the painted dome resting on a bracketed entablature and a high drum pierced by oval windows. The walls are smooth buff-colored ashlar sandstone blocks with marble and polished granite trim.

Lower zone: Clustered pilasters at the springing of the arches and the corners of the room are faced with polished granite and have Italian marble bases and

*Significant features in this interior space are underscored as specified in the proposed Rules for Designated Bank Interiors. (Public Hearing, June 18, 1996) "Significant features" are defined in Section 9-02 of the Rules.

Corinthian capitals, which are closely modeled on Italian Renaissance sources. Above the pilasters is a Late Renaissance entablature enriched with gilded rosettes and ornamented with shallow, undercut moldings and a granite frieze painted in black, coral, and gold with an anthemion and lotus pattern. The pedestals beneath the pilasters and the continuous dado which extends around the perimeter of the room are faced with decorative stonework. Described as marble in an early newspaper account but presently painted a light cream color, this facing is punctuated with gray-green and gold polished granite panels and ornate Néo-Grec style foliate bronze ventilation grilles that correspond with windows above. The main banking floor was originally covered with English encaustic tiles which are thought to survive at least in part but are presently covered with carpeting.

Attic zone: Monumental round arches (encompassing tripartite Roman bath windows on the south and east walls), have stone archivolts highlighted with gilt bosses and painted rinceau motifs; these arches carry pendentives.

Upper zone and dome: Resting on the pendentives is a soaring double-shell cast-iron dome which rises 110 feet above the banking floor. The dome is set on a drum punctuated with incised pilasters and oval lights surmounting a modillioned and paneled entablature. The elaborate cast-iron Renaissance brackets and paneled entablature which ring the dome are painted in cream, green, gold, and red. The brackets support a balcony which was originally had a bronze balustrade fitted with gas jets (now replaced with a pipe rail). The high drum, is lit by oval windows with recently restored etched glass lights bearing the insignia of the Williamsburgh Savings Bank (some broken pieces of original glass are attached to clear replacement windows). Separating the windows are Néo-Grec pilasters with incised decorations; the pilasters are painted black with red and gold accents. A similar color scheme is used for the elaborate cornice which provides a handsome transition for P.B. Wight's richly colored design for the vaulted ceiling of the dome. Wight's mural features spear-shaped rays which extend out from a central azure cap flecked with specks of gold to a dark border that includes stylized floral motifs, Néo-Grec elements, and orientalizing geometric designs. Gold leaf is used throughout the design to produce a flickering changeable effect.

South Wall: The south wall of the banking room extends past the perimeter of the dome and forms a recessed area which is set off from the main area by freestanding piers. Between the piers is a central vestibule surmounted by an open balcony. On the east side of the south wall there is elaborate bracketed stone portal decorated with swags and pendants and

surmounted by a granite frieze panel with incised lettering reading "staircase." The doorway contains a pair of mahogany doors which are decorated with raised panels and knobs. Flanked by two small rooms (which are not the subject of this designation) the open balcony is fronted by metal rail featuring Néo-Grec motifs. A lunette-shaped tripartite transom window lights the balcony.

Side Walls: At the south end of the east and west side walls, narrow windows with simple enframements light the recessed areas of the banking room. The arch on the east (Driggs Avenue) wall contains a large tripartite window separated by stone mullions with Néo-Grec decorations. This window is surmounted by a lunette-shaped transom. The arch on the west wall, which would have originally contained matching windows, was extended in 1906 to join the main banking room to the addition. This bay is articulated with paired pilasters and sections of frieze and is capped by a coffered vault. Although the opening between the banking rooms was sealed with masonry in the 1980s, much of this linking bay remains within the confines of the main banking hall.

North Wall: The north (rear) wall is punctuated with a series of single and paired paneled wood and etched-glass doors in classical enframements. The elaborate bracketed door surrounds are decorated with swags and pendants.³⁶ All the wood is imported mahogany. The large central opening contains a painted and stencilled metal vault door set on ornate metal strap hinges. Its stone surround is topped the decorative focal point of the banking hall: a series of broken pediments inset with a commemorative tablet, bronze eagle, clock, and barometer.

Subsequent Changes

Over the years a number of changes (mostly reversible) have been made in the banking room. Except for the polished granite facings, the wall surfaces below the cornice have been painted a light cream color. Openings have been cut for air conditioner vents in the stonework above the frieze on the north and south walls. In addition some of the ashlar facings on the southeast and southwest pendentives have been patched or replaced. Fluorescent light fixtures have been attached to the masonry on the north, east, and west walls. The ceilings above the entrance vestibule and the flanking bays have also been painted, as has the ceiling of the balcony over the entrance vestibule (Traces of blue paint show through in certain areas suggesting that the original ornamental painting may still remain in these areas.) The panels between the brackets beneath the gallery at the base of the dome have also been painted. During World War II, the grilles protecting the windows on the side walls were removed, and new metal sash and interior roll-down fire shutters were

installed for the lower windows. (The wood moldings around the windows survive intact and the tripartite Roman bath windows on the east and south walls are probably original.) In 1970 a new aluminum and glass entrance vestibule was installed in the main banking hall and new tellers' counters were installed in both the 1875 and 1905-08 banking halls (the latter is not subject to this designation).³⁷ In 1995 the windows in dome (which had been sealed with wood since World War II) were restored.

Subsequent History

As Brooklyn expanded, the Williamsburgh Savings Bank continued to grow, enlarging the scope of its business to cover the entire metropolitan region. This development was spurred by the opening of the Williamsburgh Bridge in December 1903. In 1902, in anticipation of an increase in population and business, the bank announced plans for a major addition to its building which would provide separate banking rooms for men and women depositors. In May 1903, the bank acquired three additional lots to the west of its property for the new extension, but was unable to proceed with construction until 1905-08 because of labor unrest. The exterior and interior articulation of the new addition, planned by the Brooklyn-based firm of Helmle, Huberty & Hudswell, echoes Post's

original design; an arched opening connected the two buildings and a curved tellers' counter extended from the eastern wall of the original building through the archway to the western wall of the new addition. Although the bank relocated its headquarters to downtown Brooklyn in 1929, there remained a need for increased space at the Broadway location. In 1925, a small extension, designed by Helmle & Hudswell was added to the rear of the 1905-08 building. The Broadway building was extended to the west again between 1941 and 1942, providing additional teller space and new kitchen and dining facilities. Sometime between 1979 and 1986 the bank began leasing the 1905-08 banking hall to Williamsburg Family Services, a division of St. Joseph's Children's Services, and a partition was constructed between the two banking rooms. (None of these later interiors is part of this interior designation.) The main banking room remains in banking use for Republic National Bank which acquired the Williamsburgh Savings Bank in 1989.

Report prepared by
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Notes

1. The Williamsburgh Savings Bank building was designated a New York City landmark on May 17, 1966 (LP-0164).
2. This section on the early history of Williamsburgh is based on Henry R. Stiles, *History of Kings County* (Brooklyn, 1884), 1, 293-303; Samuel Reynolds, *A History of the City of Williamsburgh* (Williamsburgh, 1852); Eugene Armbruster, *Brooklyn's Eastern District* (Brooklyn, 1942); Edgerton G. North, *The First Hundred Years, 1851-1951* (Brooklyn, 1951); Harry W. Havemeyer, *Merchants of Williamsburgh* (New York: privately printed, 1989).
3. After Williamsburgh lost its independent status, the "h" at the end of the name was dropped, becoming "Williamsburg."
4. "An Act to Incorporate the Williamsburgh Savings Bank, passed April 9, 1851." Reprinted in North, 69.
5. "The Williamsburgh Savings Bank, George B. Post, Architect," *The New-York Sketch-Book* 2 (Feb. 1874), pl. 5. These figures are taken from "Deposits of the Savings Banks of New York," *Bankers Magazine*, May 1867, 846.
6. Williamsburgh Savings Bank, "Records of the Williamsburgh Savings Bank, June 1851-1868" [Minutes of the Trustees Meetings, hereafter cited as WSB Records], vol. 1, s.v. Mar. 1, 1869.
This site had originally been part of the farm of Frederick Devoe which was subdivided into building lots in 1834. By the early 1850s the block bounded by Bedford Avenue, Broadway, Driggs Avenue, and South Fifth Street was built up with houses and two churches, St. Mark's Episcopal Church at Bedford Avenue and South Fifth Street (built 1841) and the Third Methodist Episcopal Church at Driggs Avenue and South Fifth Street (built 1851). See Armbruster, 88-94, 257; *Map of the City of Brooklyn* (N.Y.: J.H. Colton, 1839); *Map of the City of Brooklyn* (N.Y.: M. Dripps, 1850); All of the buildings along South Fifth Street were razed when the Williamsburg Bridge (opened 1903) was constructed.

7. The Kings County Savings Bank is a designated New York City Landmark.
8. This section is based on WSB Records, v. 1, s.v. Mar. 1, 1869, July 29, 1869; Sarah Bradford Landau, *P.B. Wight: Architect, Contractor, and Critic, 1838-1925* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1981), 28; and George B. Post Collection, New-York Historical Society -- Letterpress: George B. Post to P.B. Wight, July 30, 1869, v. 1, 102; Post to Wight, Aug. 3[?], v. 1, 106; Post to the Building Committee of the Williamsburgh Savings Bank, Aug. 6, 1869, v. 1, 110; Post to Building Committee, Dec. 29, 1869, v. 1, 123; Post to S.W. Truslow, Sept. 27, 1869, v. 1, 118; Post to Truslow, Feb. 5, 1870, v. 1, 160; Post to Truslow, Mar. 11, 1870, v. 1, 186; Correspondence: Truslow to Post, Sept. 24, 1873; Ledger: v. 1, p. 186-187.
9. Giles and King were well-known Brooklyn architects. P.B. Wight was the designer of the prestigious Brooklyn Mercantile Library which was then nearing completion (1867-69, demolished); moreover, he was the brother-in-law of the bank's counsel, Samuel Meeker, and was acquainted with several of the bank's trustees. Post, just beginning to establish his practice, had been recommended to the trustees by Wight.
10. At a trustees meeting in July 1869, the Building Committee recommended adoption of Post's design, but it appears that some of the trustees had reservations about denying Wight the job and the motion was tabled. Edmund Driggs subsequently met with Post who agreed that if he received the commission he would employ Wight to design the interior decoration of the bank. On August 5, 1869, the bank formally awarded the commission to Post.
11. Letterpress, Post to the Building Comm., Dec. 29, 1869, v. 1, 123.
12. See Correspondence, P.B. Wight to Post, Nov. 30, 1873, Aug. 7, 1874; Letterpress, Post to Wight, Dec. 6, 1873, v. 2, 373, Merry to Guille Sarre & Le Pellet, Feb. 20, 1874, v. 2, 453. Other contractors involved in the Williamsburgh Savings Bank project included J.G. Batterson, the Hartford masonry contractor that supplied the stonework for the Connecticut State Capital and the Equitable Building; the noted cast iron manufacturers, J.B. and J.M. Cornell; and the local Brooklyn firm of Captain J.W. Van DeWater which was responsible which for the woodwork and furnishings. The total cost of construction exceeded \$600,000.
13. This discussion of the evolution of bank design in the second half of the nineteenth century is drawn from Lois Severini, *The Architecture of Finance: Early Wall Street* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1983), 2-3, 55-84; LPC, *Bowery Savings Bank (now Home Savings of America) First Floor Interior Designation Report*, LP-1911 (New York: City of New York, 1994), prepared by Richard Brotherton; *Money Matters: A Critical Look at Bank Architecture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990).
14. Examples included the Kings County Savings Bank, Carl Pfeiffer's Metropolitan Savings Bank (1867), 9 East 7th Street in Manhattan, and Henry Engelbert's Bond Street Savings Bank (1873-74), 330 Bowery in Manhattan. Both the Metropolitan Savings Bank and the Bond Street Savings Bank are designated New York City Landmarks. Other examples of the bank-office building include Leopold Eidlitz's Gothic Revival style Dry Dock Savings Bank at 333 Bowery (1875, demolished), and the Fraser & Furness's Néo-Grec style Second National Bank of Wilkes Barre (c. 1870). In a variant of the bank-office building type, Lamb & Rich's Mount Morris Bank Building at 81-85 East 125 Street (1883-84) combined Queen Anne and Romanesque Revival architectural features in a design that incorporated a first-story banking hall with an apartment house called the "Morris" containing six French flats on the upper stories. (The Mount Morris Bank is a designated New York City Landmark.)
15. This decision was probably based in part on the bankers' interest in proper ventilation since an article published in the *New-York Sketch-Book of Architecture* in 1874 indicated that it was at the trustees' suggestion that the banking room was given great height and provided with a continuous row of windows at the base of the dome. "The Williamsburgh Savings Bank." P.B. Wight's project also featured a centrally-planned banking room with a vaulted ceiling surrounded by a continuous row of windows. Concern about the accumulation of "foul air" in their banking hall prompted the trustees of the Bowery Savings Bank to install the latest ducted hot air and ventilation system in their bank at the Bowery and Grand Street in 1865. See *Bowery Savings Bank*, 3.
16. This image was so important to the trustees that Post was able to persuade them to acquire an additional lot to the west of the building so that the bank could be freestanding. Although Post also suggested that a freestanding building would have an advantage in regard to fire prevention, his main argument was that the bank "will be one of the most monumental buildings in the country and it seems a pity to cramp it by its surroundings."

Letterpress, Post to Edmund Driggs, Nov. 17, 1873, v. 2, 355.

17. On the Williamsburgh Savings Bank as model for freestanding monumental banks in the classical mode, see Robert A.M. Stern, Gregory Gilmartin, and John Montague Massengale, *New York 1900* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 177; *Bowery Savings Bank Interior Designation Report*, 2-3, 9, 10.
18. In the late 1820s a group of French architectural students studying in Italy began to rethink the way they approached classical architecture. In contrast to Neo-classicists who had derived their theories from written texts, the Romantic Rationalists insisted on the importance of direct and careful observation of historic buildings. In addition they admitted to a much greater range of possible models since they viewed architecture as a continuum in which different forms evolved to meet different architectural circumstances. The early Renaissance was seen as particularly worthy of emulation because it had recovered the artistic principles of antiquity while creating new forms to meet new needs -- thus the Renaissance provided a methodological starting point for the evolution of a modern style. Initially the Romantic Rationalists greatly simplified the classical ornament on their buildings, treating it in an abstracted, skeletized manner that was likened to the simplified ornament of archaic Greek architecture and given the name "Modern Greek" or *Néo-Grec*. In the 1850s and 1860s Parisian architects began to introduce a new richness of massing and modeling to their buildings which was often coupled with an increasing historicism and interest in the late Renaissance and Baroque. Architects working in various styles were united in their underlying presumption that buildings should be expressive of their structure and function -- so that ideally the interior of a building could be anticipated by a glance at its exterior. For French architectural theory see: David Van Zanten, *Designing Paris: the Architecture of Duban, Labrouste, Duc, and Vaudoyer* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1987); Van Zanten, "Second Empire Architecture in Philadelphia," *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 74 (Sept. 1978), 9-24; Christopher Mead, *Charles Garnier's Paris Opera: Architectural Empathy and the Renaissance of French Classicism* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991); Neil Levine, "The Book and the Building: Hugo's Theory of Architecture and Labrouste's Bibliothèque Ste-Geneviève," and Barry Bergdoll, "'The Synthesis of All I Have Seen': the Architecture of Edmond Duthoit (1834-89)," in *The Beaux-Arts and Nineteenth-Century French Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1982); Bergdoll, *Léon Vaudoyer: Historicism in the Age of Industry* (New York: Architectural History Foundation; Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1994).
19. For Hunt and the training offered at his atelier, see Paul F. Baker, *Richard Morris Hunt* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1980); Susan R. Stein, ed., *The Architecture of Richard Morris Hunt* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986); Mary N. Woods, "Henry Van Brunt: 'The Historic Styles: Modern Architecture'" in *American Public Architecture: European Roots and Native Expressions*, ed. Craig Zabel and Susan Scott Munshower (University Park: Penn. State University, 1989); George E. Thomas, Jeffrey A. Cohen, and Michael J. Lewis, *Frank Furness: The Complete Works* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1991).
20. Sarah Landau was the first to observe the relationship between late French *Néo-Grec* design (notably Davioud's utilitarian designs for the *Magasins Reunis* (1865-66), and Post's and Hunt's commercial designs of the early 1870s which were very influential in the development of what has been called the "commercial style" and the American Neo-Grec. See Sarah Bradford Landau, "Richard Morris Hunt: Architectural Innovator and Father of a Distinctive American School," in *Architecture of Richard Morris Hunt*, 54-60, 68-70; Sarah Bradford Landau and Carl Condit, *Rise of the New York Skyscraper, 1865-1913* (New Haven: Yale, 1996), 10-11.
21. A.J. Bloor, "Annual Address," *Proceedings of the Tenth Annual Convention of the American Institute of Architects* (Boston, 1877), 25.
22. Ibid.
23. For the Lenox Library, see Landau, "Hunt," 69, 77; David Van Zanten, "The Lenox Library: What Hunt Did and Did Not Learn in France," in the *Architecture of Richard Morris Hunt*, 71-106; Montgomery Schuyler, *American Architecture and Other Writings*, ed. William H. Jordy and Ralph Coe (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, Harvard Univ. Press, 1961), 8, 76-79, 523-524.
24. For a discussion of Beaux-Arts classicism in American architecture, see William H. Jordy, *American Buildings and Their Architects: The Progressive and Academic Ideals at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, Doubleday, 1976), 70-71, 314-349.

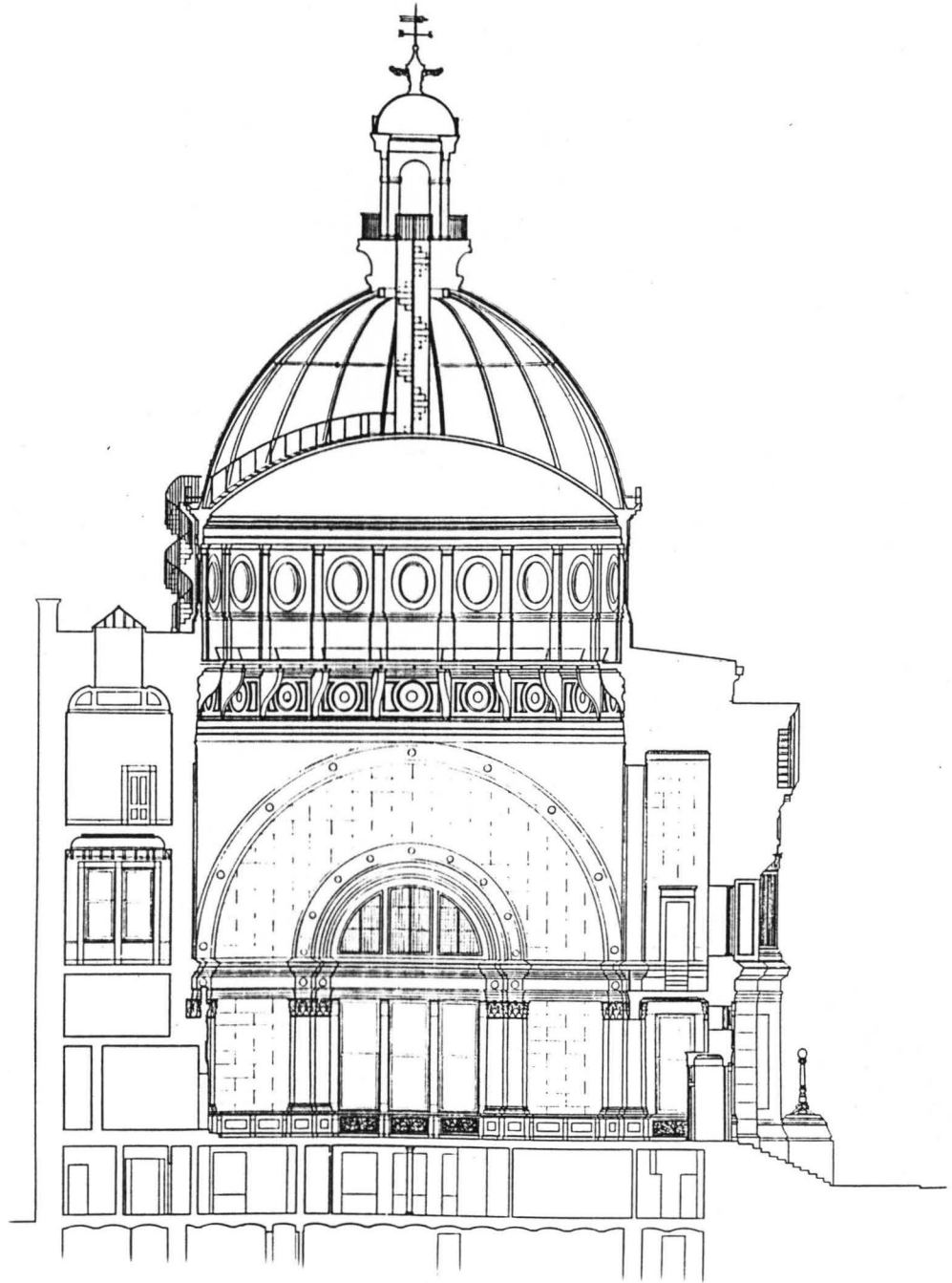
25. The following biographical information of Post is based on Winston Weisman, "The Commercial Architecture of George B. Post, *JSAH*, 31 (Oct. 1972), 176-203; Weisman, "George Browne Post," *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects* (New York: Free Press, 1982); Diana Balmori, "George B. Post: The Process of Design and New American Architectural Office (1868-1913)," *JSAH* 46 (Dec. 1987), 342-355; LPC, *Upper East Side Historic District Report*, LP-1051 (New York: City of New York, 1981), vol. 2, 1319-1320; Lisa B. Mausolf, "A Catalog of the Work of George B. Post, Architect" (M.S. Thesis: Preservation, Columbia Univ., 1983).
26. This account of P.B. Wight's career is based on Sarah Bradford Landau, *P.B. Wight*; Landau, "Peter B. Wight," *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects*; *In Pursuit of Beauty: Americans and the Aesthetic Movement* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1986), 485-486.
27. This description of the interior of the Williamsburgh Savings Bank is based on the photographs published in Charles T. Greene, *Robinson Crusoe's Father: The Projector of Savings Banks* (Brooklyn: Williamsburgh Savings Bank, 1910); and the description of the bank at the time of its opening published in "A Bank Palace," *Brooklyn Daily Times*, June 1, 1875, p. 2. See also Platt and Byard, Architects, "The Williamsburgh Savings Bank, 175 Broadway, Brooklyn, New York, Landmark Management Master Plan Draft," 1994.
28. "Bank Palace," p. 2.
29. It is doubtful that there were partitions separating these spaces from that main banking room in 1875 since they are not mentioned in the very detailed newspaper account, "A Bank Palace." However low partitions were in place by 1910 when they appear in a photograph published in *Robinson Crusoe's Father*. Based on their design, these partitions would appear to have been installed around 1900; it is not known whether they replaced earlier partitions, but the original circulation pattern from central vestibule, to side vestibules, to banking hall, would have been the same.
30. The design may have been suggested by a similar device used above the entrance of Gabriel Davioud's *Magasins Réunis*, which was illustrated in the popular French periodical *Revue générale de l'architecture* in 1870.
31. "A Bank Palace."
32. This discussion of P.B. Wight's designs for the banking room is based on Landau, *P.B. Wight* (pp. 28, 65, 94) and his correspondence with Post's firm. See Letterpress -- Frederick Merry (for Post) to Wight, May, 9, 1873, v. 2, 191; Merry to Wight, Oct. 31, 1873, v. 2, 208; Merry to Wight, Oct. 20, 1873, v. 2, 301; Merry to Wight, Oct. 30, 1873, v. 2, 313; Post to Wight, Dec. 6, 1873, v. 2, 373; Merry to Wight, June 26, 1874, v. 3, 100; Correspondence -- Wight to Post, May [?], 1873; Wight to Post, Nov. 30, 1873; Wight to Merry, July 23, 1874; Wight to Post, Aug. 7, 1874, Wight to Post, Aug. 15, 1874; Wight to Merry, Sept. 30, 1874. For the English Aesthetic Movement and its influence on Wight, see *In Pursuit of Beauty*, 53-70.
33. At the same time he submitted his ceiling design Wight sent Post a (now lost) section drawing of his color scheme for the drum and cornice. Wight asked Post to explain to the committee "that if the iron drum were not decorated most of the beautiful detail in the iron work would be lost and to paint the dome without the iron work would be a great mistake." Correspondence, Wight to Post, Nov. 30, 1873.
34. Wight also offered some general advice on the decoration of the other rooms in the bank and determined the placement of the cast-iron eyeholes in the vault from which scaffolding ropes were suspended to paint the ceiling.
35. Perhaps these were the ornamental studies of Victor-Marie-Charles Ruprich-Robert which were then appearing with some regularity in the *Revue générale*. See, for example, Ruprich-Robert's ornament studies for the Eglise de Flers, *Revue générale* 28 (1870), pls. 38-40. Landau has observed that the design's "finely detailed border and delicate, spider-like flower motif are noticeably more refined in style than the simpler, more conventional painted decoration of the Brooklyn Mercantile Library," see *P.B. Wight* (p. 28).
36. The design may have been suggested by similar moldings used by Gabriel Davioud for the *Magasins Réunis*.
37. This work was undertaken under New York City, Department of Buildings, Brooklyn, Alt 3691-1970; and LPC 70-217, CNE 70-348.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and the other features of this Interior, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that Williamsburgh Savings Bank (now Republic National Bank), first floor interior, 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, is customarily accessible to the public, and is thirty years old or more.

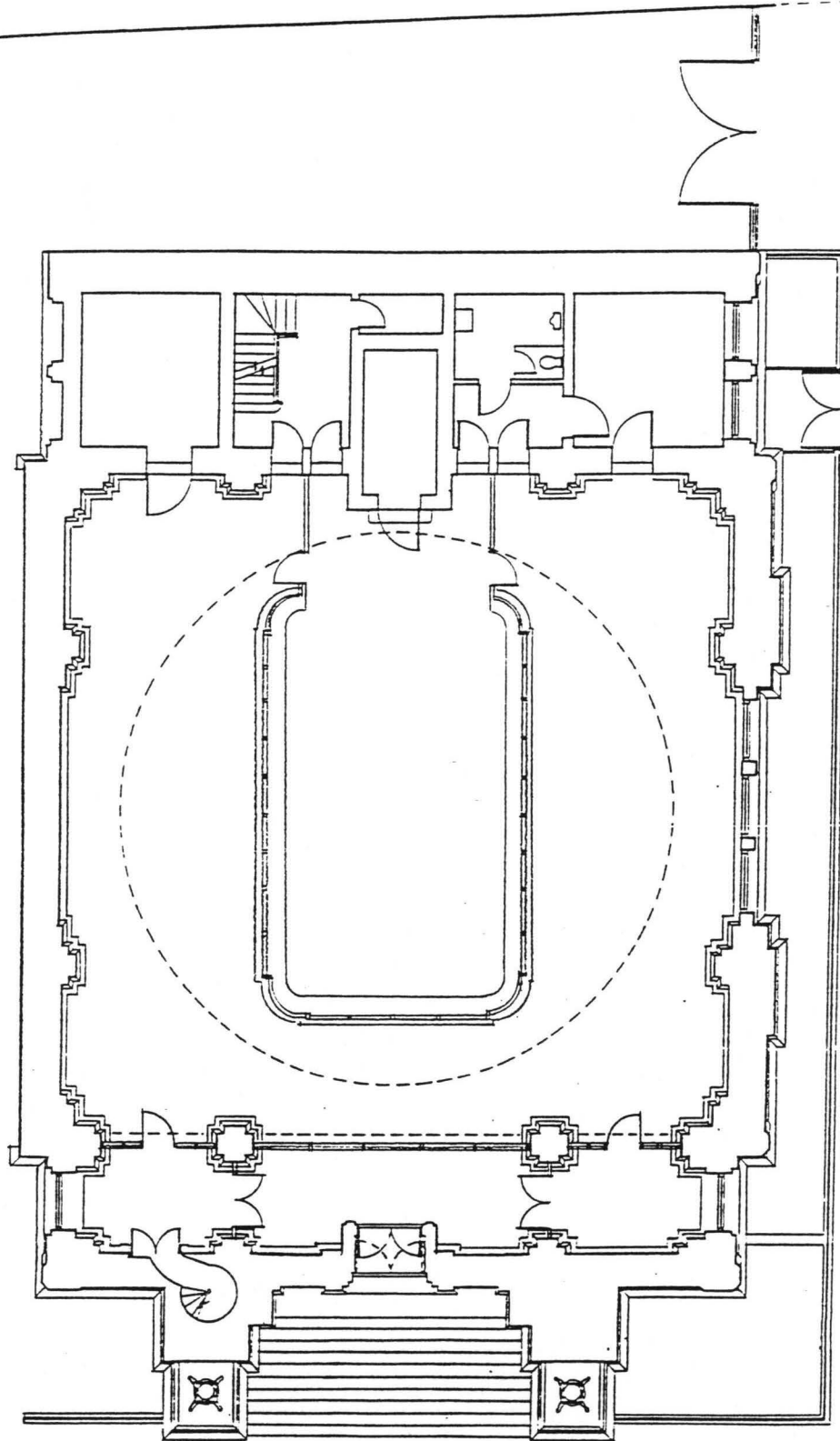
The Commission further finds that, among its other qualities, the first floor interior of the Williamsburgh Savings Bank at 175 Broadway containing the great banking hall is one of the most monumental public spaces surviving in New York from the post-Civil War era; that, built between 1870 and 1875, the bank was designed by renowned New York architect George B. Post and has interior decorations by the noted architect-designer, Peter. B. Wight; that the bank is among these distinguished architects' few surviving works; that Post's centrally-planned domed design, inspired by Renaissance models was one of the first examples of French academic classicism in American architecture and set a model for the classic banking halls which came into vogue following the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition; that the space is dominated by the soaring cast-iron dome rising 110 feet above the banking floor which is capped by a beautiful painted vault featuring an unusual abstract design by Wight; that the banking hall is decorated with a mixture of Renaissance and Néo-Grec motifs and contains an abundance of rich materials and elaborate polychromy; that these finishes constitute a rare, intact mid-nineteenth century interior ornamentation scheme; and that this magnificent space was home to one of Brooklyn's most historic and influential wealthiest institutions for over a hundred years and continues in use as a banking space for a successor firm.

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 an Interior Landmark the Williamsburgh Savings Bank (now Republic National Bank), first floor interior, consisting of the main (175 Broadway) entrance vestibule; the 1875 banking room, including the dome; the balcony above the main entrance vestibule; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces; floor surfaces; doors; balustrades; railings; ventilation grilles; decorative metalwork; clocks; the exterior of the vault in the 1875 banking room; and attached decorative elements; 175 Broadway, aka 161-175 Broadway and 834-844 Driggs Avenue, Borough of Brooklyn, and designates Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 2457, Lot 28, as its Landmark Site.



Williamsburgh Savings Bank (Broadway)
Section Drawing

Source: Platt and Byard Architects, Master Plan

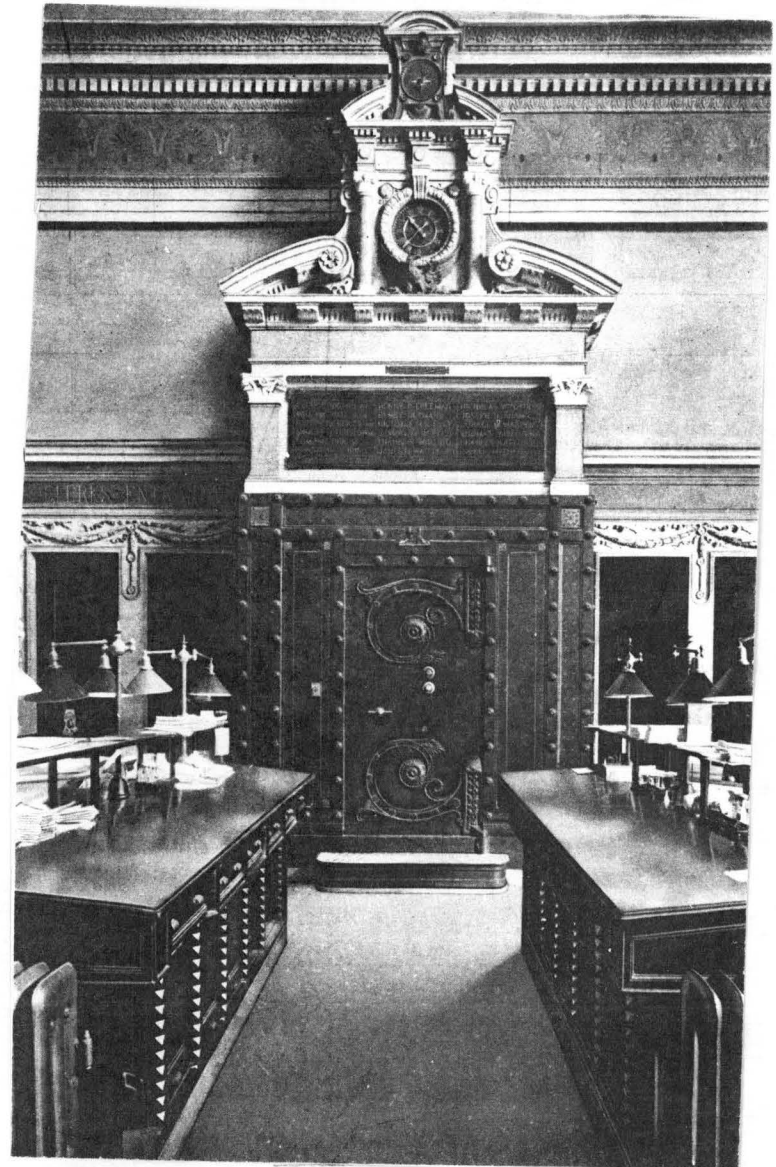
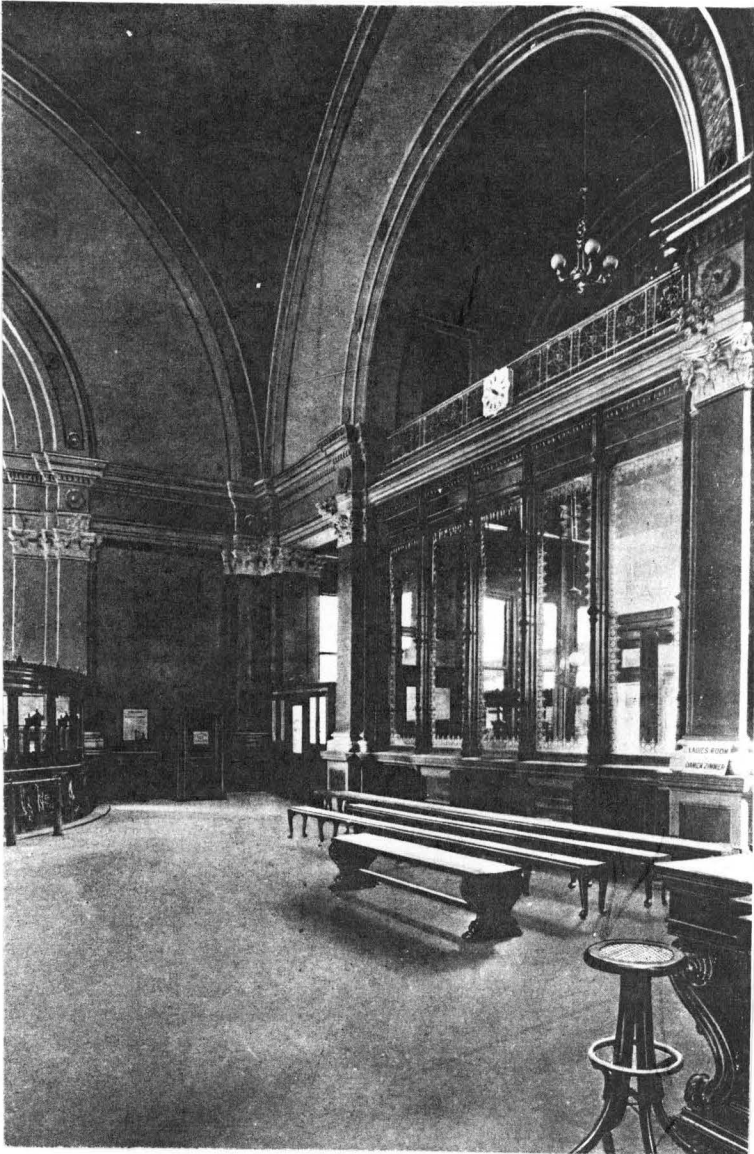


Williamsburgh Savings Bank (Broadway)
First Floor Plan circa 1875
Source: Platt and Byard Architects, Master Plan



Williamsburgh Savings Bank (Broadway)
First Floor Interior looking east

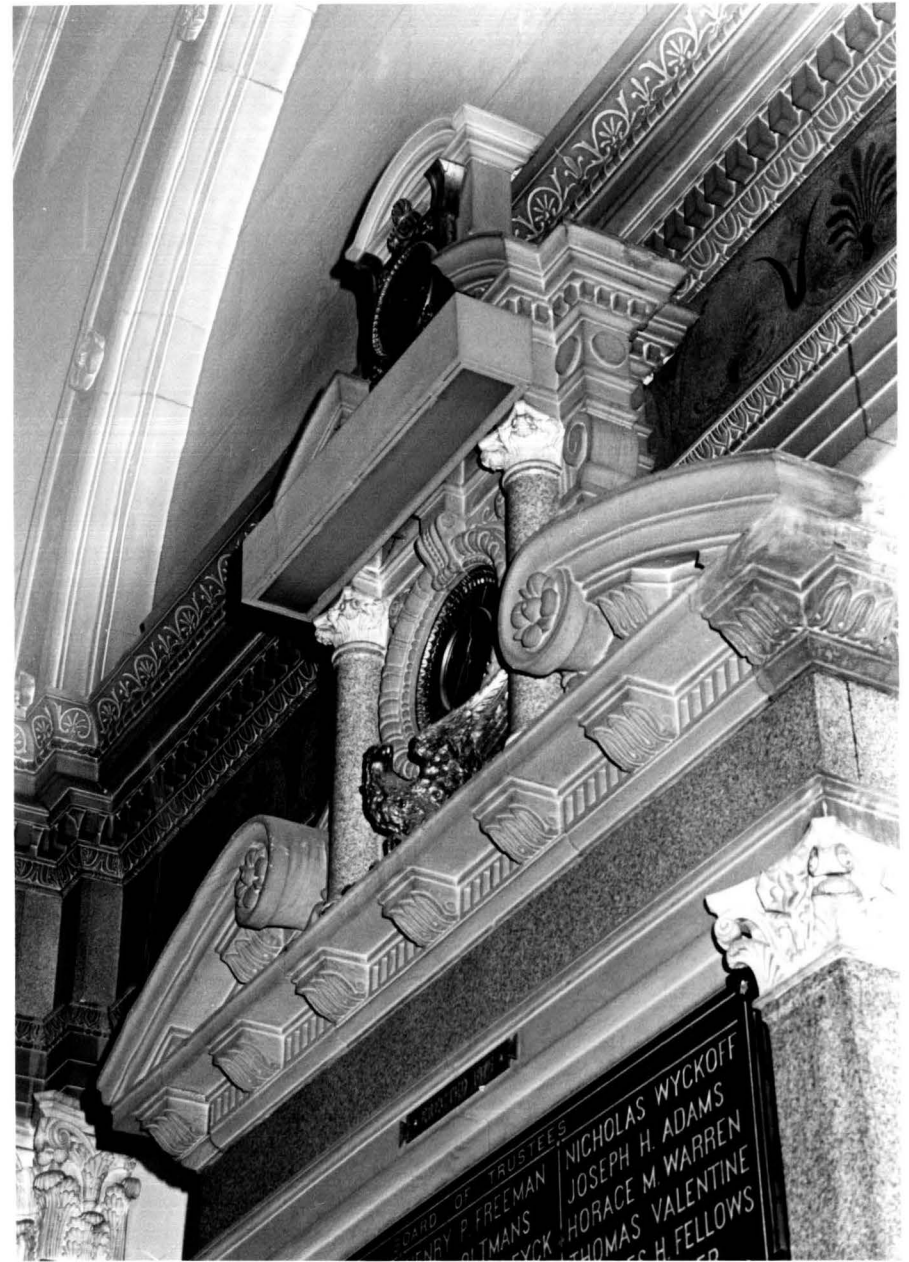
Photo: Carl Forster



Williamsburgh Savings Bank (Broadway)
 First Floor Interior c. 1910
 Source: Robinson Crusoe's Father



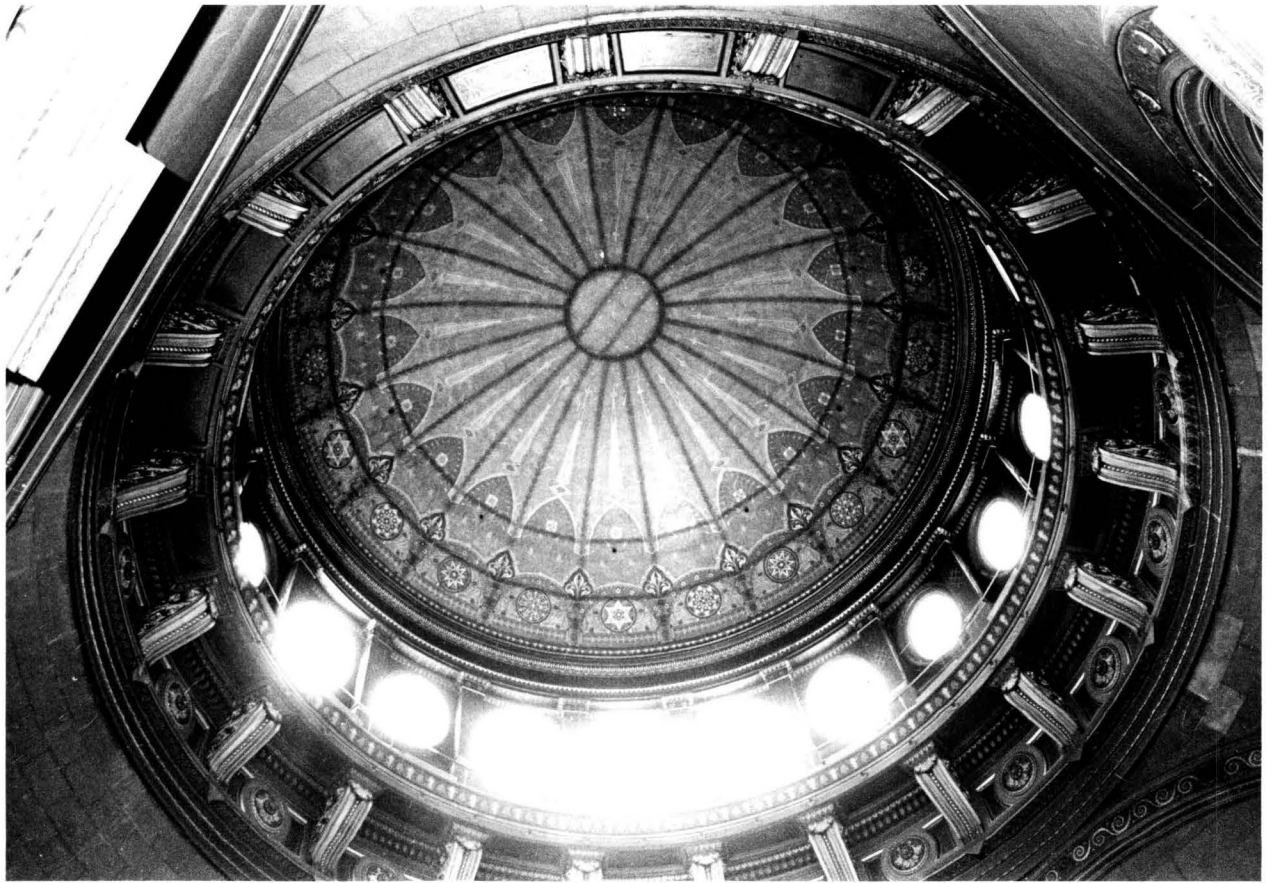
Williamsburgh Savings Bank (Broadway)
 Views of the banking room looking southwest (left) and northeast (right)
 Photos: Carl Forster



Williamsburg Savings Bank (Broadway)
 Stonework: Staircase entrance surround (left); Fronton over vault (right)
 Photos: Carl Forster



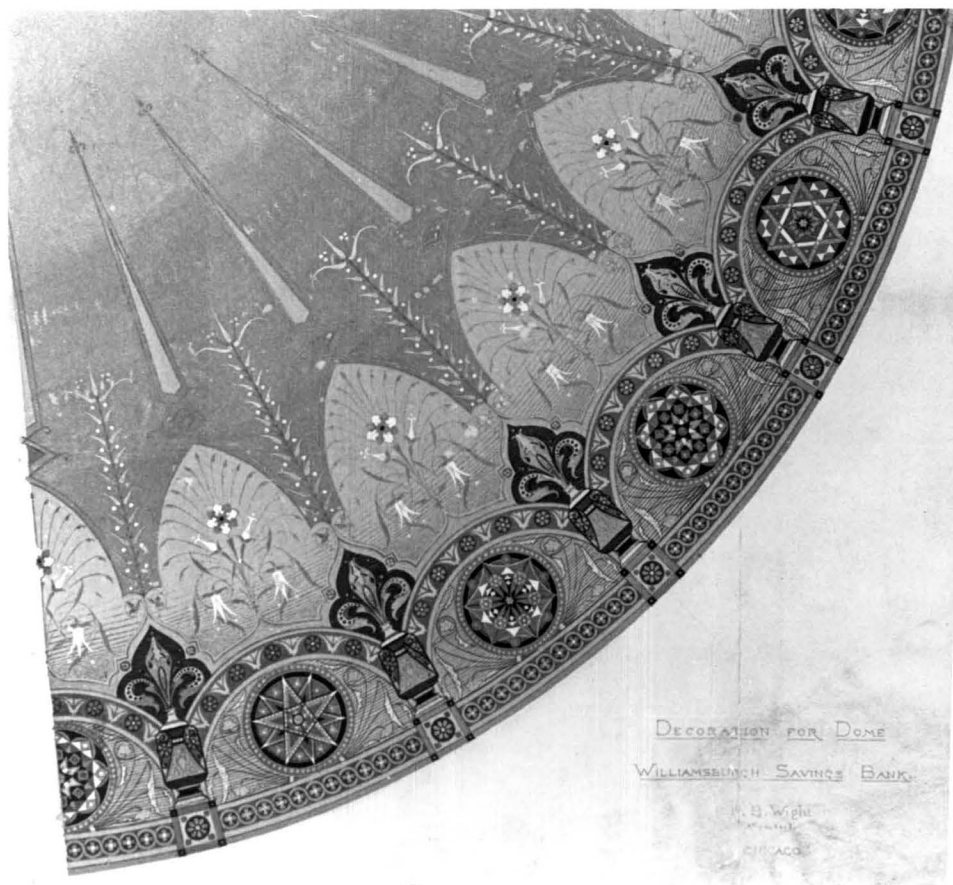
Williamsburgh Savings Bank (Broadway)
 Details of the marble pilaster capitals and a bronze grille
 Photos: Carl Forster



Williamsburgh Savings Bank (Broadway)
Dome (top) and attic zone of the south wall showing balcony (bottom)

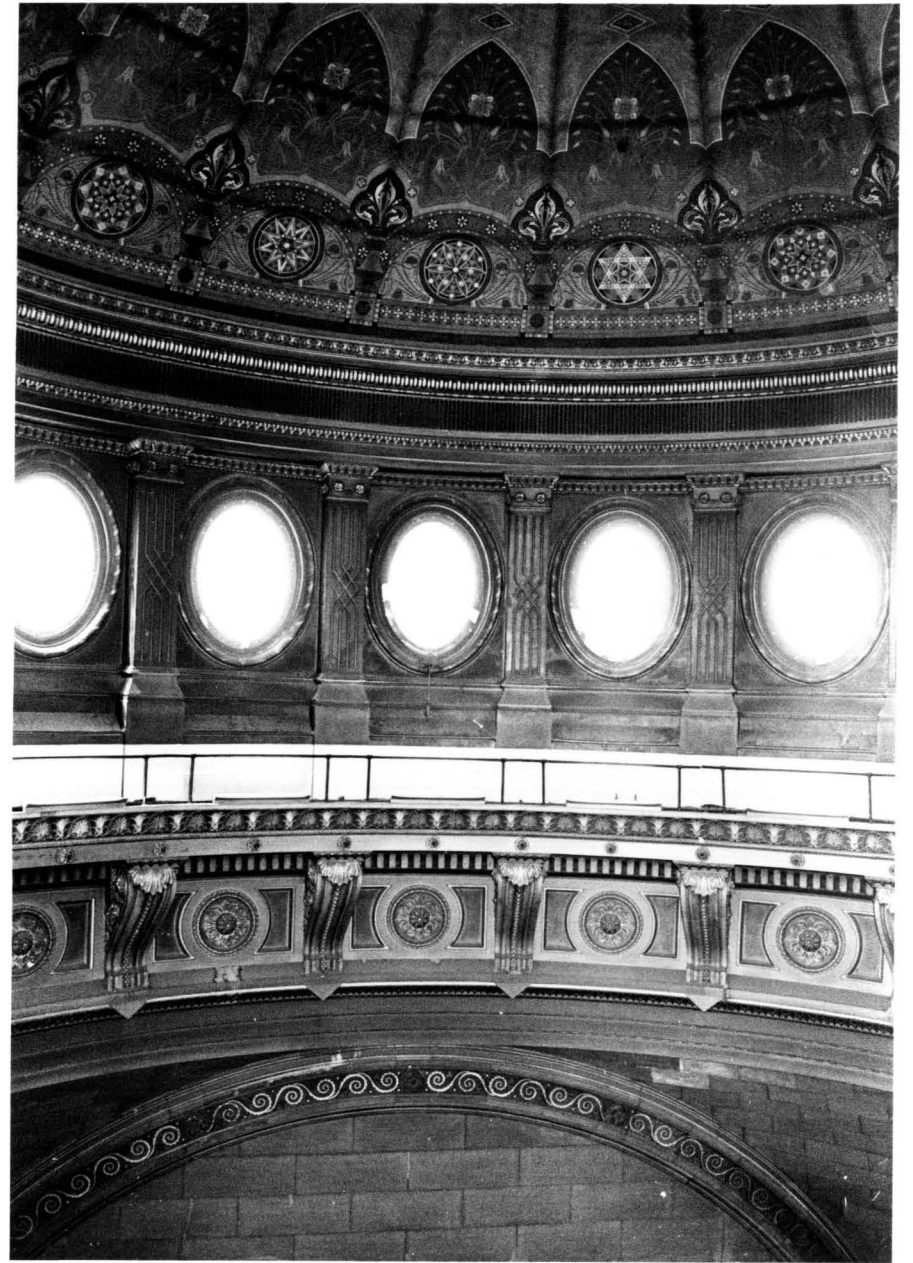
Photos: Carl Forster





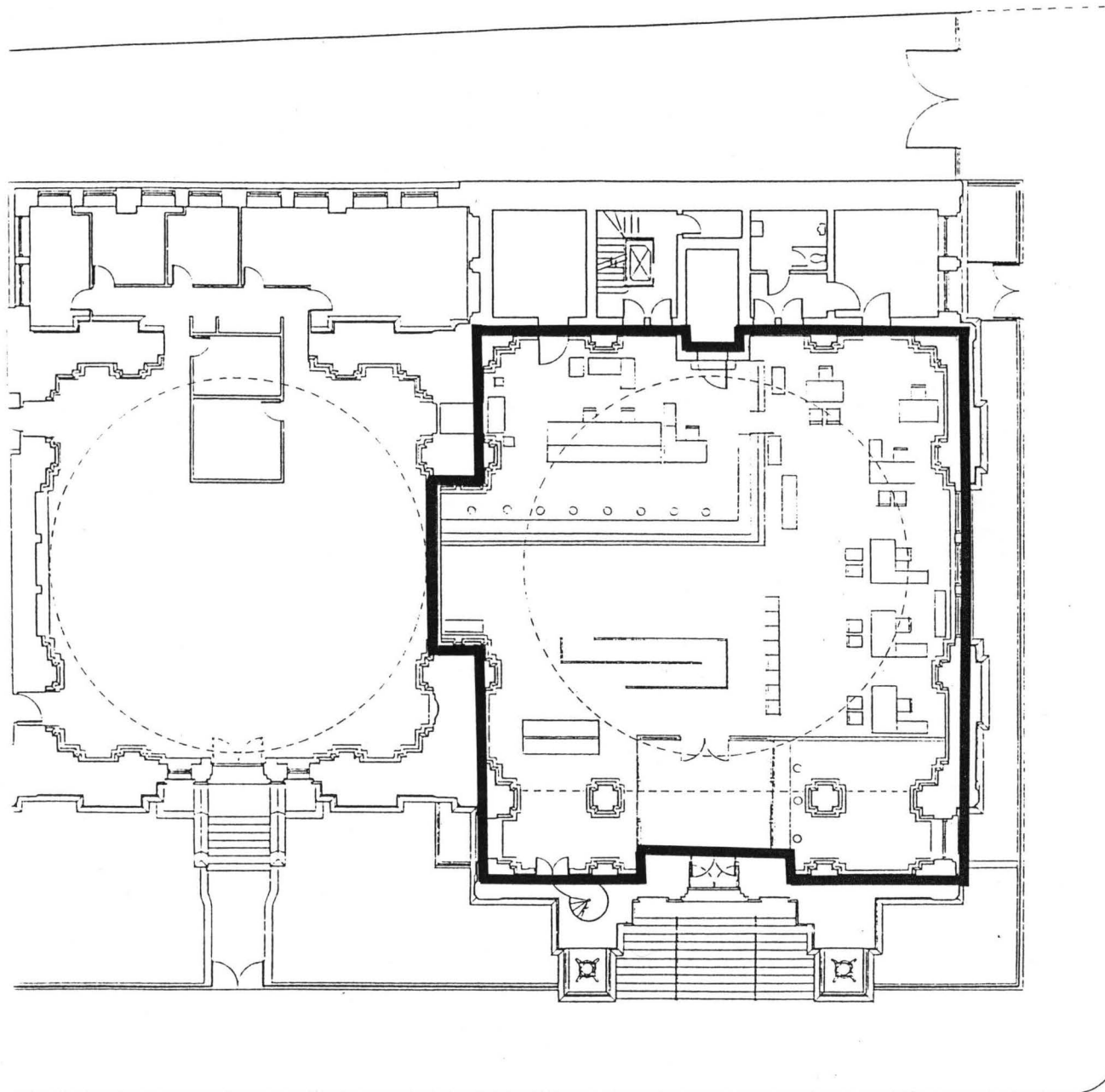
P.B. Wight, "Decoration for Dome, Williamsburgh Savings Bank," 1873 (top)
 P.B. Wight, Archivolt freize decoration, Williamsburgh Savings Bank (bottom)
 Drawing: Landau, P.B. Wight

Photo: Carl Forster



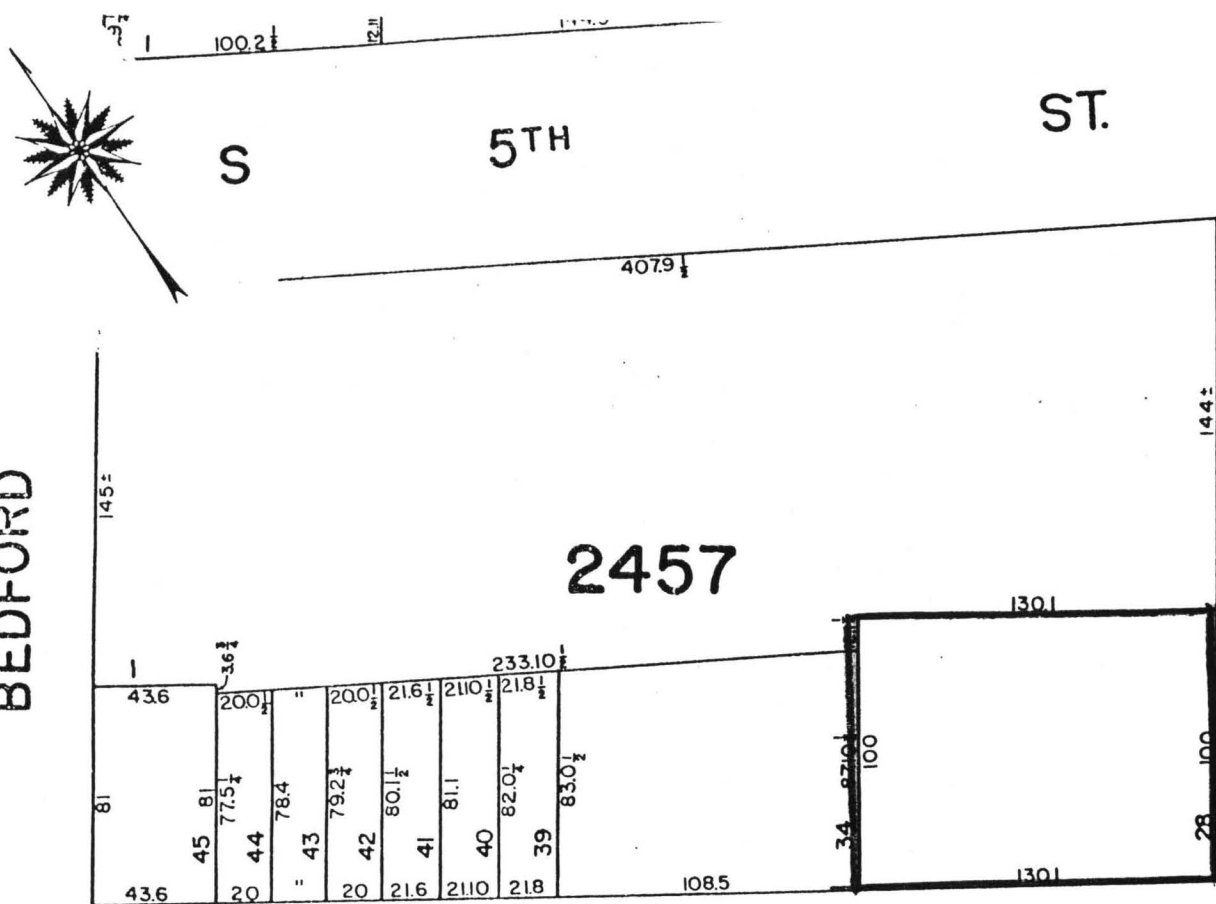
Williamsburgh Savings Bank (Broadway)
Details of the cast iron drum and gallery

Photos: Carl Forster

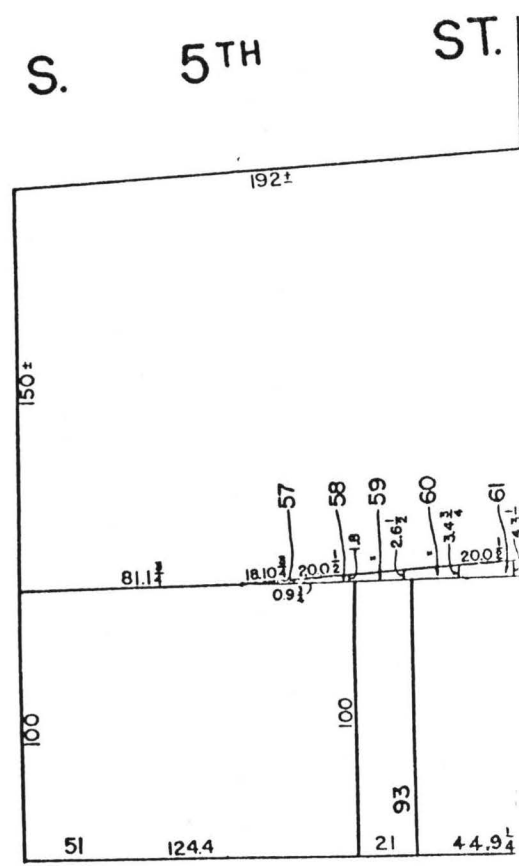


Williamsburgh Savings Bank (Broadway)
First Floor Plan Showing Existing Conditions
Source: Platt and Byard Architects, Master Plan

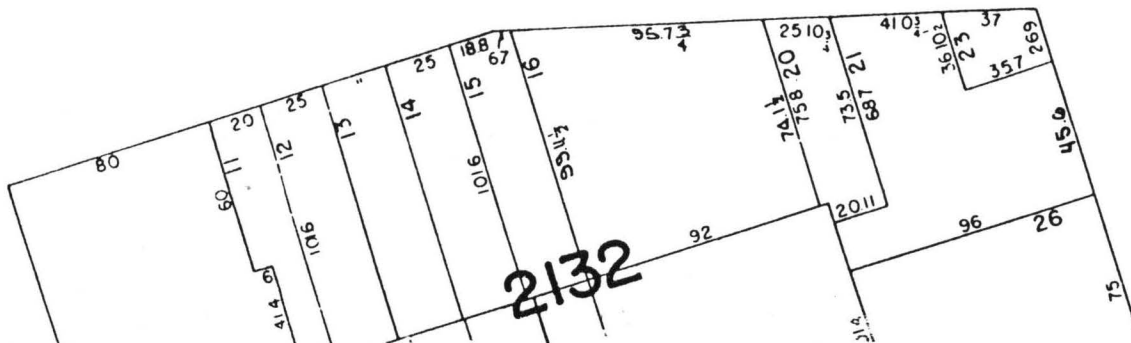
BEDFORD



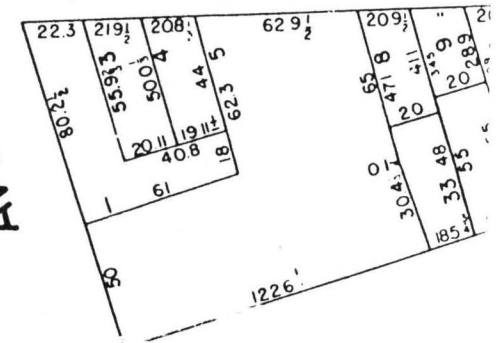
DRIGGS



BROADWAY



AVE.



Williamsburgh Savings Bank (Broadway)
175 Broadway (aka 161-175 Broadway and 834-844 Driggs Avenue), Brooklyn
Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 2457, Lot 28
Source: New York City Dept. of Finance, City Surveyor, Tax Map