

Landmarks Preservation Commission
February 27, 2007; Designation List 386
LP-2172

SOHMER & COMPANY PIANO FACTORY BUILDING, 31-01 Vernon Boulevard (a/k/a 11-02 to 11-16 31st Avenue), Borough of Queens. Built c. 1886 (Berger & Baylies, architects); addition: c.1906-07 (attributed to Franklin Baylies).

Landmark Site: Borough of Queens Tax Map Block 503, Lot 5, in part, consisting of the property bounded by a line beginning at the northwest corner of the lot and extending easterly along the northern property line to the northeast corner of the lot, then 134 feet southerly along the eastern property line, eighty feet westerly, eighty feet southerly to the southern property line, then westerly along the southern property line to the southwest corner of the lot, then northwesterly and northerly along the western property line to the point of the beginning, and including all stairways facing 31st Avenue and the land on which they are situated.

On March 15, 2005, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Sohmer & Company Piano Factory Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 1). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of the law. Eight witnesses testified in favor of the designation, including representatives of Metropolitan Waterfront Alliance, the Municipal Arts Society, and the Historic Districts Council. Representatives of the building's owners at that time spoke against designation. The Commission also received e-mails and letters in support of designation, including a letter from the Society for Industrial Archaeology. Queensborough President Helen Marshall, City Councilmember Peter F. Vallone, Jr., and State Senator George Onorato sent letters opposing designation. Subsequent to the 2005 public hearing, new owners acquired the building and their representative submitted a letter in support of designation. In addition, Councilmember Vallone, Jr., submitted a subsequent letter no longer opposing designation. The Landmarks Preservation Commission held earlier public hearings on November 15, 1983 (LP-1462), which was continued on June 12, 1984 and on July 10, 1990 (LP-1799), which was continued on September 11, 1990.

Summary

One of the most prominent structures along the Queens side of the East River in Long Island City, the Sohmer & Co. Piano Factory Building is distinguished by its monumental scale and prominent mansard-roofed clock tower. The original part of the building, which included the clock tower, was constructed around 1886 as the piano factory for Sohmer & Co. It was designed by the architectural firm Berger & Baylies, which produced plans for commercial and residential buildings throughout New York City, including several warehouses and store-and-loft buildings in the Tribeca Historic Districts. The Sohmer factory, designed in the German Romanesque Revival Style, is constructed of brick with segmentally-arched windows with brick lintels. The first, second, and fifth stories are surmounted by band courses. The factory was expanded to the south in c.1906-07. This new wing, which fronts on Vernon Boulevard, is attributed to architect Franklin Baylies and was designed to match the earlier section.

Sohmer & Co. was founded in 1872 in Manhattan by the German immigrant Hugo Sohmer (1845-1931). The firm specialized in the making of "verticals" or upright pianos that were more popular for domestic usage, and the company's product was



one of the finest pianos made in the United States. Sohmer was part of the booming nineteenth-century New York City piano industry. In 1872, there were 171 piano manufacturers in New York City; now, most pianos are produced abroad. While Sohmer never achieved the celebrity of its more famous counterpart, Steinway, the company did have notable fans. Composer Victor Herbert owned several Sohmer pianos and the noted American songwriter Irving Berlin had three Sohmers with transposing keyboards that he used that he used to write his music. The company remained at the plant until 1982, when it was acquired by the Pratt, Read & Co., America's leading manufacturer of piano keyboards and actions, which moved the factory to Ivoryton, Connecticut. Sohmer pianos are now made in Korea. After Sohmer departed, the factory in Queens was acquired by the Adirondack Chair Company. The New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission held previous public hearings on the Sohmer & Co. Piano Factory Building in 1983, 1984, and 1990. The Sohmer Building, which is one of the few extant survivors of the once-thriving piano-manufacturing industry in New York City, is a significant reminder of the industrial past of the East River waterfront, and is one of the rare surviving nineteenth-century factory buildings found in Queens.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Industrial Development of Long Island City/Astoria¹

The Sohmer & Company Piano Factory Building is located in the northern part of Long Island City near Astoria on the East River waterfront of Queens. In 1870, Long Island City became an incorporated municipality,² the fourth within the current boundaries of New York City, after New York City itself, Brooklyn, and Williamsburgh. That year, the Steinway family began to acquire 400 acres of land on the East River at the present-day Steinway Street and laid out Steinway Village³, which attracted many residents of German extraction. At about the same time, the German United Cabinet Workers bought four area farms and developed an area known as Germantown. Beginning in the 1870s, and continuing until the turn of the century, large oil refineries, lumber yards, and factories for asphalt, ceramic pipe, barrels, tin ware, and glass, as well as chemical and gas plants lined the shoreline from Hunter's Point to Astoria, replacing the area's earlier country estates and farms, creating jobs and the need for housing. These businesses took advantage of the docks along the shore and the area's growing network of railroad arteries. Long Island City was incorporated into Queens County in the consolidation of the Greater City of New York in 1898. Afterwards, industrial development continued along East River waterfront and in inland locations along the transportation lines. Residential and industrial development continued after the opening of the Queensborough Bridge (a designated New York City Landmark) in 1909 and the coming of passenger train and subway service in the 1910s through the 1930s. The area also gained importance in the fledgling movie industry with the opening of the Famous Players – Lasky Studios, later Paramount Studios, in 1919-21 (35-11 35th Avenue, a designated New York City Landmark). The Triborough Bridge, connecting the neighborhood to the Bronx and the mainland, opened in 1936. By the Second World War, the Sohmer & Co. building had been joined by many other industrial and commercial building along Queens's East River waterfront.

The History of the American Piano Industry⁴

The piano was virtually unknown in the American colonies in 1771, when Thomas Jefferson asked his agent to have a "forte-piano" sent to him from Europe. By the 1780s, however, piano imports were being supplemented with domestically produced instruments made by a handful of manufacturers in New York and Philadelphia.⁵ But despite the announcement in New York, in 1791, that one Mr. Kullin "would perform on a Grand Concert Pianoforte ... just finished by Messrs. Dodds & Claus, of this city,"⁶ American-made pianos were rare at the turn of the nineteenth century. According to one estimate made in the 1790s, only 27 families in the entire city of Boston owned pianos at that time, and all of those instruments had been made in London.

For the first half of the nineteenth century, Boston was "the liveliest American center for the development of new piano-making ideas," as its makers pioneered crucial technological advancements

that included the one-piece iron frame.⁷ But other cities were making pianos, too, and by 1829, with the industry on the rise, Philadelphia led the country in piano production, followed by New York, Boston, and Baltimore. By the 1840s and 1850s, with New York's ascendancy as the nation's cultural and commercial capital, German piano makers began arriving in the city, including Heinrich E. Steinweg, whose name—later changed to Steinway—would become synonymous with the instrument.⁸

The 1850s “marked the domestic triumph of the American piano,” as the nation's production doubled during the decade, and imports from England dwindled to virtually nothing.⁹ Although the piano would never become, in the words of pianist and social historian Arthur Loesser, a “possession of the ‘masses,’” its appearance in more and more American parlors led one popular writer to remark in 1867 that “almost every couple that sets up housekeeping on a respectable scale considers a piano only less indispensable than a kitchen range.”¹⁰ Between 1870 and 1910, and especially, in the latter two decades of this period, the American piano industry boomed; per-capita consumption of pianos skyrocketed, with one American in every 252 purchasing a new piano in 1910, up from one in 1,540 in 1870. Falling prices and the growing availability of inexpensive, low-quality “thump-boxes” were factors in expanding the market for the piano, which was becoming an increasingly affordable status symbol. Among this backdrop, Sohmer was founded and flourished into a major producer of the instrument.

In the mid-to-late nineteenth century, as the piano became a more common feature of the middle-class home, it began to carry considerable cultural freight. During this period and into the twentieth century, most piano players were women and girls; the ability to play even simple tunes on the instrument was a mark of a “cultivated lady” with good social graces, as piano music had become “an unavoidable feature of the small soiree.”¹¹ The piano was believed to be more suitable for a girl than the harp—which might bring bad posture—or the horn, violin, or cello, which were inappropriate for refined, modest young women and were thought to cause “detriment of their feminine attractions.”¹² But more importantly, the piano was viewed as an important feature of a home that was supposed to shelter its family from the uncertainties of an increasingly industrialized society, and to incubate moral and spiritual values that were believed to be under threat. Music was held to be morally uplifting “medicine for the soul”;¹³ a mother's duty to provide it to her family was intertwined with her responsibilities as keeper of the domestic hearth. The daughters of the house also shouldered this duty. By playing the piano at home, one 1909 article argued, a girl could “lighten the hours free from the cares of business and household,” acting as “a boon to her father, to her mother, and to her brothers.” In the words of historian Craig H. Roell, “The girl musician was not just cultivating a pastime or social grace; she was playing her proper role. She provided a musical oasis in a workaday world.”¹⁴

The peak year for domestic pianos was 1909, when American manufacturers turned out nearly 365,000 of them. Several factors had contributed to the industry's rapid growth over the previous four decades, including the rise of the supply business, which provided keys, actions, cases, soundboards, and other ready-made parts to manufacturers that were too small to produce these components in-house.¹⁵ The widespread use of installment sales, broadened musical education, and sophisticated marketing techniques—including manufacturers' sponsorship of concerts and their construction of recital halls—also boosted sales. But by the turn of the twentieth century, changes were afoot that foreshadowed the industry's collapse. Around that time, the industry started to consolidate; multiple brand names were grouped under big corporate umbrellas, diluting the value of old, respected marques and squeezing out smaller manufacturers. The growth of the used-piano business undercut new piano sales. And while pedal-operated and electric player pianos boosted the industry between 1900 and 1925, manufacturers sowed the seeds of their own demise by emphasizing these instruments' ease of operation. “There is no question that for the industry as a whole, the appeal to the consumer's laziness was a very profitable but eventually disastrous path,” Roell explains, noting that Steinway, which continued to make high-quality pianos requiring skilled human hands, was among the strongest survivors of the fierce industry shakeout to come.¹⁶

The arrival of the phonograph around the turn of the twentieth century posed some threat to piano manufacturers, but radio devastated the industry. Not only did radios offer a wide variety of musical and other programming, but they were cheaper and smaller than pianos, came in attractive cabinets, and were seen as technological marvels. As radio production rose from 190,000 units in 1923 to almost five million in 1929, the piano industry experienced near-complete collapse. Between 1923 and 1933, the number of American piano manufacturers shrank from 160 to 36; the industry's workforce fell by 85%. Even the once-mighty American Piano Company, which became the first musical instrument manufacturer to be listed on the New York Stock Exchange following its 1908 formation, fell into receivership in 1929. Although Sohmer's business remained relatively strong during the mid-twentieth century, the company was leasing excess space in its Long Island City factory to other companies.

From the late nineteenth century on, piano manufacturing's growth in the Midwest—particularly in Chicago and Cincinnati—eroded the dominance in the industry that East Coast cities, particularly New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, once enjoyed. Nevertheless, New York remained a major center for piano making until the time of the industry's decline. In 1911, 120 of the 295 American piano manufacturers were headquartered in New York City, giving it, by a wide margin, the most manufacturers of any city in the United States;¹⁷ in 1924, just before the piano industry fell apart, "American piano production had reached phenomenal proportions," and New York was "one of the leading domestic centers for the production of pianos and other musical instruments."¹⁸ Although most of the city's piano manufacturing was occurring in the Bronx in the early twentieth century, Queens was well-represented by two of the largest piano manufacturers: Steinway & Sons and Sohmer & Co. Of these, only Steinway presently remains in operation.¹⁹

Berger & Baylies, Architects²⁰

Bruno W. Berger (dates undetermined) first practiced as an architect in New York City with Theodore A. Tribit in the firm of Tribit & Berger from 1879 to 1880. In 1881, he practiced independently and in the following years joined in partnership with Franklin Baylies (dates undetermined), whose architectural career had just begun. The firm of Berger & Baylies designed commercial and residential structures in the city, including many warehouses and store and loft buildings now located in the Tribeca Historic Districts, many of which exhibit characteristics of the neo-Grec Style. The Sohmer & Company building was one of their major commissions, and unusual for the firm in that it was designed in the German Romanesque Revival style.

Berger & Baylies remained active until 1890, at which time both architects established independent practices. In 1904, Berger established the firm of Bruno W. Berger & Son, which was active at least through 1940, designing mainly residential and institutional buildings. Baylies's office remained active through 1929, designed mostly commercial structures, some of which are located in the SoHo-Cast Iron Historic District and in the Tribeca Historic Districts. He appears to also have designed Sohmer's addition in c. 1906-07.

Sohmer & Company, Piano Makers²¹

Sohmer & Co. was founded in 1872 by German immigrant Hugo Sohmer (1845-1931). Sohmer, who had apprenticed with several piano firms before establishing his own company, was the inventor of and the first to build a five-foot bay grand piano. However, the Sohmer firm came to specialize in making "verticals" or upright pianos that were more popular for domestic usage, and the company's product was one of the finest pianos made in the United States. Hugo Sohmer's first factory was located in Manhattan at 149 East 14th Street in New York's "Little Germany" and in the same building as the Academy of Music (demolished).²² By 1879, the factory had expanded into the adjacent buildings at 151 to 155 East 14th Street at Irving Place, now the site of the Consolidated Edison Building. A few years later, the company had outgrown its 14th Street location, and moved its manufacturing facilities to a larger building at 143 East 23rd Street (demolished). By the 1880s, the company, which had grown from making four pianos per week in 1872 to 46 per week, was established as one of New York major piano makers. Business continued to increase, and in 1886,

Sohmer bought a large tract of waterfront land near the Astoria ferry in Queens, where a new six-story factory with a prominent clock tower would be built.

Sohmer & Co. was part of the booming nineteenth-century New York City piano industry. The fabrication of pianos and other musical instruments was one of New York City's top ten manufactured products. In 1872, there were 171 piano manufacturers in New York City; now only Steinway remains. While Sohmer never achieved the celebrity of its more famous counterpart and Queens neighbor, with which it maintained a close informal association, Sohmer did have notable fans. Composer Victor Herbert owned several Sohmer pianos and the noted American songwriter Irving Berlin had three Sohmers with transposing keyboards that he used to write his music. In 1924, William Thompson Bonner wrote: "the firm Sohmer & Company, founded in 1872, makes pianos at Astoria, Long Island, that have long been special favorites with New York music lovers."²³ The firm also made custom-built pianos in the Art Deco and Spanish styles for film stars such as Ramon Navarro, Jean Harlow, and Al Jolson.²⁴ Before any Sohmer left the Queens factory, members of the Sohmer family personally inspected it and certified its approval.

Sohmer's business continued to expand in the early twentieth century, and in 1906-07, the company built a six-story addition to the Long Island City factory, apparently designed by Franklin Baylies, a member of the firm that designed the original building in c.1886. In 1919, Sohmer & Company built a six-story piano showroom and office building at 31 West 57th Street, designed by architect Randolph Amiroty.²⁵ By this time, West 57th Street had become "piano row," with several other piano showrooms located there, including those of Steinway & Sons, Story & Clark, and Chickering & Sons. Sohmer sold its West 57th Street building to investors in 1952, but continued to lease part of it as a showroom for many years.

The Sohmer Brothers sold the company in 1982 to Pratt, Read & Co., which continued to make fine-crafted pianos under the Sohmer name; by the early 2000s, Sohmer pianos were being made in Korea by the SMC Company, which is the largest piano maker in the world and the producer of other fine pianos, such as Bechstein, William Knabe, Conover Cable, and Hazelton pianos.

Design of the Sohmer & Company Piano Factory Building²⁶

The original c.1886 portion of the Sohmer & Co. Piano Factory Building, with its mansarded clock tower, exhibits many characteristic features of a late-nineteenth-century factory. Like other industrial buildings of its time, much of the Sohmer factory's appearance and form is rooted in practical needs; "the aesthetic basis of American industrial building design," according to architectural historian Betsy Hunter Bradley, "was an ideal of beauty based on function, utility, and process."²⁷ Among the original Sohmer building's features are its relatively narrow, width and its L-shaped footprint, which arose from functional requirements; in industrial buildings, before the advent of artificial lighting, the need to bring ample natural light to the interior dictated a narrow width which, in turn, led the typical factory to take to form of an I, or of an amalgamation of wings in the shape of an L, U, H, or E.²⁸ The Sohmer building's flat roof, similarly, was a practical feature that was characteristic of the era's industrial buildings. Gabled roofs had largely been supplanted by flat roofs on factories by the 1860s, as architects and other designers of industrial lofts sought to eliminate attic spaces within which dust might accumulate and spark fires.²⁹

Many features, while rooted in function, also played an aesthetic role. While the original Sohmer Factory's footprint was chosen primarily for utilitarian purposes, it also enabled the building to maintain the street wall and shield its interior yard from public view, both of which were important to factory owners who wanted their buildings—their companies' "public facades"—to exhibit a neat appearance.³⁰ The Sohmer Factory's regular pattern of window openings allowed for even interior illumination but, as on other industrial lofts, also provided "a sense of organization and, by extrapolation, dignity for the ... exterior."³¹ Brick was chosen for the factory's walls and facades because it was among the most fire-resistant materials then available. Berger & Baylies, like other designers of industrial buildings, used decorative brickwork—including, at Sohmer, stringcourses and corbels—as a "relatively economical means of relieving plain brickwork."³² This technique was also seen on residential buildings that were contemporary to the original Sohmer Factory, particularly on large multiple dwellings with similarly expansive facades. Many examples survive today within the

Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic District of five-, six-, and seven-story flats from the 1880s and early 1890s displaying dogtoothing, recessed panels, channeling, pilasters, corbelling, and other forms of decorative brickwork, together with contrasting stone highlights, that break up and animate their lengthy facades.

Sohmer's regular fenestration pattern and long, monumental brick facades projected a strong, solid, and attractive image for the company. This was important in an era in which a factory often served as an advertisement for its firm; companies typically produced bird's-eye renderings of their industrial complexes that appeared in their catalogs, in business directories, in advertisements, and on company letterhead.³³ Generally, these depicted the factory as a hub of activity with smoke pouring from its chimneys, the home of a successful business that, by implication, made a desirable and dependable product.

In erecting a factory that would use its monumental and attractive design to help market its products, the Sohmer Piano Company took advantage of the building's prominent site and its ability to be seen from long distances. It was clearly visible from across the East River; it seems likely that the Sohmers would have expected their factory to be seen by the residents of Manhattan's east side and by passengers on boats on the East River,³⁴ and responded with a building that was sure to be an eye-catching landmark at this key location.

To make the most of the factory's location—and to get the most marketing value out of it—the Sohmer Piano Company and its architects endowed the building with an attention-grabbing clock tower that remains its signature feature. It was not unusual for large buildings in New York to have noteworthy corner features like the Sohmer tower; these buildings' opposite corners were the only places from which pedestrians could take them in their entirety, and early photographs of the Sohmer Factory make it clear that that angle, from which the building's symmetry and large scale were apparent, was the one, above all others, from which it was meant to be seen. According to Bradley, architects tended to practice "rationalized placement of ornament" in designing factory buildings, considering decoration to be most appropriate for entrances, towers, and other prominent features;³⁵ the Sohmer Factory's clock tower projects above the adjacent roof parapets and is topped by a bulbous mansard roof, which is its most elaborately-ornamented feature.

The American factory clock tower had its roots in the cupola of the early-nineteenth-century New England mill. The cupola marked the factory, like the meetinghouse, as a structure of local importance; it similarly contained a bell, which played a crucial role in organizing people's daily activities. As historian William H. Pierson, Jr. explains, no architectural feature "was more expressive of the role that each building played in the life of the community than the bell which in the meetinghouse called the congregation to worship and in the factory called the workers to their tasks."³⁶ By the 1830s, these cupolas were often placed atop towers that were attached to their buildings' facades; by providing exterior staircases, the towers prevented fires from spreading vertically through the interior of the building, while keeping the factory floor open for workers and machinery. The exterior tower, which would come to house water tanks, sprinkler systems, and other equipment, "would become standard in the fully developed nineteenth-century factory,"³⁷ but it played more than a functional role; towers and cupolas, like those of Boston's massive Chickering & Sons Piano Forte Works—which, upon its 1853 completion, was the country's largest industrial building—"provided a civic presence that coincided with the mill's dominant role in a new industrial order."³⁸ By the 1870s, the corner clock tower would become a feature of industrial complexes such as the large Manhattan works of R. Hoe & Company.³⁹

By the late nineteenth century, the clock was influencing the day-to-day activities of New Yorkers as it never had before.⁴⁰ Americans were becoming "increasingly attentive to and accountable for living and working in synchronized ways," according to historian Carlene E. Stephens, and developments like the 1883 creation of time zones with the institution of Standard Time indicated that they were doing so.⁴¹ But the inexpensive watch had yet to arrive, so most Americans depended on a patchwork system of time balls, factory whistles and bells, and timepieces displayed in the windows of jewelry stores to stay on schedule.⁴²

They also depended on the publicly visible clocks that proliferated after the Civil War on the facades and towers of factories, commercial buildings, banks, railroad stations, courthouses, and schools.⁴³ These clocks, some publicly owned and some private, provided a valued service; the dedication of a new town clock could be cause for celebration with “music and cannon,” and the failure of a clock that the public relied upon could inconvenience people in myriad, unexpected ways.⁴⁴ More than this, these clocks symbolized “regularity, coordination, order, permanence, and reverence for the machine,” according to historian Alexis McCrossen, who says that they were “at the heart of modernity and the modern nation state.” Companies that erected clocks for public use “reassured the public that [they] were regular, dependable, and punctual,” asserting their importance within the public sphere;⁴⁵ they also often used their clocks for direct marketing advantage. In 1880, for example, when the *Washington Post* installed a new public clock at its headquarters, it crowed on its front page about making its building “useful as well as ornamental,” affording “the *Post* another opportunity of serving the public.” By the early twentieth century, clock makers marketed their products with the promise that they would attract the public’s attention—that they would be visible “from more than one thousand doors and windows”—and public clocks did become important local landmarks that were closely associated with the companies that owned and maintained them.⁴⁶ It seems likely that the clock tower of the Sohmer Piano Factory was intended to brand its company as an important, publicly minded member of its community.

The Sohmer & Co. Piano Factory Building is an excellent example of the American industrial interpretation of the German Renaissance Revival or *Rundbogenstil*, which developed in the 1830s and 1840s, “synthesized classical and medieval architecture—particularly the round-arched elements of those styles—and relied on brick and locally available stone,” according to Bradley.⁴⁷ Despite its name, buildings constructed in the American version of the style, like the Sohmer Factory, often used economical segmental-headed window openings. They also utilized corbelling, patterning, and other forms of decorative brickwork, to model and bring variety to their facades, and had parapets that sometimes varied in height and featured pediments, bringing additional visual interest. The design of the c.1906-07 addition to the original Sohmer building, which continues Berger & Baylies’ c.1886 German Renaissance Revival style, is attributed to firm member Franklin Baylies. The Department of Buildings records for the addition have been lost, but the similarity of the addition to the original building, plus the fact the Baylies continued on his own to specialize in warehouse and loft buildings, while Berger’s subsequent work was mainly residential, suggests that Baylies, who was also a Queens resident, may have been retained again by the Sohmers to execute the addition. Furthermore, Baylies’s 1902 addition to an existing loft building at 155-159 Franklin Street (1882, George W. DaCunha) in the Tribeca West Historic District in Manhattan was designed in the same neo-Grec style as the original wing, indicating Baylies’ apparent sensitivity to original designs when producing plans for building extensions.

The Sohmer & Co. Piano Factory Building not only showcases many representative features of a factory building of its time, but exhibits an elegant handling of these features, many of which, like the corner clock tower, are unusually distinctive. Altered only slightly since 1913, the Sohmer Piano Company Factory remains remarkably intact.

Later History⁴⁸

Sohmer & Co. continued to thrive in the early twentieth century; by 1915, it was employing 250 people. By 1947, Sohmer had excess capacity at its Vernon Boulevard plant, and was leasing portions of it to other companies. Sohmer remained at the Vernon Boulevard plant until 1982, when company was acquired by the Pratt, Read & Co.,⁴⁹ the leading American manufacturer of piano keyboards, which moved the factory to Ivoryton, Connecticut. The Sohmer building was then taken over by the Adirondack Chair Company, which specializes in office and institutional furniture. The company was founded in 1926. The Sohmer & Co. Archives now reside at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. The New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission held previous public hearings on the Sohmer & Co. Piano Factory Building in 1983, 1984, and 1990. The building is being converted to residential use in 2007.

Description

The Sohmer & Company Piano Factory Building, which is located at the southeast corner of Vernon Boulevard and 31st Avenue, is an L-shaped building with a projecting clock tower at its northwest corner. The building has two primary facades, both of which feature red brick laid in common bond, and secondary brick elevations facing the courtyards. There are also several, low brick wings and an elevator shaft attached to the minor elevations, as well as a freestanding brick drying kiln. The present building is the result of several building campaigns, including the erection of the original building c.1886, and the construction of an additional story and a full-height south wing, both in the early twentieth century. Both the south wing and the additional story were designed in a manner that is similar to the original c.1886 block.

The Vernon Boulevard façade has twenty-five bays, including three which are incorporated into the base of the clock tower and the two south bays that are angled to conform to the curve of Vernon Boulevard. There are horizontal divisions above the first, second, and fifth stories in the form of series of projecting and recessing brick courses and a sandstone band above the first story, a recessed brick band and dentil course supporting a compound sandstone band (incorporating the third-story window sills) above the second story, and a projecting soldier course on brick corbels and sandstone band above the fifth story, which originally served as the buildings cornice prior to the addition of the sixth floor. The façade is topped above a recessed brick course (which was extended from the original clock tower façade) over the sixth-story fenestration by a corbelled brick parapet surmounted by sandstone coping blocks. In addition, there are three black and white painted sign bands. The one above the fifth story contains the words “ADIIRONDAK DIRECT est. 1926,” the sign above the fourth reads “FURNTURE FOR BUSINESSES and INSTITUTIONS,” and the sign band above the third story says “SALES & RENTALS 718-204-4500.” A greystone block at the corner of the tower at the level of the second story has “Boulevard” inscribed on the Vernon Boulevard Side and “Jamaica” in scribed on the 31st Avenue side.⁵⁰

The fenestration consists of segmentally-arched windows filled with six-over-six wood sash on the first, fifth and sixth stories and aluminum sash with faux muntins on the second and third stories, with subtle variations in the sill and surround treatments. The first-story fenestration has projecting sandstone sills with brick surrounds laid-up to imitate quoins. The second-, fourth-, and fifth-story windows have projecting sandstone sills and simple header-brick lintels. The third- and fourth-story window sills are incorporated into continuous, projecting sandstone bands, and have simple header brick lintels. There is a freight entryway in the southernmost two bays covered with a steel roll-down gate. A pedestrian entryway, located at the base of the tower, has detailing similar to the first story windows. Another pedestrian entryway, located near the center of the façade in a shallow brick inset flanked by projecting piers and topped by stone blocks which support a steel i-beam decorated with rosettes. The opening is filled with a pair of paneled wood and glass doors topped by a transom.

The nineteen-bay 31st Avenue façade is similar to the west façade, including three bays incorporated into the base of the clock tower, but not including angled bays because 31st Avenue does not have a curve. In addition, there are two second-story entryways near either end of the façade, which are accessed via cast-iron porches featuring fluted columns, decorative rosettes, molded newels post, and twisted railings. The deeply inset, segmental doorways feature paneled reveals, paired and paneled wood and glass doors, segmental transoms, and header-brick lintels.

The clock tower is square in plan and springs from sections of the north and west facades which are set off from those facades by full-height, projecting brick piers that continue the horizontal divisions of the facades. The north and west facades of the clock tower contain the clock faces which consist of round masonry dials with bronze numbers, hatch marks, and hands, sitting within a slightly recessed plane outlined by header bricks. Additionally, there are projecting brick hoods at the upper curves of the clock frames. Attached bronze numerals, stating “1886,” are located below the clock and between the sixth-story windows of the clock tower facades, which are topped by gables with copper flashing. The tower is surmounted by a prominent mansard roof covered with replacement roofing and stone coping. Circular dormers with projecting flat sills and molded hoods are located at the upper

parts of the north and west slopes. The tower is surmounted by a flattish, square roof with a molded and bracketed cornice.

The south elevation, the lower part of which is hidden by the adjacent two-story building, has three recessed bays, segmental fenestration filled with two-over-two metal sash, and painted sign bands above the three upper floors reading “OFFICE FURNITURE WHOLESale” from top to bottom. The east elevation is four bays wide, and contains segmental fenestration filled with two-over-two metal sash, and a steel stair tower, which exceeds the building’s roofline. There is a one-story brick extension, which appears to have been added in the late twentieth century, containing a secondary entryway filled with a pair of paneled wood-and-glass doors.

The courtyard elevations, which have irregular bay divisions, display segmental fenestration (one bay is bricked in), projecting sandstone sills, and six-over-six wood sash. There are also a brick elevator and stair shafts, which exceed the height of the building, a wrought-iron fire escape, a number of stacks and ventilation pipes, drainage conduits, communications equipment, and a steel stair tower, which also exceeds the building’s roofline. A wooden water tower on a steel frame sits upon the roof. At ground level, there are several one-story wings containing freight entryways, loading platforms, and various doors and windows. A concrete ramp leads down to below-grade loading docks were created at the former locations of fenestration. The drying kiln building is a two-story, brick structure with segmental openings and a flat roof that slopes gently toward the west.

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Research Department

NOTES

¹ This section draws upon the following sources: Greater Astoria Historical Society, “The History of Astoria and Long Island City” (2006); Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC), “Astoria Park Pool and Play Center” (LP-2196), prepared by Donald G. Presa (New York, 2006); _____, *Steinway Hall Designation Report* (LP-2100), prepared by Jay Shockley (2001); _____, “Survey Report – Long Island City, Queens,” prepared by Dennis Pidgeon and Kate Frankel (1991 draft); Vincent Seyfried, “Astoria,” *The Encyclopedia of New York City*. ed., Kenneth T. Jackson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 63; _____, “Long Island City,” *Encyclopedia*, 690.

² Incorporating the villages of Ravenswood, Hunter’s Point, Dutch Kills, and Astoria.

³ Steinway Village grew to include row houses, a lumberyard/sawmill, a foundry, piano factory, and a piano case works.

⁴ This section is based on: LPC, *Estey Piano Company Factory* (LP-2195), prepared by Michael D. Caratzas (New York, 2006), which draws upon the following sources: Alfred Dolge, *Pianos and Their Makers: A Comprehensive History of the Development of the Piano* (originally published 1911; reprinted New York: Dover Publications, 1972), 277; Arthur Loesser, *Men, Women and Pianos: A Social History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1954); Craig H. Roell, *The Piano in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1989); Daniel Spillane, *History of the American Piano-Forte: Its Technical Development and the Trade* (Originally published 1890; reprinted New York: Da Capo Press, 1969); and *Trow’s Business Directory of the Borough of Queens* (New York: Trow’s Directory, Printing, and Bookbinding Co. 1902, 1906-07, 1912).

⁵ John Jacob Astor was importing pianos into New York by 1786, according to *Men, Women and Pianos*, p. 443.

⁶ *Men, Women and Pianos*, p. 458.

⁷ *Men, Women and Pianos*, p. 462. The Babcock frame, which was a cast-iron, one-piece frame for square pianos, was developed in Boston and patented in 1825; the Boston manufacturer Jonas Chickering patented

a one-piece iron frame for grand pianos in 1843. The iron frame was crucial in permitting the use of thicker, higher-tension strings, enabling a fuller sound.

⁸ On the Steinway company, see LPC, *Steinway Hall Designation Report* (LP-2100) (New York: City of New York, 2001), prepared by Jay Shockley.

⁹ *Men, Women and Pianos*, p. 509.

¹⁰ *Men, Women and Pianos*, p. 540; James Parton, “The Piano in the United States,” *Atlantic Monthly*, July 1867, p. 82, cited in *The Piano in America*, p. 23.

¹¹ *The Piano in America*, p. 24.

¹² *The Piano in America*, p. 15.

¹³ *The Piano in America*, p. 5.

¹⁴ *The Piano in America*, p. 25.

¹⁵ Loesser explains that, by the late nineteenth century, “the American piano-making industry had become, to a greater or lesser degree, an assembly of separately, independently made parts. As early as 1880 Steinway & Sons advertised in a trade paper that they were ‘the only manufacturers who make every part of their pianofortes—including the casting of the full iron frames—in their manufactories.’ They continued making this claim for decades; it was never challenged as long as it was made” (*Men, Women & Pianos*, p. 525). Dolge wrote in 1911 that “perhaps no other class of manufacturing depends more largely upon auxiliary industries ... than the piano industry” (*Pianos and Their Makers*, p. 115).

¹⁶ *The Piano in America*, p. 160.

¹⁷ These numbers were arrived at by the author using Alfred Dolge’s list of American piano manufacturers, which appears on pp. 454-464 of *Pianos and Their Makers*. Dolge lists the city and state of each manufacturer’s headquarters.

¹⁸ *The Bronx and Its People: A History*, pp. 725, 727.

¹⁹ In the early years of the twentieth century, there was about a dozen or so piano makers and dealers in the Queens, scattered around the borough with small concentrations in Long Island City/Astoria (including Steinway and Sohmer), Far Rockaway, and Flushing.

²⁰ This section was adapted from LPC, *Tribeca West Historic District Designation Report* (LP-1713), Architects Appendix, 351 (New York, 1989), and includes the following sources: Dennis Steadman Francis, *Architects in Practice in New York City, 1840-1900* (New York, 1979), 14, 15; *Key to the Architects of Greater New York* (New York, 1900), 11; (1901), 13; LPC, Research Files; ____, *Ladies Mile Historic District Designation Report* (LP-1609), Architects’ Appendix (New York, 1989); *Trow’s New York City Directory* (New York, 1879-1921); and James Ward, *Architects in Practice in New York City, 1900-1940* (New York, 1989), 6, 7.

²¹ The section draws upon the following sources: *Brooklyn Eagle* (July 31, 1886), 4; Christopher Gray, “The Sohmer Piano Factory,” *New York Times* (Oct. 28, 1990), R8; *New York Times* (Jan 1, 1886), 4; (July 11, 1909), 8; (Nov. 18, 1923), RE2; (Jan. 11, 1952), 36; (May 27, 1982), D5; “The Sohmer Story,” (accessed online at www.pianopiano.com/sohmerstory.html); and *Trow’s New York City Directory* (New York: Trow’s Directory, Printing, and Bookbinding Co., 1874, 1881-82, 1884-85, 1895-96, 1905-06.)

²² According to *Trow’s New York City Directory*, Sohmer & Co. were the manufacturers of “patent agraffe pianofortes.”

²³ William Thompson Bonner, *New York, The World’s Metropolis* (New York: R.L. Polk & Co., 1924), 531, 640.

²⁴ *New York Times* (Aug. 13, 1982), B1.

²⁵ The company’s earlier showrooms were located at 149 East 14th Street (demolished), 382 Second Avenue at 22nd Street (demolished), 170 Fifth Avenue, and 315 Fifth Avenue. The Sohmer Building at 170 Fifth Avenue, located in the Ladies Mile Historic District, was designed by the noted commercial architect Robert Maynicke and built in 1897-98 in the Beaux Arts style.

²⁶ This section draws upon the following sources: Betsy Hunter Bradley, *The Works: The Industrial Architecture of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) and William H. Pierson, Jr., *American Buildings and Their Architects: Technology and the Picturesque; the Corporate and Early Gothic Styles* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1980), pp. 22-90, and has been adapted from LPC, *Estey Piano Company Factory* (LP-2195).

²⁷ *The Works*, p. 202.

- ²⁸ In some cases, the factory took the form of a K, as at the Joseph Loth & Company Silk Ribbon Mill (Hugo Kafka, 1885-86), which is a designated New York City Landmark. See LPC, *Joseph Loth & Company Silk Ribbon Mill* (LP-1860) (New York: City of New York, 1993), prepared by Betsy Bradley.
- ²⁹ On this point, in addition to *The Works*, p. 179, see Brigitte Cook, "Preserving Design Objectives Found in Industrial Architecture of Mott Haven" (Unpublished Columbia University class paper, c.2004), p. 3.
- ³⁰ *The Works*, p. 60.
- ³¹ *The Works*, p. 162.
- ³² *The Works*, p. 234.
- ³³ For example, *King's Handbook of New York City* (Boston: Moses King, 1893) contained a large section, spanning pp. 913-984, devoted to "notable manufacturers" that included many illustrations of factory complexes.
- ³⁴ *New York Times* (March 20, 1887), 9.
- ³⁵ *The Works*, p. 232.
- ³⁶ *American Buildings and Their Architects*, pp. 43-44.
- ³⁷ *American Buildings and Their Architects*, p. 61.
- ³⁸ *Men, Women and Pianos*, pp. 495-496; *The Works*, p. 119. The Kohler & Campbell piano factory in the Bronx at East 163rd Street between Melrose and Courtland Avenues (Charles Steinmetz & C.S. Clark, 1885-1908, demolished) also featured a clock tower. See LPC, *Bronx Survey* (New York: City of New York, 1978), pp. 85-86. The Estey Piano Factory, also in the Bronx, also has a clock tower and is a designated New York City Landmark.
- ³⁹ An illustration of the Hoe factory appears on p. 67 of *The Works*.
- ⁴⁰ In 1854, the *New York Daily Times* lamented the inaccuracy of the City Hall clock, writing of the "shame that a city like ours, the great center of commerce, the metropolis of our great and growing country, should be without a decent clock to regulate its movements" ("The City Hall Clock – Necessity of a Better Time-Keeper," *New York Daily Times*, March 15, 1854, p. 2).
- ⁴¹ Carlene E. Stephens, *On Time: How America has Learned to Live by the Clock* (Boston: Bulfinch, 2002), p. 109.
- ⁴² One of America's best-known time balls was the one that dropped at noon between 1877 and 1914 from the roof of Western Union's New York City headquarters. Like other time balls around the country, it was activated by a daily signal telegraphed from Washington, D.C.; onlookers would use the time ball to synchronize their watches. See *On Time*, p. 117. Incidentally, time balls likely inspired one of New York City's most beloved and famous traditions—the annual lowering of a flagpole-mounted ball atop the old *New York Times* tower to mark the arrival of the new year. The basis for the New Year's ball "was probably the gold-plated 'time balls' that were once lowered at noon every day in seaports throughout the world to enable ships' navigators to set their chronometers," according to Tama Starr and Edward Hayman, *Signs and Wonders: The Spectacular Marketing of America* (New York: Currency/Doubleday 1998), p. 267. The inexpensive "dollar watch," which dramatically expanded watch ownership, did not become available until 1896, according to *On Time*, p. 135.
- ⁴³ On this topic, see Alexis McCrossen, "Hands and Faces: Public Clocks in the United States After the Civil War" (accessed online at epsilon3.georgetown.edu/~coventrm/asa2001/panel9/mccrossen.html). Public clocks had appeared on American churches and meetinghouses by the early eighteenth century, according to Frederick Shelley, *Early American Tower Clocks* (Columbia, Penn.: National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors, 1999), pp. ix-xv.
- ⁴⁴ "Happy Chicopee: With Music and Cannon She Celebrates, and Looks with Delight at Her New Clock," *Boston Daily Globe*, September 24, 1887, p. 4. When a privately maintained clock used by the public on Chicago's North Side stopped working in 1893, it affected everything from the business of a local dentist, to the work of a housewife who "[couldn't] tell when to cook dinner," according to "Clock to Run Again: Yerkes' North Side Timepiece Undergoing Repairs," *Chicago Tribune*, November 27, 1893, p. 7.
- ⁴⁵ "Hands and Faces: Public Clocks in the United States After the Civil War."
- ⁴⁶ "The Post's New Clock: Our Building Made Useful to the Public as well as Ornamental," *Washington Post*, October 24, 1880, p. 1. The "from more than one thousand doors and windows" quote is from "Hands and Faces: Public Clocks in the United States After the Civil War." One newspaper account from 1901 described how an argument over the correct time led a group of men on a hansom cab ride around Manhattan as they sought out, by name, the Western Union time ball, the clocks of the Tiffany, Hudnut, and New York Life Insurance companies, and the clocks of the *Times* and *Tribune* ("What Time Is It?"

New York Times, July 7, 1901, p. SM3). For decades after watch ownership first became common, people continued to rely on public clocks. When Trinity Church's clock was stopped for repairs in 1947, it confused the "tens of thousands of 'Street' employees who several times a day turn their eyes to the gilded hands of the clock's ... dials," according to "Time Stands Still in Trinity's Clock," *New York Times*, February 27, 1947, p. 23.

⁴⁷ *The Works*, p. 235.

⁴⁸ This section includes the following sources: Chamber of Commerce of the Borough of Queens, *Queensborough, The Borough of Homes and Industry* (New York, 1915), 28; *New York Times* (Oct. 16, 1947), 48.

⁴⁹ Pratt-Read is one of the nation's oldest companies, dating back to Colonial times, when it made ivory combs and brushes; later, the company began producing piano keys and other components. *New York Times* (Aug. 13, 1982), B1.

⁵⁰ Previously, Vernon Boulevard was named the Boulevard, while 31st Avenue was known as Jamaica Avenue.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and other features of the building and site, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Sohmer & Company Piano Factory 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 Sohmer & Co. Piano Factory Building is one of the most prominent structures along the Queens side of the East River in Long Island City; that the building is distinguished by its monumental scale and prominent mansard-roofed clock tower; that the original part of the building was constructed around 1886 as the piano factory for Sohmer & Co.; that it was designed by the architectural firm Berger & Baylies, which produced plans for commercial and residential buildings throughout New York City; that the Sohmer factory is an excellent example of the German Romanesque Revival Style, which was commonly used for late nineteenth-century factories; that the building was expanded to the south in c.1906-07 in a design that matches the original section and is attributed to architect Franklin Baylies; that Sohmer & Co. was a major producer of upright pianos during the late-nineteenth and the twentieth centuries; that the company's pianos were used by composer Victor Herbert and songwriter Irving Berlin among other prominent musicians; that the Sohmer Building is one of the few extant survivors of the once-thriving piano-manufacturing industry in New York City; that it is a significant reminder of the industrial past of the East River waterfront; and that it is one of the rare surviving nineteenth-century factory buildings found in Queens.

Accordingly, pursuant to 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 Sohmer & Company Piano Factory Building, and designates Borough of Queens Tax Map Block 503, Lot 5 as its Landmark Site.

Robert B. Tierney, Chair
Pablo Vengoechea, Vice-Chair
Steven Byrns, Roberta Brandes Gratz, Christopher Moore,
Richard Olcott, Jan Pokorny, Elizabeth Ryan, Commissioners



Sohmer & Co. Piano Factory Building, 31-01 Vernon Boulevard, Queens
Photo by Carl Forster, December 2006



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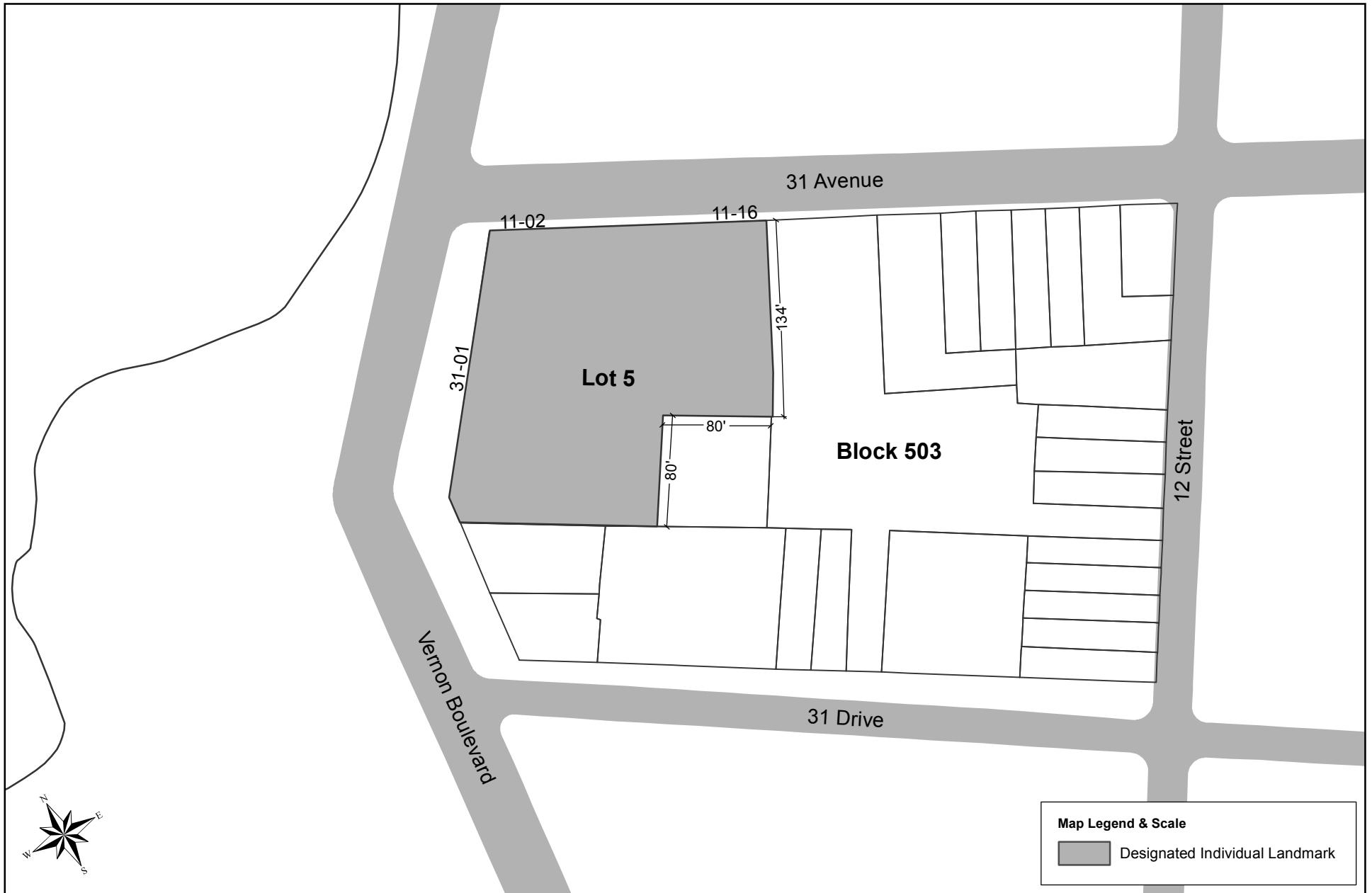
Sohmer & Co. Piano Factory Building, 31-01 Vernon Boulevard, Queens
Photo by Carl Forster, December 2006



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Sohmer & Co. Piano Factory Building, 31-01 Vernon Boulevard, Queens
Photo by Carl Forster, December 2006



Sohmer Piano Factory Company (LP-2172), 31-01 Vernon Boulevard, aka 11-02 to 11-16 31st Avenue.
 Landmark Site: Borough of Queens Tax Map Block 503, Lot 5 in part.

Designated: February 27, 2007