

FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE, 110 Schermerhorn Street, Borough of Brooklyn.
Built 1857. Design attributed to Charles T. Bunting.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn, Tax Map Block 169, Lot 9, in part,
(Meeting House only) consisting of the land on which the described building
is situated and the courtyard and iron fence in front of the building.

On October 9, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Friends Meeting House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 4). The hearing was duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Two witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The handsome brick building located at the southwest corner of Schermerhorn Street and Boerum Place in downtown Brooklyn is the meeting house of the Brooklyn Society of Friends, a branch of the New York Monthly Meeting. Built in 1857, the building is attributed to master builder Charles T. Bunting. The Brooklyn Friends congregation gathered in 1835 -- the year after Brooklyn became a city-- and built its first meeting house in that year at the corner of Henry and Clark Streets in Brooklyn Heights. This edifice served the Society for twenty years, but by 1855 more room was needed and a committee was appointed to plan for a new building at a new location.

The "Minutes of the Monthly Meeting" for May, 1856 included the committee report:

The attention of this Meeting has been turned to the limited and imperfect accommodation afforded by our present meeting house for a considerable time past...On examining the subject we were united in opinion that the present house could not be changed or altered so as to furnish the proper accommodations; and we therefore turned our attention to the selection of a new location, and we have agreed to propose for the consideration of the meeting the five lots of ground on the Southwesterly side of Schermerhorn Street, commencing 44 feet southerly from Boerum Street. These lots are each 25 feet front and rear, by 100 feet deep, and can be bought for \$2,000 each.

The plan to buy the five lots on Schermerhorn Street met with the approval of the Meeting, and by October, 1856, they had been purchased for the sum of \$10,000. One third of this amount was paid in cash and the remainder was covered by a mortgage. The purchase having been made, attention was then focused on what sort of building should be erected on the property. In March, 1857, the Property Committee reported as follows:

The Property Committee have had under consideration the subject of erecting a Meeting House at Brooklyn. We have concluded to propose to the Meeting that it should be 54 feet front and 63 feet deep, and that it be built of brick with Brown Stone Sills and Lintells [sic]. We estimate the cost at 15,000 to \$16,000 Dollars. We have concluded to ask the Monthly Meeting to nominate a few friends to advise us in adopting a plan for the house.

It would not have been consistent with Quaker taste or tenets to want a pretentious meeting house. In fact, the specifications for the exterior of the building were already set to the point where an experienced master builder would be able to take on the project, provide a suitable floor plan, and erect the building, a practice which was often followed in the nineteenth century.

The affairs of the Brooklyn Monthly Meeting and the New York Monthly Meeting were managed jointly and knowledgeable persons from both groups most likely conferred over the proposed plan for the new Brooklyn building. One of these was Charles T. Bunting, a reputable builder. The design of the Brooklyn Friends Meeting House is attributed to him for several reasons. First, Bunting was a member of the New York Monthly Meeting; second, he is known as a builder active in New York City in the mid-nineteenth century; third, the Quakers were a tightly knit group and they preferred to conduct business with other members of the Society whenever possible; fourth, Bunting erected a new meeting house for the New York Monthly Meeting on Rutherford Place in Manhattan in 1861 and its exterior is almost the exact duplicate of the one erected in Brooklyn in 1857. It would seem that the design was so pleasing and so well suited to the needs of the two congregations that both Societies decided to use it. The Rutherford Place Meeting House was designated a New York City Landmark on December 9, 1969.

The design of the Meeting House on Schermerhorn Street is a subtle transitional blend of the Greek Revival and Italianate architectural styles executed in a severe and straightforward manner. The basic form and the materials employed are in the Greek Revival tradition while the influence of the newly popular Italianate style is evident in the elongated proportions of the doors and windows which tend to accentuate the vertical lines of the structure. The proportions and scale of the various architectural elements are in perfect relationship to one another, a factor which relieves the austerity of the building.

The walls are constructed of hard-pressed red brick laid in running bond and the window lintels and sills are brownstone as are the foundations and the water table. The main facade rises through three-and-one-half stories to a peaked roof with a low gable which contains a bisected demi-lune window. The raking cornice, made of wood, is faced with simple, bold moldings and has horizontal returns at the ends. The sides and rear of the building are constructed in the same manner and of the same materials as the front.

The ground floor has two windows with eight-over-eight sashes flanking a wooden porch which shelters the front doors. This porch has a triangular pediment--formed by the slopes of its roof and supported by two plain wooden Doric columns. The floor of the porch is made of three immense slabs of brownstone, and at either end are wrought-iron footscrapers. The porch, which was originally open, now has a glass enclosure.

The upper level of the facade has three tall double-hung windows with sixteen panes of glass in each sash. All of the front windows have their original exterior wooden louvered window blinds in position. The porch and the window sashes are painted white while the window blinds and the cornices are painted a shade of red which closely matches the color of the brick. The windows at the sides and rear of the building are like those of the front. An iron fire escape has been added to the rear and a new brick chimney has been placed against the northern wall. The courtyard in front of the meeting house is paved with large flags of bluestone and a tall iron fence of conservative design divides the yard from the inner edge of the sidewalk. The Meeting House, originally a freestanding building, now abuts the Friends School (not included in the designation) at the south.

Although the interior of the Friends Meeting House is not subject to this designation, it is nearly intact and is interesting enough to merit a brief description: The enclosed porch opens into a broad hallway at ground level which contains two matching double-run staircases, one at either end. These elegant stairways, which have handsome newels and balusters of Italianate design, are the only pronounced decorative architectural features within the building. The remainder of the interior, although plain in design, is eloquent in its understated approach to the needs of a Quaker congregation. The meeting room on the second floor has a high wooden wainscoting and smoothly plastered walls with a deep plaster cove at the ceiling line. Originally, there was a narrow gallery across the rear of the auditorium, but it is now sealed off and the space is used for offices. Except for one rear window converted to an emergency exit, the meeting room is in original condition. The seating is provided by movable wooden benches which may have come from the earlier meeting house. The first floor is occupied by a kitchen and a large dining room.

The Society of Friends is well known for a dislike of ostentation and their buildings have traditionally portrayed that view with sound construction and unadorned facades. The Friends Meeting House at 110

Schermerhorn Street beautifully reflects the restrained character of Quaker architecture, and symbolizes the active presence of the Society in Brooklyn. This well maintained building still serves as the meeting house of the Brooklyn Society of Friends.

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FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Friends Meeting House has a special character, special historic 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 Friends Meeting House is built in a subtle transitional blend of the Greek Revival and Italianate styles executed in an austere and straightforward manner; that the design of the meeting house, attributed to master builder, Charles T. Bunting, beautifully reflects the restrained character of Quaker architecture; that the basic form of the building and the materials employed are in the Greek Revival tradition while the influence of the Italianate style is evident in the elongated proportions of the doors and windows; that among the masterful features of the building are the proportions and scale of the various architectural elements which are in perfect relationship to one another; and that the Friends Meeting House symbolizes the active presence of the Society in Brooklyn.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City 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 Friends Meeting House, 110 Schermerhorn Street, Borough of Brooklyn, and designated Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 169, Lot 9 in part (Meeting House only) consisting of the land on which the described building is situated and the courtyard and iron fence in front of the building, as its related Landmark Site.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Cook, Mary G. "History of a Quaker Meeting." Long Island Forum, 35 (September 1972), 196-200; (October 1972), 222-224.

Dolkart, Andrew Scott. "The City of Churches: The Protestant Church Architecture of Brooklyn, 1793-1917." M.S. thesis. School of Architecture, Columbia University, 1977.

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FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE
110 Schermerhorn Street, Brooklyn
Built 1857

Photo Credit:
Andrew S. Dolkart

Design attributed to
Charles T. Bunting