

Landmarks Preservation Commission
June 16, 1998, Designation List 294
LP-1996

NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY, MORRISANIA BRANCH (originally MCKINLEY SQUARE BRANCH), 610 East 169th Street, The Bronx. Built 1907-08. Babb, Cook & Willard, architects.

Landmark Site: Borough of The Bronx Tax Map Block 2615, Lot 23

On May 5, 1998, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the New York Public Library, Morrisania Branch, and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 2). A representative of the New York Public Library spoke in favor of the designation; there were no speakers in opposition.

Summary



Opened on December 1, 1908, this is the fourth branch library in the Bronx and the twenty-eighth in the city to have been built with funds provided by the multi-million dollar gifts made in 1901-02 by Andrew Carnegie for the purpose of establishing a city-wide system of sixty-five neighborhood libraries. The McKinley Square Branch of the New York Public Library was designed by the prominent architectural firm of Babb, Cook & Willard, which had designed Carnegie's own house on East 91st Street in 1899-1903. The plan of the branch contrasts with those of the Carnegie-endowed libraries built on narrow lots. It is a freestanding two-story building with a T-shaped plan with lower two-story wings facing East 169th Street. Classical Revival in style, it has a centrally-placed entrance through a projecting stone portico with arched window openings lighting the interior. The branch was actively sought by residents of the area after the Carnegie gift was announced; over 1,500 signed petitions. The branch was extensively rehabilitated and made handicapped-accessible beginning in 1995. For ninety years, the branch, now called the Morrisania Library has been visually and historically an important component of its community.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

History of Morrisania¹

The Morrisania section of the Bronx was named after the prominent Morris family, local landowners and politicians through several generations from the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries. Morrisania became one of the twenty-one townships of Westchester County in 1788, and was annexed to the Town of Westchester in 1791. The construction of the Harlem and Hudson River Railroads, beginning in 1842, resulted in the start of development and an increase in population, particularly an influx of German and Irish immigrants. Morrisania became part of the new township of West Farms in 1846, was the most populous section of Westchester County by 1855, and was chartered as a separate town in 1864. When Morrisania was formally annexed to New York City in 1874, along with the western section of the Bronx, it had a population of over 19,000. By the late nineteenth century, Morrisania had a predominantly German population, with its own local brewing industry. Expansion of the elevated railroad lines along Third Avenue beginning in the mid-1880s, and later, the IRT subway system, reaching the area in 1904, helped spur a vast real estate boom. Between 1874 and 1911, the population of the annexed section of the Bronx grew by 1,300 percent, the majority of which occurred after the annexation of the rest of the Bronx in 1895. At that time, the Bronx would have been the seventh largest city in the United States. Starting in the 1930s, the ethnic composition of the area's population changed as earlier groups moved and new immigrant families came to the neighborhood.

The part of the neighborhood in which the library is located was known in the mid-nineteenth century as Eltona after Robert H. Elton, who had purchased property from Gouverneur Morris, built his home near Boston Road and 166th Street, and began to subdivide the land in the 1850s. Thomas Rogers, a prominent Wall Street financier, built a home on part of this land around 1872; the Rogers estate was divided for sale around 1900, the largest portion going to the City for the borough's first high school, Morris High School (1901-04, C.B.J. Snyder). The remaining portion of the estate was developed with rowhouses in 1900-06; these buildings make up the Morris High School Historic District, located two blocks to the southeast of the library. McKinley Square, which was officially named in 1902 in honor of the recently-deceased

United States president, became the major traffic hub and commercial center of Morrisania. Beatty Plaza, one block to the west of McKinley Square, was named in 1940 in honor of local World War I hero, Sergeant Arthur G. Beatty. The decision to locate a branch of the New York Public Library in Morrisania represents the growth of that neighborhood at the turn of the century and the accompanying expansion of public services.

History of Bronx Libraries²

Prior to the receipt of Andrew Carnegie's grant and the ensuing library building campaign which produced nine branches of the New York Public Library in the borough, the Bronx had only a handful of circulating libraries which were either private, church-related, or school district-affiliated. One of the earliest was the Van Schaick Free Reading Room, a designated New York City Landmark at Westchester Square, which was donated to the community by local philanthropist Peter C. Van Schaick in 1882-83 and designed by Frederick Clarke Withers. The library was expanded to the designs of William Anderson in 1890, when it was endowed by railroad tycoon and Throggs Neck resident Collis P. Huntington, and renamed. The Huntington Free Library and Reading Room is still administered by its trustees and functions as a non-circulating library open to the public. Church libraries included those belonging to the Brotherhood of Andrew and Philip and to the Mott Avenue Methodist Church.

The Kingsbridge Free Library and the Riverdale Library were founded prior to 1900, while the High Bridge Free Library and the Bronx Free Library were both founded in 1901, the latter being mainly an adult education organization. All four were eventually absorbed into the New York Public Library system, which at the time was operating a "travelling" branch that periodically circulated books in neighborhoods not served by a permanent branch.

New York Public Library and Andrew Carnegie³

The New York Public Library, a private corporation providing library services under contract to the City of New York, is the product of an amalgamation first of several privately-owned libraries and, later, various free circulating libraries. The consolidation in 1895 of the excellent research facilities of the privately-owned Astor and Lenox Libraries (founded respectively by the will of Jacob

Astor in 1849 and by famous book collector and philanthropist James Lenox in 1870) and the Tilden Trust (established in 1886 by the will of former governor of New York Samuel J. Tilden) formed the basis for the Reference Department. Meanwhile, the New York Free Circulating Library, established in 1878, incorporated two years later, and aided by public funds beginning in 1887, was supported initially by wealthy New Yorkers such as Andrew Carnegie, J.P. Morgan, Cornelius Vanderbilt, Jacob H. Schiff, and Henry G. Marquand, who were interested in encouraging the self-education of the poor and aiding the underprivileged. In 1901 the Free Circulating Library, which had grown to include eleven branches, was incorporated with several smaller free circulating libraries in the city to form the Circulation Department of the New York Public Library (now the Branch Libraries System).

The Library's branch system, which serves the boroughs of Manhattan, the Bronx, and Staten Island, owes most of its development to industrialist Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919), the exemplar of the self-made man. His philanthropic philosophy was spelled out in two articles published in 1889 in the *North American Review* and later reprinted as the title essay of his book, *The Gospel of Wealth and Other Timely Essays* (1901). Carnegie's aim, "to help those who would help themselves," would be achieved through "a free library...provided the community will accept and maintain it as a public institution, as much a part of the city property as its public schools, and, indeed, an adjunct to these."⁴ As early as 1881 he had donated a library to his native town in Scotland and later to Pittsburgh and other Pennsylvania communities. In New York, where he had lived since 1867, he served on the board of the Free Circulating Library beginning in 1893 and assisted in fund-raising campaigns. In 1901 he sold his steel company to J.P. Morgan and began seeking a substantial philanthropy to which he could direct his attention and wealth. Following the guarantee that the Public Library and the Free Circulating Library would merge, as Carnegie had advocated, he pledged \$5.2 million for the establishment in New York City of sixty-five library branches (divided among the New York Public Library, Brooklyn Public Library, and Queens Borough Library) to cost \$80,000 each.⁵ For the three boroughs it served, the New York Public Library would choose the location of each new library with the approval of New York City, which provided the funds to purchase the sites. The library would construct and equip the branches with the

Carnegie funds and operate them as free circulating libraries on lease from the city, which would maintain the buildings and purchase books with its own funds. In November 1901, the New York Public Library agreed that architectural services for the anticipated buildings would be provided by three highly-prestigious firms: Babb, Cook & Willard; McKim, Mead & White; and Carrère & Hastings.⁶ It was agreed that the Carnegie branches, which were sited and planned in a collaboration between architects and librarians,⁷ would embody a distinctive type, uniform in design, materials, general characteristics, and scale; the resulting buildings were of superior architectural quality.⁸ The branches, which continued to be built using Carnegie funds into the 1920s, were typically finished and opened within two or three years of their initial planning and design. Eventually Carnegie's unprecedented beneficence produced over 2,500 libraries in the English-speaking world. The Carnegie Corporation, which still operates, continues to provide various types of grants to libraries worldwide.

Babb, Cook & Willard⁹

George Fletcher Babb (1843-1916) was born in New York City and spent his early childhood in New Jersey. He began his architectural career in 1858 in the New York office of Thomas R. Jackson. From 1859 to 1865 Babb collaborated with Nathaniel G. Forster. Three years later he served as senior draftsman in the office of Russell Sturgis. Babb was a fellow of the American Institute of Architects and a member of its New York chapter. Walter Cook (1846-1916) was born in New York and was a Harvard graduate (1869) who had also studied architecture at the Royal Polytechnical School in Munich and at the atelier of Joseph Auguste Emile Vaudremer in Paris. He was one of the first Americans to receive professional training in France. In 1877, Babb and Cook formed a partnership. By the 1890s, Cook was the principal designer of the firm. Cook was an early member and fellow of the American Institute of Architects, serving as its president in 1912-14. He was also a member of the Architectural League of New York and the Beaux-Arts Society of Architects, and was active in civic affairs. Daniel W. Willard (dates undetermined) was a graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a fellow of the American Institute of Architects, and a member of the Architectural League. He joined Babb and Cook in 1884 to form the firm Babb, Cook & Willard.

The firm designed the Romanesque Revival DeVinne Press Building (393 Lafayette Street, 1885), the Andrew Carnegie Mansion (now the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, 2 East 91st Street, 1899-1903), and eight Carnegie branches in Manhattan and the Bronx between 1905 and 1909.¹⁰ Successor firms Babb, Cook & Welch and Cook & Welch designed three additional branches between 1909 and 1913.¹¹

Design and Construction of the McKinley Square Branch of the New York Public Library¹²

The Morrisania Branch of the New York Public Library, originally called the McKinley Square Branch, was a new branch created using Carnegie funds. Many neighborhoods were vying to be chosen by the library as branch sites, including Morrisania, whose residents submitted the following resolutions, signed by over 1,500 people, to the New York Public Library's site committee and to the Board of Estimate and Apportionment:

Resolutions in behalf of a Carnegie Library

As the need for a public library in this vicinity is indicated by the fact that the 169th Street branch of the Travelling Dept. of the New York Public Library, open only four hours per week, has circulated about 20,000 (twenty thousand) volumes in the last two years:

Resolved - that we, the undersigned citizens of Morrisania, in mass meeting assembled, consider that the Carnegie Libraries to be placed in Tremont and Mott Haven will be so distant as to be inconvenient for about 40,000 (forty thousand) people in this immediate neighborhood; and, therefore,

Resolved, - that we respectfully request the Sites Committee of the New York Public Library to locate a Carnegie Library at or near the junction of 169th St. and Boston Road, - a point which is conveniently situated for such site because of its central location.

Adopted, Dec. 4, 1902.¹³

The resolution was accompanied by an impassioned letter from the principal of nearby Morris High School, Edward J. Goodwin, in which he pleaded for a library to be located "near to the building now in process of erection for the Morris High School. The modern methods of teaching history and English

require an extended and frequent use of library privileges."¹⁴

The community's campaign for a Carnegie library was successful; the site was approved by the Board of Estimate and Apportionment on July 6, 1906, and was formally acquired in August 1906 at a total cost of \$48,500 for three adjacent lots.¹⁵ By October 1906, the firm of Babb, Cook & Willard had been chosen to design the branch, and was advised by Alanson T. Briggs, the Agent for Carnegie Sites,¹⁶ to submit plans and begin test borings at the site.¹⁷

At the turn of the century, American architects were substantially influenced by classicism as taught by the Parisian Ecole des Beaux-Arts, which stressed rationality, correctness, and thinking on a grand scale. Resulting public buildings are often exuberant versions of this approach. In Manhattan, the Carnegie libraries were designed for urban sites, a condition which encouraged palazzo-like facades and simple interior layouts characterized by a tripartite scheme: vertical circulation was contained along one solid side wall, and front and rear rooms, separated by a librarians' station, were aligned along a second side wall, typically lined with bookshelves. On a less restrictive site, a freestanding library typically had a symmetrical front with a central entrance leading to a room containing the librarians' station, which was flanked on two sides by large reading rooms. The second floor contained offices; the basement accommodated a packing room, boiler, and toilets. The Morrisania Library followed the second model while employing a classical vocabulary and taking advantage of its irregular, curving site on East 169th Street and Franklin Avenue.

The library was built by the construction firm Richard Deeves & Company, which also built the Seward Park and West 40th Street branches in Manhattan and the Woodstock branch in the Bronx. It opened on December 1, 1908. The cost of the land, building and equipment was \$156,983.

Subsequent History

The building has continuously served as a public library since its opening in 1908. In 1913, three rear basement windows were lowered and brick window wells were built.¹⁸ By the mid-1940s, the library's name had been changed from the McKinley Square Branch to the Morrisania Branch. In 1995-96, the interior was re-designed and a number of exterior modifications took place, including the installation of a handicap ramp, the extension and replication of the

original wrought-iron fencing to the front steps, and the relocation of the granite posts. The project architects were DCI International, which received an Art Commission award for their design.

Description

The Morrisania Library, a freestanding two-story building with a T-shaped plan and lower two-story side wings, is located at the curve formed at the intersection of East 169th Street and Franklin Avenue, across from a small park named Beatty Plaza and one block west of McKinley Square. The neighborhood is mainly residential in character, consisting of early- to mid-twentieth century low- and mid-rise brick tenements with ground-level storefronts. Public School 63, built in 1924, is located on the adjacent lot to the west of the library, which occupies most of its curving, irregularly-shaped lot. Small lawns, enclosed by historic wrought-iron fencing, are situated in front of the two side wings. Rear alleyways are entered through non-historic mesh gates. A handicap ramp, with a granite bulkhead, wrought-iron fencing, and flanking granite posts topped with ornamental balls, is located to the east of the granite entry stairs; a matching bulkhead, fence, and posts extend to the west of the stairs.

Classical Revival in style, the library is of red brick, laid in Flemish bond, above a pink Milford granite base and has contrasting limestone detail. The basement windows contain historic, wrought-iron grilles. The centrally-placed limestone portico features double wooden doors with glass panels, decorative iron grilles, and flanking historic light fixtures; flat pilasters; a semicircular transom; a prominent keystone; dentils; and panelled parapet. A large carved stone seal of the City of New York dominates the facade above the entrance. Arched window openings, with prominent keystones and replacement sash, light the interior of both floors, which are separated by a molded limestone band. The second story windows sit upon panelled limestone spandrels. The building is topped by a stone cornice embellished by an egg and dart molding and a dentil course, and surmounted by a brick and stone parapet wall.

The side wings and side elevations, which are similarly detailed, contain secondary entrances on the first story and have flat-topped window openings.

Report prepared by
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Research Department

NOTES

1. This section was adapted from the following sources: LPC, *Morris High School Historic District Designation Report* (LP-1258), (New York: City of New York, 1982), with additional information from Louis F. Haffen, *Borough of the Bronx: A Record of Unparalleled Progress and Development* (New York: Bronx Borough President, c. 1909), 3 and John McNamara, *History in Asphalt: The Origin of Bronx Street and Place Names* (Bronx: The Bronx County Historical Society, 1984), 29, 172.
2. This section is based on the following sources: Phyllis Dain, "The New York Public Library; A History of its Founding Years" Ph.D. dissertation (Columbia University, 1966), 44-45, 50-52, 599, 605-608; Benedict Fitzpatrick, *The Bronx and Its People: A History, 1609-1927* (New York: The Lewis Historical Publishing Co, Inc., 1927), v. 2, 552; LPC, *Van Schaick Free Reading Room/Huntington Free Library and Reading Room Designation Report* (LP-1886), (New York, 1994), prepared by Pat Garbe.
3. This section was adapted from LPC, *New York Public Library, Tottenville Branch Designation Report* (LP-1867), prepared by David M. Breiner (New York: City of New York, 1995), and includes the following sources: Phyllis Dain, "The New York Public Library: A History of its Founding and Early Years," Ph.D. dissertation (Columbia University, 1966), abstract and 477-481, 555; Dain, *The New York Public Library: A History of its Founding and Early Years* (New York: NYPL, 1974), esp. 209-247; Theodore Wesley Koch, *A Book of Carnegie Libraries* (New York: H.W. Wilson Co., 1917), 12-19, 38; LPC, *Schomberg Collection for Research in Black Culture Designation Report* (LP-1133), prepared by Rachel Carley (New York: City of New York, 1981); and LPC, *New York Free Circulating Library, Bloomingdale Branch Designation Report* (LP-1616), prepared by Betsy Bradley

- (New York: City of New York, 1989). An additional source is: Mary B. Dierickx, *The Architecture of Literacy: The Carnegie Libraries of New York City* (New York: Cooper Union, 1996), 15-52, 115.
4. See Koch, "Carnegie Libraries," bound excerpt found at the Research Branch of the NYPL, 345-351.
 5. Sixty-seven were actually built between 1901 and 1929 in New York City, the majority of which, numbering 55, were built between 1902 and 1909. Of the 67 branches, which was the largest number of any city in the country, 57 are still standing and 54 still operate as libraries. Carnegie's grant was a record library donation for any single donor. Carnegie gave away about 90 percent (\$330 million) of his wealth to various institutions, including \$56 million to libraries worldwide.
 6. At first, Carnegie objected to the selection of just three firms to design the libraries, preferring architectural competitions, but was persuaded by John S. Billings, the Director of the New York Public Library, that using a small number of firms would be more economical and produce more unified results. The Brooklyn and Queens Public Libraries hired different firms.
 7. The librarians had particular influence over the plans, which generally incorporated the progressive library thinking of the period, where stacks were easily accessible to librarians, reading rooms were light and airy, and charge desks located at the center.
 8. The predominant style was Classical Revival, which was especially popular for public buildings in the early twentieth century, although Carnegie's moderating influence stressed simple, modest buildings.
 9. This section was adapted from LPC, "Architects' Appendix," *Expanded Carnegie Hill Historic District Designation Report* (LP-1834), (New York: City of New York, 1993), and includes the following sources: "Babb, Cook & Willard," *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects*, ed. Adolf K. Placzek (New York, 1982), vol. 1, 121-122; Mary B. Dierickx, *The Architecture of Literacy: The Carnegie Libraries of New York City* (New York: Cooper Union, 1996), 31; Dennis Steadman Francis, *Architects in Practice in New York City, 1840-1900* (New York, 1979), 12, 23, 82; *Journal of the American Institute of Architects*, v.4, 1916, 231-233; LPC, Research Files; LPC, *Andrew Carnegie Mansion Designation Report* (LP-0674), (New York, 1974); LPC, "Architects Appendix," *Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic District Designation Report* (LP-1647), (New York, 1990); Norval White and Elliot Willensky, *AIA Guide to New York City* (New York, 1978), 97, 238; and Henry F. Withey and Elsie R. Withey, *Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased)*, (Los Angeles, 1970), 135-136.
 10. Besides the Morrisania branch, they are Columbus (1909); 58th Street (1907), demolished; 96th Street (1905); St. Agnes (1908); 67th Street (1905); and Webster (1906) in Manhattan, and Mott Haven (1905) in the Bronx. See Dierickx for specific details.
 11. These are Seward Park (1909) by Babb, Cook & Welch, and Fort Washington (1914) and West 40th Street (1913) by Cook & Welch. See Dierickx for specific details.
 12. This section is based on the following: City Planning Commission, *Program for the Public Libraries of New York City* (New York, 1945), Appendix, Table A; Dierickx, 25-27; Harry Miller Lydenburg, *History of the New York Public Library* (New York, 1923), 545; and The New York Public Library Archives, Files of the Agent for Carnegie Sites, A.T. Briggs, boxes 10 and 15.
 13. Agent, box 10, folder 2.
 14. Ibid. Morris High School (C.B.J. Snyder, 1900-04, 1926), located at East 166th Street and Boston Road, is located within the Morris High School Historic District; its auditorium is a designated interior Landmark.
 15. Lot A was purchased by the City of New York from Marie M. Mantel for \$20,000; Lot B from Paulina W. Goeltz for \$15,000; and Lot C from William A. Sinclair and wife for \$13,500 (Bronx County Conveyance Records, liber 54, pp. 117-126).
 16. New York City attorney A.T. Briggs was chosen by the New York Public Library and the Brooklyn Public Library to propose library sites and to act as agent to the libraries and liaison to New York City.

17. An application for a new building was filed in September, 1907. New York City Department of Buildings, Borough of the Bronx, NB 399-1907.
18. New York City Department of Buildings, Borough of the Bronx, ALT 337-1913.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the New York Public Library, Morrisania Branch (originally the McKinley Square Branch) has a special character and 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 New York Public Library, Morrisania Branch, was built in 1907-08 to the designs of Babb, Cook & Willard in the Classical Revival style that was popular for public buildings in the early twentieth century; that it is the fourth branch library in the Bronx and the twenty-eighth in the city to have been built with funds provided by the multi-million dollar gifts made in 1901-02 by Andrew Carnegie for the purpose of establishing a city-wide system of sixty-five neighborhood libraries; that it has a centrally-placed entrance through a projecting stone portico with arched window openings lighting the interior; that the branch was actively sought by residents of the area after the Carnegie gift was announced; and that for ninety years, the Morrisania Library, which survives nearly intact, has been visually and historically an important component of its community.

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 the New York Public Library, Morrisania Branch (originally the McKinley Square Branch), 610 East 169th Street, and designates Borough of the Bronx Tax Map Block 2615, Lot 23, as its Landmark Site.

SEE PAGE 6

FRANKLIN

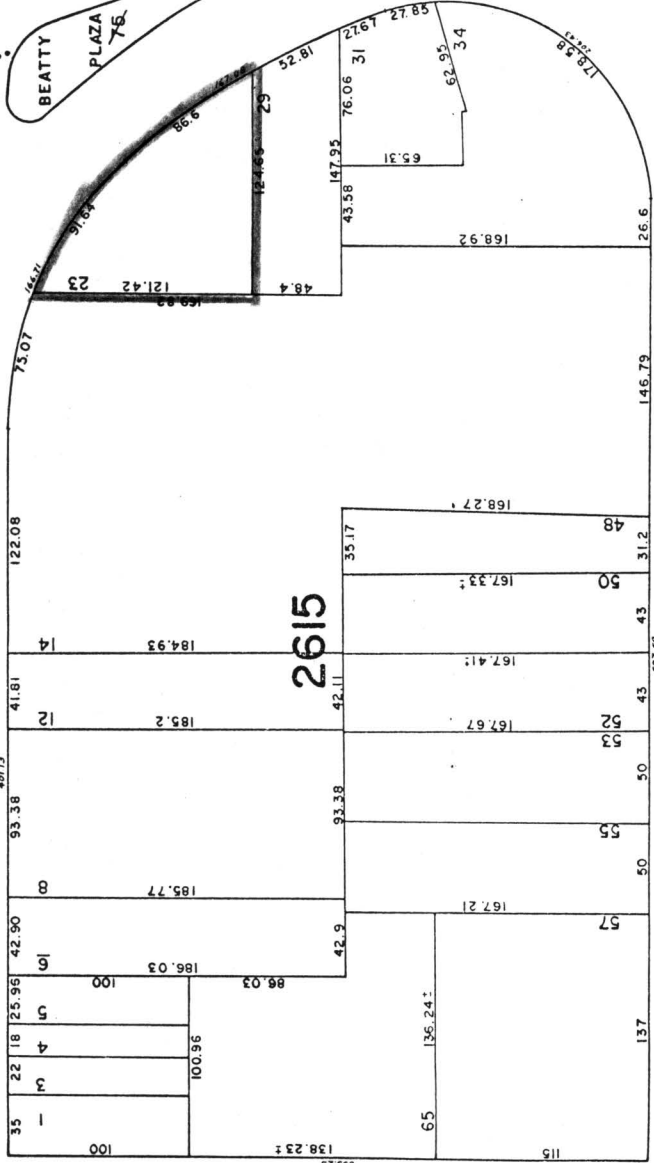
AVE.

BEATTY PLAZA 76

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76
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2615

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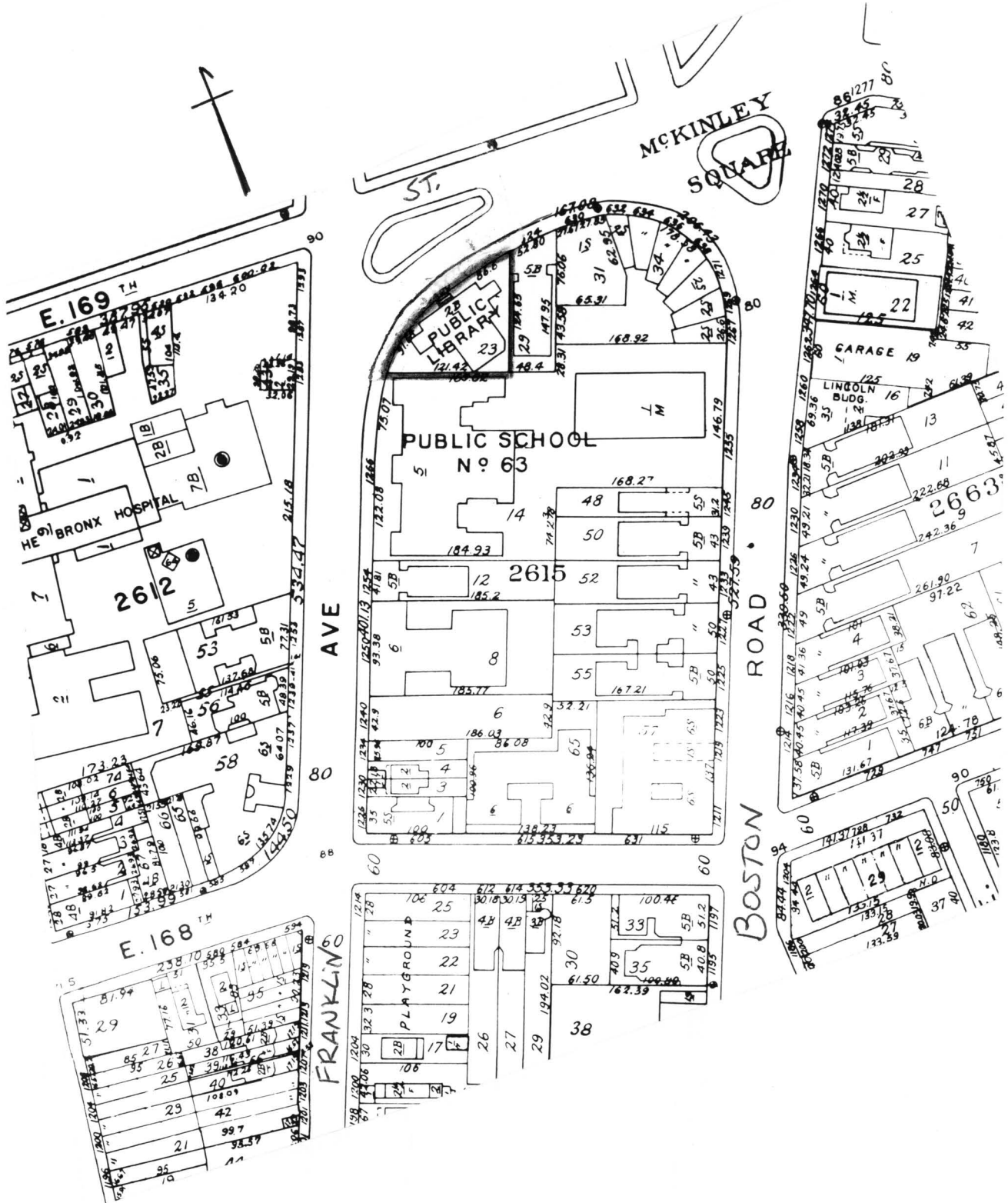
ROAD

BOSTON

SEE VOL. 4



New York Public Library, Morrisania Branch, 610 East 169th Street.
 Borough of The Bronx Tax Map Block 2615, Lot 23.
 Graphic Source: New York City Department of Finance, City Surveyor, Tax Map.



New York Public Library, Morrisania Branch, 610 East 169th Street.
 Borough of The Bronx Tax Map Block 2615, Lot 23.
 Graphic Source: *Bronx Land Book of the City of New York*, 1997, Vol. 1, Plate 226.



New York Public Library, Morrisania Branch, 610 East 169th Street, The Bronx

Photo: Carl Forster, 1998



New York Public Library, Morrisania Branch, 610 East 169th Street, The Bronx
Detail of city seal.
Photo: Carl Forster, 1998



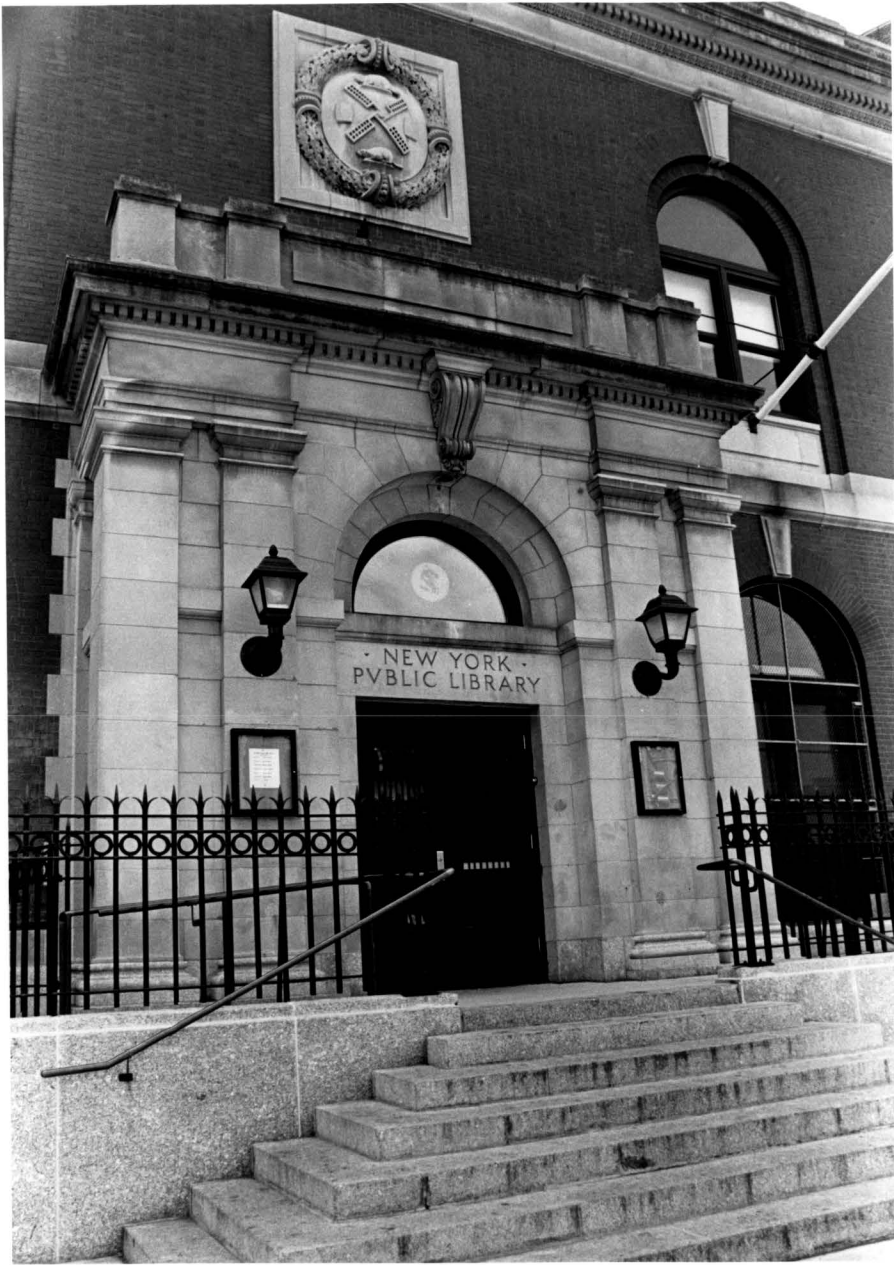
New York Public Library, Morrisania Branch, 610 East 169th Street, The Bronx
Detail of cornice and parapet.
Photo: Carl Forster, 1998



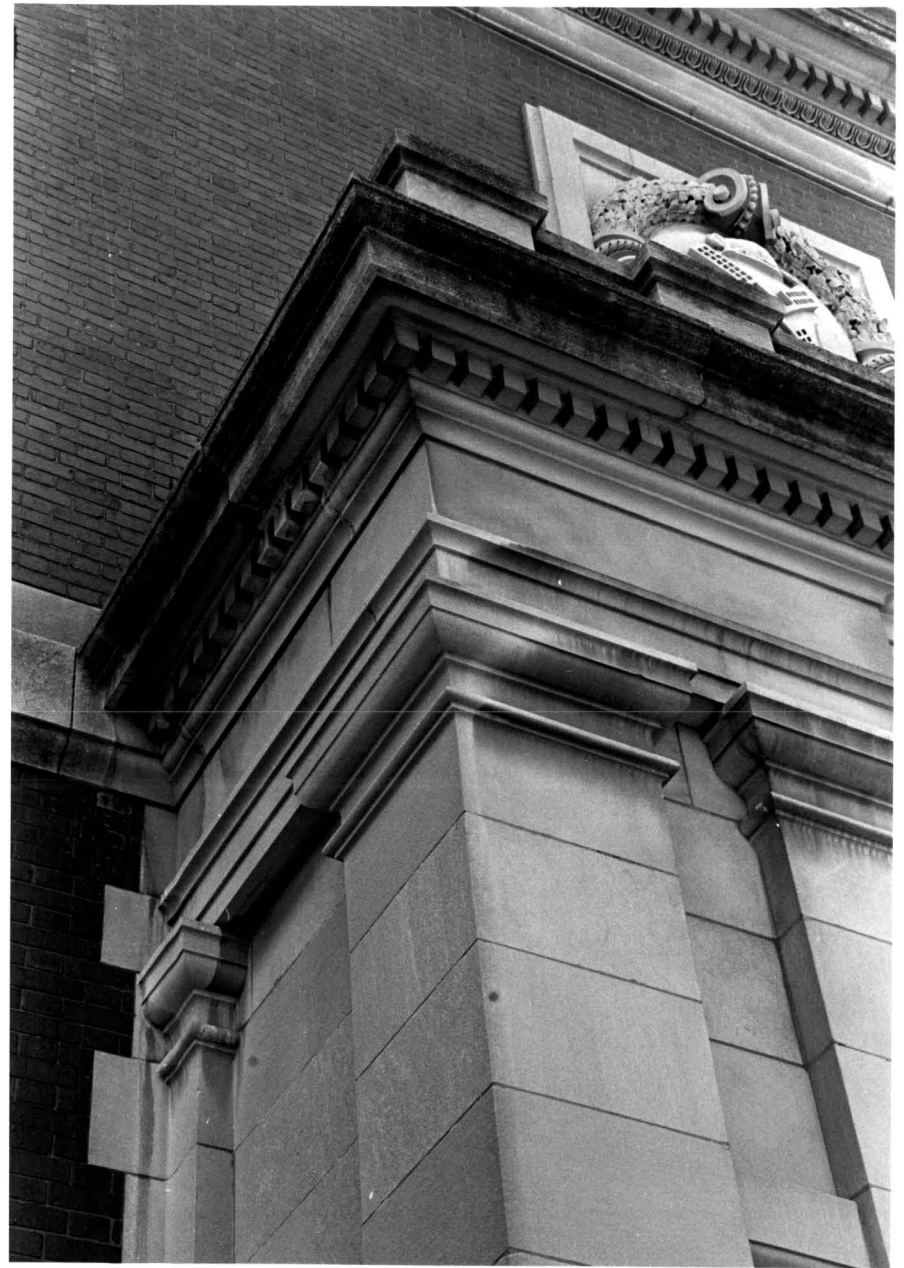
New York Public Library, Morrisania Branch, 610 East
169th Street, The Bronx
West wing. Photo: Carl Forster, 1998



New York Public Library, Morrisania Branch, 610 East
169th Street, The Bronx
East wing. Photo: Carl Forster, 1998



New York Public Library, Morrisania Branch, 610 East 169th Street, The Bronx. Detail of front steps and portico.
Photo: Carl Forster, 1998

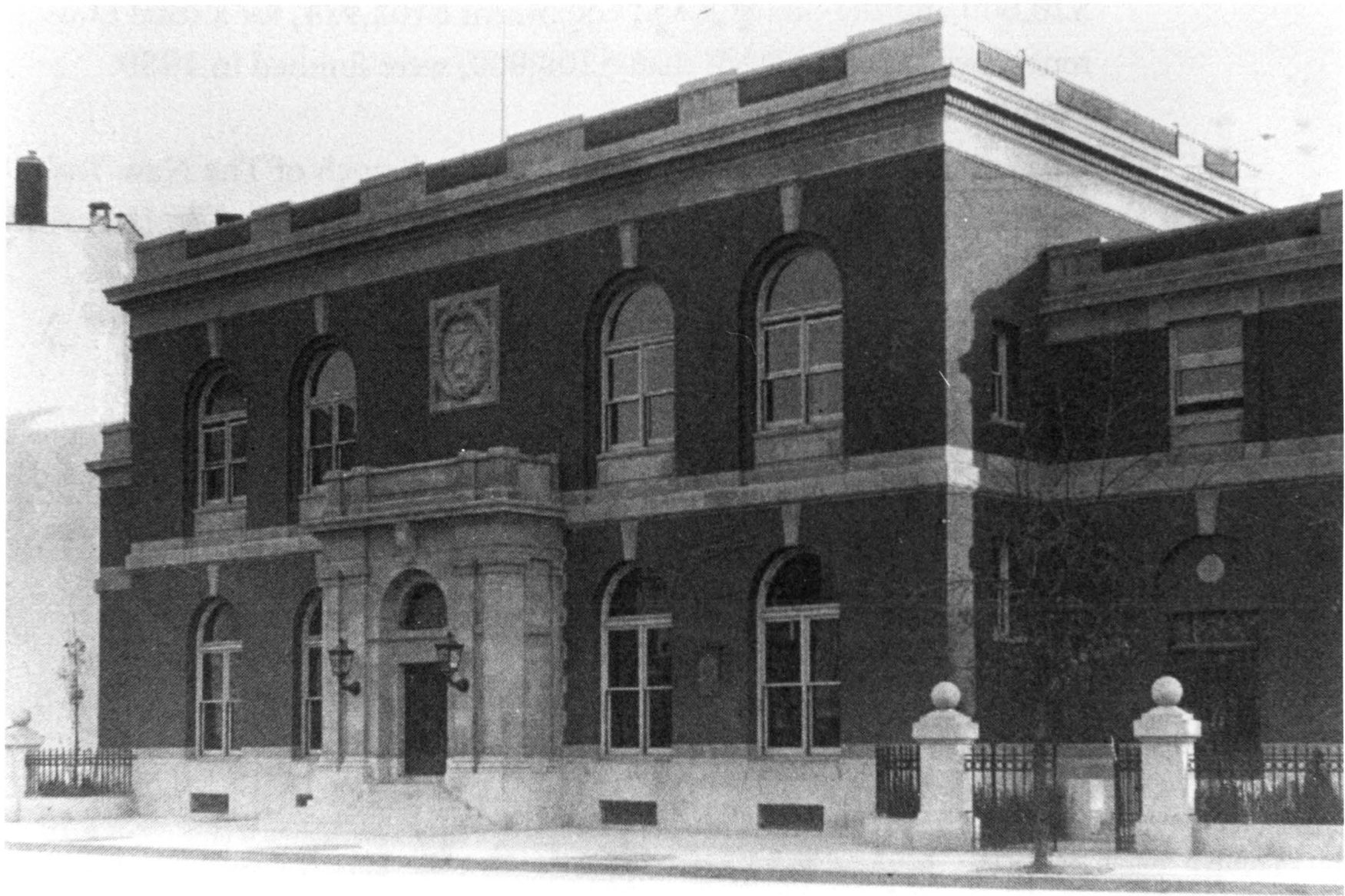


New York Public Library, Morrisania Branch, 610 East 169th Street, The Bronx. Detail of portico.
Photo: Carl Forster, 1998



New York Public Library, Morrisania Branch, 610 East 169th Street, The Bronx
Handicapped-accessible ramp

Photo: Carl Forster, 1998



New York Public Library, Morrisania Branch, 610 East 169th Street, The Bronx. c. 1908, Wurts Brothers Photographers. (Archives of The New York Public Library Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.) From Mary B. Dierickx, *The Architecture of Literacy: The Carnegie Libraries of New York* (New York, 1996), 114.



New York Public Library, Morrisania Branch, 610 East 169th Street, The Bronx

Photo: Carl Forster, 1998