

FIRST FREE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, now POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE BUILDING, 311 Bridge Street, Borough of Brooklyn. Built 1846-47; architect unknown.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 2047, Lot 7.

On October 9, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the First Free Congregational Church, now Polytechnic Institute Building, and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 3). The hearing was continued to December 11, 1979 (Item No. 4). Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of three witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There was one speaker in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The First Free Congregational Church, more commonly known as the Bridge Street Church, is a fine and rare example of a vernacular Greek Revival building of the mid-nineteenth century. This style reached the height of its popularity in the 1830s and 1840s but few non-residential buildings of this period remain in Brooklyn. When the Bridge Street Church was constructed in 1846-47 its simple rectangular shape and temple front were still considered ideal architectural forms for a religious structure. The straightforward shape of this brick and wood building, and the lack of applied ornament indicate its modest beginnings and have helped adapt the building to the varied uses it has had since it served a religious congregation.

The land in this part of Brooklyn was originally part of the estate of Dr. John Duffield. It was surveyed and divided into lots in 1829. The three lots on which the church stands were owned by Samuel Willoughby when they were purchased by the First Free Congregational Church in 1846.

This congregation was organized in 1841 as the First Free Presbyterian Church and it occupied a building at Lawrence and Tillary Streets in Brooklyn. After four years of existence, and with a membership of 150 people, this group decided to change its affiliation to Congregational. Thus in 1845 they became the First Free Congregational Church and the second of that denomination in Brooklyn. The "Free" in the name refers to the Church's policy of not charging a rental fee for its seats, a common practice in other churches at the time. Under the leadership of their first minister Rev. Isaac N. Sprague, the building on Bridge Street was constructed, at a cost of \$14,000. Original plans called for a tower modelled after the Monument of Lysicrates in Athens to be placed on the ridge of the roof, but this was never carried out.

Internal disputes forced the congregation to disband within a fairly short time. By 1854, the building was turned over to six trustees of

the church for the purpose of selling it and paying off all debts. Shortly thereafter, it was bought by the African Wesleyan Methodist Church. This congregation prospered and remained in the building for eighty-four years.

The A.W.M.E. Church had its beginnings in the eighteenth century when Thomas Webb, a Wesleyan captain in the British Army, travelled from Manhattan to Brooklyn to preach to a small group of followers in open air services. His ministry was carried on by Woolman Hickson later in the century. By 1794, his followers constructed a church in Brooklyn. The congregation, composed of whites, free Negroes, and ex-slaves, became known as the Sands Street Methodist Church. The white people in the congregation harassed the Negroes, requiring them to sit in the crowded gallery and then demanding \$10.00 payment for the seats. The blacks withdrew in a body and incorporated in 1818 as the African Wesleyan Methodist Episcopal Church of Brooklyn. Their first building was on High Street, between Bridge and Jay Streets. The congregation grew and they acquired this building on Bridge Street in 1854, purchasing it from the First Congregational Church for \$12,500. By this time membership had reached 292.²

The A.W.M.E. Church is the oldest black congregation in Brooklyn and played an important and active role in the anti-slavery movement. Many escaping slaves were housed in the basement of this building as they made their way northward to freedom.³

A fire burned part of the building in 1885 but the damage seems to have been limited to the inside. It was repaired and furnishings replaced within months.⁴

The A.W.M.E. Congregation remained in the building until 1948. Then the church followed most of its members who had moved to the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. The building was sold to another religious organization, the Gospel Temple Church of God in Christ. This group held the building for almost two years, until the end of 1949. For the following five years, the building was owned by a businessman and its use as a church was at an end. The area of Brooklyn where it was located had become commercial rather than residential, and the building was converted for industrial use. From 1955 until 1968, it housed classrooms and office space for the Institute of Design and Construction, a school devoted to the building trades. In 1968, it was taken over by the Polytechnic Institute of New York, the present owners of the building. Some exterior changes were made to adhere to building codes, but the majority of work took place on the interior. The result is that the building appears today much as it did when it was constructed in the mid-nineteenth century.

This building's debt to the Greek Revival style can be seen in the two fluted wooden columns and the low-pitched, full-width pediment in front. The Greek Revival had been a very popular style in the early 1800s and the temple front was considered quite fitting for a religious structure. One of the many churches built in this manner was the Sands Street Methodist Episcopal Church from which the A.W.M.E. Church came.⁵ Despite the widespread use of this style in the nineteenth century, very few of these churches remain today, especially in this downtown area of Brooklyn.

One of the best known architects of the period, Minard Lafever, was building simple Greek Revival, temple-fronted churches in Manhattan around

the time the Bridge Street Church was being constructed in Brooklyn. In addition to, and perhaps more important than his actual buildings, Lafever published pattern books which were extremely popular throughout the country and contributed immeasurably to the spread of this style of building. Mariners' Temple of 1842 and St. James Church of 1837 have been attributed to Lafever.⁶ They are both in the distyle-in-antis temple form. This type of church facade, with a recessed porch between two enclosed areas, creating a five-part composition, became almost standard after the building of the Carmine Street Church by Town & Davis.⁷ There were a number of English precedents for this type of configuration which were familiar to American architects of the period. These included Albion Catholic Chapel by William Jay (1817) and St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church by John Newman (1817), both in London.⁸

While the architect of the Bridge Street Church is not known, it is obvious that he was familiar with current trends in church building, since this structure was originally constructed in a similar distyle-in-antis form. There was a recessed portico behind the two front columns, with a single pair of double doors serving as an entrance into the church. During a remodelling early in the twentieth century, this entire area was filled in. Three pairs of double doors were placed between the columns and the area above the doors was filled with ornamental stained glass. These doors were originally of wood, with their own glass panels in the top half. In the most recent renovation, these doors were replaced with steel doors and the windows changed to plain glass.

On each side of this central area are wall surfaces flanked by coupled antae. Between each pair of pilasters is a large, double-height window surrounded by heavy wood moldings and topped by a shallow pediment. These pediments rest on console brackets while modillions support the sills beneath the windows. The pediments and the console brackets seem to be an attempt by the builder of this church to show his awareness of the latest building styles. The Italianate style, from which these elements derive, was just gaining in popularity during the 1840s in Brooklyn. By adding these elements to an otherwise fairly conservative building he was making it more modern and up-to-date. Originally, the large windows would have contained small panes of clear glass. At some point, probably late in the nineteenth century, the windows were replaced with decorative stained glass. The top sash of each of these two windows contains the only stained glass remaining at the present time.

The columns and pilasters of the front facade support an extremely simple entablature. It has a tripartite architrave and a plain frieze while the pediment above it is also undecorated. Early pictures of the church indicate simple wooden moldings on the cornices. These cornices are now covered by flat sheet metal painted white to match the rest of the front facade.

The building is a simple rectangle in shape and each side is four bays wide. Originally there was a single, double-height window in each bay to light the large sanctuary and gallery which filled the interior of the building. Presently there are two windows in each bay, indicating two distinct stories above the basement. The stone sills of the lower window match the stone lintels of the upper windows and the brickwork of the spandrels between the stories shows an obvious difference from the rest of facade. These windows again are a modern alteration, dating from sometime after the building ceased functioning as a church. The only decorative

element on the sides is a simple projecting string course which extends just above the top window lintels, carrying through the height of the architrave in front.

The flight of steps which leads up to the front of the church is a modern metal replacement for the original stairs which had heavy stone balustrades in an Italianate manner flanking them, rather than the poured concrete railings which exist today.

A straight, modern iron fence encloses the property at the lot line. Connecting the sides of the building to this fence are two sections of original iron railings. Their Greek Revival design, composed of Greek frets along the top and circles inscribed with a geometric motif on the bottom, suggest the early date of these fences.

The continued existence of this handsome Greek Revival building so near downtown Brooklyn is unusual. Its fine proportions and simple, clear details are a tribute to the anonymous architect/builder who designed it. That he was indebted to the popular pattern books and surrounding buildings of the period is clear. Not content with staying in the accepted Greek Revival style for a religious edifice, he embellished the building with elements from the newly-popular Italianate vocabulary. The result is a pleasing and dignified building which for many years housed the African Wesleyan Methodist Episcopal Church, Brooklyn's oldest black congregation. Since 1948, the building has been compatibly adapted to numerous other uses.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Manual of the First Free Congregational Church (Brooklyn, N.Y.: T.S. & C.H. Sprague's Press, 1847).
2. Amos M. Jordan, comp., Compiled History of the African Wesleyan Methodist Episcopal Church (Brooklyn, N.Y., 1973), n.p.
3. "W.E.H.C." "History of the Bridge Street A.M.E. Church, Brooklyn, N.Y.," The Colored American Magazine, 7 (Nov. 1904), 675.
4. The New York Freeman, 24 January 1885, p. 3, and 25 April 1885, p. 3.
5. Henry R. Stiles, History of Kings County Including Brooklyn From 1683 to 1884 (New York: W.W. Munsell & Co., 1884), p. 1030.
6. No documentary evidence exists to confirm either attribution, however, and the Mariners' Temple was more likely to have been built by a little-known architect/builder named Isaac Lucas. The detailing in both buildings is quite similar to some published in Lafever's pattern books.
7. Talbot Hamlin, Greek Revival Architecture in America (New York: Dover Publications, 1964), p. 151.
8. Jacob Landy, The Architecture of Minard Lafever (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), p. 218.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

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 First Free Congregational Church, now Polytechnic Institute Building, 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 First Free Congregational Church is a fine example of a vernacular Greek Revival church and one of the very few non-residential buildings of this style surviving in Brooklyn; that the design is a faithful reflection of the major architectural trends of the period and the plan demonstrates the influence of such important contemporary architects as Minard Lafever and Town & Davis; that the building was constructed in 1846-47 when the Greek Revival style still predominated in religious structures, but that its architect/builder also included elements from the newly-popular Italianate style; that for 84 years the building served the African Wesleyan Episcopal Church, the oldest black congregation in Brooklyn, founded in 1818 and still strong today; that this congregation played an important and active role in the anti-slavery movement, using this building to shelter escaping slaves; that since 1948 the building has been successfully adapted to serve a variety of commercial and educational roles while its form and facade have been kept largely unchanged.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the charter of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the First Free Congregational Church, now Polytechnic Institute Building, 311 Bridge Street, Borough of Brooklyn, and designates Tax Map Block 2047, Lot 7, Borough of Brooklyn, as its Landmark Site.

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Photo: Andrew S. Dolkart

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