

NEW ENGLAND CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, now Light of the World (La Luz del Mundo) Church, 179 South Ninth Street, Borough of Brooklyn. Built 1852-53; architect Thomas Little.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 2139, Lot 37.

On October 9, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the New England Congregational Church and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 8). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provision of law. Three witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

#### DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Built in 1852-1853 to the designs of the architect Thomas Little, the New England Congregational Church in Williamsburgh is a unique surviving example of an Italianate style church in Brooklyn. One of the earliest Congregational churches in Brooklyn, it was organized under the popular minister, Thomas Kinnicut Beecher, a member of that celebrated and colorful family of New England preachers.

Although Congregationalism was the dominant Protestant sect in New England where its pristine white Greek Revival and spired churches almost symbolized religious belief, it was a late-comer among the populist sects of New York. From the first, Congregationalism was closely connected in Brooklyn with the illustrious Beecher family, the most noted member of which, Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887), took over the newly organized Plymouth Church (today Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims) in Brooklyn Heights in 1847. From that Brooklyn pulpit he conducted a forty-year career as one of the most popular and controversial preachers in America. Beecher became one of the most outspoken commentators on issues of the day, notably slavery, which was also a dominant concern of his sister, the writer, Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of that cause celebre Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852). Within the first two years of Beecher's ministry, the congregation had grown so dramatically, averaging some 2,500 people a week, it is reported that a new church building was required. This church emphasized the auditorium, a form that was widely adopted by Congregational churches.

The rash of new Congregational churches founded in Brooklyn in the twelve years after Plymouth Church was established -- at least sixteen are recorded in 1860 -- owes much, no doubt, to the overwhelming success and popularity of Henry Ward Beecher at Plymouth Church. In 1848, for instance, a year after Beecher began preaching in Brooklyn, a congregation was founded nearby on State Street, by a group of congregants dissatisfied with the local Methodist Church. In Williamsburgh, to the north of Brooklyn, and then still a separate town, the first Congregational church had been organized in 1843, but the major growth of the denomination occurred in the following decade. During the late 1840s and early 1850s Williamsburgh was experiencing a tremendous growth in population. Indeed, the population of the incorporated village nearly tripled in the five years between 1845 and 1850!<sup>1</sup> In 1852 the village was reorganized as a city, only to be

absorbed into the consolidated city of Brooklyn in 1855. Williamsburgh never fulfilled the potential of a luxurious residential quarter as conceived by its early founders in the opening years of the nineteenth century, but it remained a fashionable middle-class community as well as a resort spot until the opening years of the twentieth century. At that time the construction of the Williamsburgh Bridge led the way to a dramatic change in population and residential character. It was not only the landscape or even convenient commuting conditions which brought New Yorkers to Brooklyn in the mid-nineteenth century, but also religion. At the height of his preaching career, Henry Ward Beecher had managed to make his pulpit with its emphasis on both presentation and liberal theology into a pilgrimage site which drew innumerable New Yorkers across the river each Sunday morning. This popularity of Congregational worship combined with the spurt in population growth lay behind the foundation of a number of Congregationalist churches in Williamsburgh in the decades before the Civil War.

The New England Congregational Church was organized on March 18, 1851, by a group meeting in the house of Edwin N. Colt on North Fourth Street. The guiding spirit behind this new congregation was, no doubt, Thomas K. Beecher (1824-1900), the ambitious younger brother of the popular preacher. He delivered his first sermon to the new congregation on April 21 of that year, although he was not ordained formally until at least June (or perhaps even as late as September) of 1851. The twelfth of the thirteen sons of Lyman Beecher (1775-1863), the influential Connecticut Presbyterian preacher, Thomas had, like his more-renowned brother rejected his rigorous Calvinistic upbringing in favor of a religion based on a more personal and optimistic vision of the deity, one which paid greater attention to the individual needs of congregants. He had been raised principally on the Western frontier, where his father was a tireless missionary, and had first pursued a career in teaching. Eventually, perhaps encouraged by his brother's impressive success as well as his deceased mother's desire that her sons serve God, Thomas K. Beecher turned also to the ministry. Beecher's ministry in Williamsburgh was short, only three years, but during this time he established the New England Congregational Church as a major force in Williamsburgh and oversaw the construction of its first permanent church building. The church was temporarily housed in two nearby lecture halls in the same neighborhood before the present church was completed in the summer of 1853. In September 1852 the Congregationalist society had purchased for \$38,000 three lots on the north side of South Ninth Street between Fifth and Sixth Streets (today Roebling and Driggs Streets) giving them a rectangular site 75 feet wide and 110 feet deep on which to build their new church. Ground was broken for the church in November 1852; the building was completed in the course of the following year and dedicated on December 22, 1853. The intimate connections of this church with the guiding light and popular symbol of the Congregational church, Henry Ward Beecher, was made evident from the outset, for it was he who gave the rousing keynote address at the cornerstone laying ceremony on January 11, 1853.

It is no surprise, given Williamsburgh's stronger connections to commercial New York than to nearby Brooklyn, that it was to the Manhattan architect Thomas Little that the congregation turned to give form to their own decided notions of the proper sort of church building. They are even said to have provided Little with a sketch plan for the church.<sup>2</sup> From what is known today of Little, he was primarily a public and commercial architect in lower Manhattan where he later built a series of handsome cast-iron buildings on the north side of Duane Street west of Broadway (now demolished) and, as Member of the Board of Supervisors, had a role (as yet not specifically determined) in the construction of the controversial Tweed Courthouse.<sup>3</sup>

The New England Congregational Church building follows the simple pattern of the Plymouth Church and other mid-nineteenth century Congregational churches in Brooklyn and New York in its adoption of a simple rectangular plan, internally expanded by generous galleries to allow as much seating and as little obstruction as possible between the congregation and the preacher. Built of brick, only the street facade, which represents the building to the community, was faced in brownstone and articulated with metal and wood trim. The church is handsomely integrated both in materials and design with the adjacent residences. The building's mid-block site was another essential factor in Little's design. Williamsburgh, although a sparsely laid out village in the early years of the century, had been surveyed and, in the 1820s it was laid out on an urban grid plan just as the ferries were bringing the first wave of population from New York. Little's design for a church conforms with that grid plan with unusual subtlety. The pedimented temple front at once declares the church's importance within the street front and integrates it with the residential fabric of the neighborhood, an apt, if unconsciously symbolic, representation of the Congregationalist aspirations. The facade subtly breaks the street line of the adjacent three-story rowhouses, stepping out enough to assert its presence without disrupting the harmonious profile of the block. Although the gable of the pediment rises above the roof line of the adjacent houses, this line is emphatically continued in the church's prominent cornice. Even the organization of the facade continues this play between harmony with the context and assertion of the church's own character: its dominant lines continue or echo those of its neighbors while its form and more plastic handling clarify the distinction in purpose and importance.

In its architectural features as well, the facade combines elements of church and residential design, all handled with a boldness of scale and sculptural modelling appropriate to a church and characteristic of the Italianate style. The symmetrical facade is flanked by boldly scaled quoins, and courses of rough stone form a basement level. The symmetrically arranged entrances at either end of the facade are residential in composition and scale, reached by stairs set in box stoops which are turned inward parallel to the street's axis to continue the line of the adjacent residential areaways. The doorways are bold Italianate compositions echoed on the later adjacent town houses, most notably the one immediately to the west. This house (No. 177 South Ninth Street) was built in 1868 to serve as the church rectory, and it is linked to the church by the return moldings on the church's side elevation which merge with those of the house itself.

The triangular composition of the profile of the gabled front is repeated in the doorways and fenestration. Each element is crowned by a crisply molded and sharply projecting triangular pediment on console brackets, all of which are composed in a marked pyramidal composition echoing the larger organization of the facade. This progression is repeated in the subdued central axis which is demarcated by the alignment of three progressively larger triangular gables, each overlapping the compositional field of the next: the pedimented aedicule with its handsome anthemion crown in the center of the facade, the large pediment over the central window which overlaps the pediment above, and finally the raking cornice of the facade pediment itself.

The fenestration detail is suggestive of the eclectic historical sources of the Italianate style. Here the style draws not only on the High Renaissance canon of forms in the console bracketed pediments but also on the late

Romanesque or Quattrocento Venetian tradition in the arched window patterns of the wooden window tracery. Like the facade itself, this tracery is composed to suggest the superimposition of the domestic and the monumental religious scales. The windows form tall narrow compositions scaled to the facade but are subdivided into two levels which not only echo the horizontal layering of the neighboring town houses but reveal the existence of the galleried upper level inside. The gallery is carried across as the level of the wooden panels which separate the two tiers of windows, a zone continued in the raised lintels over the flanking doors.

Although the original interior was lost in a fire of 1894, the gallery was retained in the remodelling by the noted architectural firm of J.B. Snook & Sons, who, like Little, were chiefly noted for its commercial work in lower Manhattan.<sup>4</sup> This suggests not only that firm's experience with cast iron was valuable in arranging a gallery in the broad interior, but that Williamsburgh's strong connections with the Manhattan commercial world continued long after the incorporation of the former village into the city of Brooklyn in 1855. Since 1955, the building has housed the Light of the World Church.

The New England Congregational Church, a unique surviving Italianate style church in Brooklyn, is an exceptional example of a church building which has been consciously and carefully integrated into the surrounding urban residential fabric. The building remains a significant element in the Williamsburgh streetscape and a reminder of the important role played by the Congregational church in mid-nineteenth century Brooklyn.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Henry B. Stiles, A History of the City of Brooklyn (Brooklyn, 1869), vol 2, pp. 400-401.
2. Historical Sketch and Manual of the New England Congregational Church, Brooklyn (Brooklyn, 1859) n.p.
3. Landmarks Preservation Commission, The Tweed Courthouse Historic Structure Report (New York, 1980), p. 25.
4. Landmarks Preservation Commission, So-Ho Cast-Iron Historic District Designation Report (LP-0768) New York: City of New York, 1973), pp. 181-183.

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## 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 New England Congregational Church 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 New England Congregational Church is a unique surviving Italianate style church in Brooklyn: that the plan reflects Congregationalist ideals and aspirations; that the pedimented brownstone facade and arched pedimented openings give the building a striking character yet integrate it into the surrounding urban residential fabric; that the church was one of the earliest Congregational groups in Brooklyn and has important associations with the prominent Beecher family; and that the building remains an important element in the Williamsburgh streetscape and continues to serve a religious congregation.

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 New England Congregational Church, now Light of the World (La Luz del Mundo) Church, 179 South Ninth Street, Borough of Brooklyn, and designates Tax Map Block 2139, Lot 37, Borough of Brooklyn, as its Landmark Site.

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Photo: Andrew S. Dolkart

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