

SURROGATE'S COURT (HALL OF RECORDS), First Floor Interior consisting of the Foyer, Main Lobby and surrounding Corridor, Grand Staircase, East Vestibule and West Vestibule; Second Floor Interior consisting of the Grand Staircase and Gallery opening onto the upper half of the Main Lobby; Third Floor Interior consisting of the Grand Staircase and Corridor around the Light Court; Fourth Floor Interior consisting of the Grand Staircase and Corridor around the Light Court; Fifth Floor Interior consisting of the Grand Staircase and Corridor around the Light Court, Court Room and Gallery ("A") on the south side of the building, and Court Room ("B") on the north side of the building, 31 Chambers Street, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1899-1907; architects John R. Thomas and Horgan and Slattery.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 153, Lot 24.

On March 23, 1976, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as an Interior Landmark of the Surrogate's Court (Hall of Records), First Floor Interior consisting of the Foyer, Main Lobby and surrounding Corridor, Grand Staircase, East Vestibule and West Vestibule; Second Floor Interior consisting of the Grand Staircase and Gallery opening onto the upper half of the Main Lobby; Third Floor Interior consisting of the Grand Staircase and Corridor around the Light Court; Fourth Floor Interior consisting of the Grand Staircase and Corridor around the Light Court; Fifth Floor Interior consisting of the Grand Staircase and Corridor around the Light Court, Court Room and Gallery ("A") on the south side of the building and Court Room ("B") on the north side of the building, and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 3). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Six witnesses, including Surrogates Millard L. Midonick and S. Samuel Di Falco, spoke in favor of designation. There was one speaker in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Hall of Records (now the Surrogate's Court), designed by architect John R. Thomas and constructed at the turn of the century, remains today a building which inspires in New Yorkers a genuine and justifiable sense of civic pride. Its opulence and grandeur, and more particularly the lavish decoration of its interiors are highly characteristic of the Beaux-Arts style--the imposing architectural expression favored throughout the "Gilded Age." The Hall of Records was conceived and planned not only to serve as a repository for municipal records but also to stand as a magnificent architectural symbol of the prosperity, importance and achievement of New York City. The building has been a designated New York City Landmark since 1966.

The first Hall of Records was established in 1831 in the old 18th-century "gaol" in City Hall Park, northeast of City Hall. Previously public records had been housed in City Hall, but in 1830 the Common Council had authorized the conversion of the old jail to fireproof offices for a Hall of Records, and, in addition, appropriated funds for exterior alterations in order to harmonize the building with City Hall. The New York Mirror recorded on September 17, 1831: "Scientific gentlemen and artists pronounce the building the most perfect and chaste piece of architecture in this city. Its style is Grecian, from the model of the temple of Ephesus." The growth of the city and the consequent increase in public records necessitated the addition of one floor to the building and the construction of a fireproof roof in 1870.

The continuing accumulation of public records resulted in the formation of the Sinking Fund Commission in 1888 to erect a building in the vicinity of the New York County Courthouse (but not in City Hall Park), to be used primarily for the keeping of records. The law authorizing the construction of the building was amended in 1890 to allow such a building to accommodate other city offices, and it was amended again in 1892 to allow the building to be built in City Hall Park. These amendations led to the formulation of a plan to raze and replace

the old City Hall building. A national competition resulted in over 130 entries and six prize-winning designs. Public outcry over the proposed destruction of City Hall was instrumental in the repeal of the law in 1894, and, instead, the Board of Aldermen authorized the Commissioner of Public Works to clean and renovate the existing City Hall early in 1895.

The need for a new Hall of Records was emphasized by a grand jury report issued in March 1896 condemning the old building as "unsafe and susceptible to destruction by fire." In December an association of real estate dealers, property owners, lawyers, and businessman was organized to lobby for a new Hall of Records. The central issue was the selection of a suitable site not in City Hall Park; finally in April 1897 the Board of Estimate and Appraisal chose the site on the north side of Chambers Street at Lafayette (Centre Street), and John R. Thomas was appointed architect.

John Rochester Thomas (1848-1901), born and trained in Rochester, New York, was reputed to have designed more public and semi-public buildings than any other architect in the country. Among his designs were the Eighth Regiment Armory, the Seventh-First Regiment Armory, the Squadron A Armory, a designated New York City Landmark, an extension to the old New York Stock Exchange, buildings for the New York State Reformatory at Elmira, buildings for the New Jersey State Reformatory at Rahway, and buildings for the Eastern New York Reformatory. Among the educational institutions from which he received commissions were the University of Rochester, Rochester Theological Seminary, Cornell University, and the University of Virginia. He designed more than 150 churches, one of which was the Second Reformed Church at Lenox Avenue and 123rd Street, now the Ephesus Seventh Day Adventist Church in the Mount Morris Park Historic District. When the State Legislature voted against a new City Hall, Thomas, who had been selected the competition winner, was awarded the commission for the Hall of Records as compensation. Best known for this design, Thomas himself considered that the building would be a crowning achievement--the "monument" to his career.

The City acquired the land for the building in 1897; Thomas's plans were approved by an advisory committee consisting of Professor William E. Ware of the Architectural School of Columbia University, the influential architectural critic Montgomery Schuyler, and Henry G. Marquand, a business magnate and trustee of the Metropolitan Museum. The construction contract was awarded to John Peirce, who had a national reputation as a contractor in the construction of both public and private structures. He supplied the building stone which was granite from Hallowell, Maine, noted for its whiteness and durability of color. Although the building permit was filed in 1897, construction did not actually begin until 1899 because of delays in clearing the site.

As in the case of many government buildings the construction of the Hall of Records was subject to a certain amount of controversy. Plans for the new structure were begun under the administration of Mayor William L. Strong, but when Tammany Mayor Robert A. Van Wyck took office in 1898, he wanted to put the stamp of his administration on the building. He engaged the Tammany-connected architectural firm of Horgan & Slattery which made a number of recommendations for altering Thomas's interior designs. The cornerstone was laid on April 13, 1901, by Randolph Guggenheimer, president of the Municipal Council. Following Thomas's untimely death on August 28, 1901, Mayor Van Wyck pushed through the appointment of Arthur J. Horgan and Vincent J. Slattery as architects of the building. Some of the their proposed changes--the "horganizing and slatterifying" of the building as the New York Times put it--were later reversed under the administration of Mayor Seth Low (1902-1906). Mayor Low was unable to abrogate their contract following his election in 1901, but fortunately, Thomas's designs appear to have been largely carried out in the way he originally intended them. In 1903 there was some controversy when the sculpture commissions were awarded to only two sculptors, Philip Martiny and Henry K. Bush-Brown. With the extensive amount of statuary planned for both interior and exterior, some criticism was expressed that they would not be able to adequately carry out the work with the best artistic effect within a reasonable amount of time.

One of the more amusing incidents involving the ornamental decoration was a joke Vincent J. Slattery claimed to have played on the Municipal Art Commission in March 1903. He supposedly had Bush-Brown make copies of gargoyles and

decorative detail by Michelangelo for submission to the Art Commission which rejected them as "inartistic and immature." Two days later the architects sent a letter to the Municipal Art Commission denying the newspaper stories, and Bush-Brown denied making any such designs.

Shortly after various City departments began moving into the building in December 1906, it was discovered that some of the "marble" embellishment on the upper floors was really of plaster. Although no graft was involved, the substitution of plaster for marble was the result of several changes of plans by three City administrations.

The old Hall of Records in City Hall Park proved so unsafe that it was ordered closed late in 1902 and was then razed. The Register's Office and its records were moved to the Morton Building at 116 Nassau Street until the new Hall of Records was completed.

The Surrogate's Court, long associated with the Hall of Records, was established under the Dutch in 1656 for the administration of the property of "orphans and minor children" who were residents within the jurisdiction of the city government. When the old Hall of Records was completed in 1831, the Surrogate's Court was accommodated there. Because of the increase in city records, the court was later moved into the New York County (Tweed) Courthouse behind City Hall. Accommodations for the Surrogate's Court were an important part of the plan for the new Hall of Records. The courtrooms on the fifth floor were planned by the architect John R. Thomas to be among the finest in the city. In response to the increasing use of the building by the Surrogate's Court, the City Council passed a resolution in 1962 calling on the Mayor and the Board of Estimate to change the name of the Hall of Records to the Surrogate's Court. This change was approved in 1963.

The Hall of Records is entered from Chambers Street through three doorways. The doors, with bronze grilles, are flanked by columns with modified composite capitals. Arched broken pediments with cartouches surmount the doors. Rising above the entrances are graceful arched windows which also have bronze grilles.

The walls of the foyer are faced with the rusticated yellow Siena marble which is used throughout the interior on the first and second floors. Highly polished and a mellow gold in color, it imparts an exceptional effect of warmth and opulence. The arcade at the north, opposite the arched entrance openings is adorned in the spandrels with cartouches composed of central convex-shaped disks with enframing swags and scrolls. Set at each end of the foyer is a marble enframed doorway with double mahogany doors. Handsome mosaics incorporating lions' heads and boukrania (bulls' skulls) enhance the reveals and soffits. Above these end doorways are two impressive sculptural groups by Albert Weinert. Executed in white marble in a classicizing style, they depict personifications of historical events. On the east is "The Consolidation of Greater New York", in which a youth is flanked by seated female figures, one who proffers him the key to the City, the other leaning upon a model of City Hall. To the west is "Recording the Purchase of Manhattan Island." At the center of the composition a slim nude youth extends a bag of gold to a seated female figure at his right who holds a tablet and stylus, while a seated Indian brave at the left looks on.

The most distinctive feature of the foyer is the elaborate and grandly conceived mosaic of the elliptically arched ceiling. It was the creation of William de Leftwich Dodge (1867-1935), a Paris-trained artist widely acclaimed for the many murals he executed in public buildings throughout the United States and Canada. The ceiling mosaic of the foyer, organized into a series of panels within which are depicted ancient deities and zodiac symbols, displays a highly inventive and elegant stylistic amalgam; Dodge has made reference to Egyptian and early 5th century Greek motifs--stylistic allusions appropriate to the subject matter. Both these ancient styles also display a sensitivity and appreciation for line and pattern, characteristics associated, too, with the turn-of-the-century Art Nouveau style, the avant-garde movement which seems to have influenced Dodge in designing the foyer ceiling.

Within the triangular panels of the ceiling are depicted eight of the twelve signs of the zodiac, eruditely labeled with Greek names: Didymoi (Gemini); Leon (Leo); Toxeutes (Sagittarius); Aigokeros (Capricorn); Parthenos (Virgo); Krios (Aries); Hydrochoos (Aquarius); Tauros (Taurus). Below the personifications of the signs--each beautifully characterized--are pairs of heraldic sphinxes. Alternating with these panels are a series with the figure of Ra, the Egyptian Sun God. In panels at the four corners of the ceiling are single figures of Greek deities associated with the functions of Recorder and Surrogate; Themis (Justice), Erinys (Retribution), Penthos (Sorrow), and Ponos (Labor).

The lunettes of the foyer end walls are also adorned with mosaics by Dodge, although these scenes, which depict "Searching the Records" and "Widows and Orphans Pleading Before the Judge of the Surrogate's Court" are executed in a pictorial, naturalistic style rather than in the more decorative and emblematic style of the ceiling.

All the mosaics are executed in ceramic tesserae predominantly in shades of red, green and blue on a dull gold ground. Shimmering glass tesserae accent the whole.

Other interesting features of the foyer are the central bronze chandelier and wall sconces, and the great ornamental bronze radiator covers which are crowned with eagles with outspread wings perched on globes. The polished marble floor is laid in a large-scale guilloche pattern using pink Tennessee and Bleu Belge marbles.

From the foyer one passes through an arcaded hall into the grand main lobby, a vast and imposing interior space. The use of Siena marble throughout and the wealth of ornamental detail make the room one of the most splendid in New York City. The lobby rises two full stories beneath an elliptically arched bronze ceiling with skylight. An arcaded gallery at the second floor enhances the sense of spaciousness as does the rusticated arcade at the ground floor which opens on the surrounding corridor. Carved ornament adorns the arcades; at the first floor, beribboned garlands executed in unpolished marble, connect the scrolled keystones of the arches to small disks above elaborately enframed roundels of red Verona marble set in the spandrels of the arches. A frieze of triglyphs and bezants separates the two floors. The arches of the gallery are flanked by engaged columns with stylized Ionic capitals and the spandrels of the arches are carved with wreaths and oak branches. The vaulted skylight with geometrically patterned panels rises above an entablature with a frieze of vertically placed leaves.

An outstanding feature of the lobby is the grand staircase. Although often compared to the great Beaux-Arts baroque stairway of the Paris Opera, the similarity is one primarily of mood, and not of plan. The grand staircase rises in two flights to a central balustraded landing above the archway leading to the west entrance. From this landing a single flight of stairs continues up to the second floor. The lower flights of stairs have giant consoles in place of wing walls, adorned with exceptionally rich and naturalistic acanthus scrolls executed in high relief. A great cartouche adorns the corbel supporting the balustraded landing, and in the lunette above this landing is an elaborate stucco relief which displays the seal of the City of New York held by winged putti growing from acanthus foliage.

A large clock in heavy bronze enframement is suspended from the elliptical arch opening to the elevator lobby. The floor has a rectilinear pattern of highly polished colored marble.

The first floor halls, again faced with rusticated yellow Siena marble, have groin vaulted ceilings from which are suspended handsome chandeliers with globes. Mahogany double doors set in deep reveals lead to the offices. The lunettes above these doors are adorned with red marble disks like those in the main lobby and are here flanked by cornucopias. An interesting feature seen in this hall as well as in the upstairs corridors are the bronze doors with studs and brass pulls. These conceal fuse boxes and other service functions.

Secondary entrances with vestibules, at east and west, are similar in design, although the west vestibule has stairs leading up from the entrance doors. The doorways are protected by bronze and glass entry "cages" with decorative grillework. A handsome bronze and glass door screen closes off the west vestibule from the corridor beneath the stairs. As in the foyer the most striking features of the vestibules are the ceiling mosaics. Set in elliptical vaults, they are executed with glass tesserae, which results in a glittering and vividly colored composition. The figures and ornament are predominantly blue with accents of green and rose, set against a golden ground. Very different in style from the mosaics of the foyer, these mosaics combine an almost Byzantine richness of color with a decorative vocabulary borrowed from late Renaissance sources. The central panels are divided by garlanded borders into four triangular sections containing winged putti clasping acanthus scrolls and winged mask-like heads set above garlands and acanthus scrolls. The side panels have fanciful garlanded urns from which acanthus grows. The two side doors in each vestibule are surmounted by mosaic lunettes, one depicting a winged putto displaying a tablet and the other an eagle within a wreathlike garland.

The second floor gallery, with arcade opening on the main lobby on all four sides, is divided into bays with shallow domes set on pendentives. Each pendentive is adorned in molded plaster with a helmeted head surmounted by an eagle and surrounded by oak leaves--a classically inspired motif though here imbued with a pleasingly romantic quality. Smooth Siena marble wall panels terminate in a cornice beneath the domes. Arched openings which reflect the gallery arcade contain handsome double doors of mahogany beneath carved wood transoms.

The staircase rises from north to south in two straight flights intersected by a broad landing with handsome patterned marble floor. Heavy balustrades, like those on the stairways below and in the gallery arcade, flank the stairs. The staircase rises and is treated in a similar fashion up to the fifth floor.

The corridors on the third, fourth, and fifth floors, all similar in overall character, surround the open interior court of the building. The walls are faced with gray-veined marble, while the handsome mosaic tile floors are bordered by a Greek fret pattern in shades of green and yellow. Each story is differentiated by the treatment of the windows on the light court and the ornamental detail--done in imitation of marble--of the doorway enframements. At the third floor unusually large bull's-eye windows have handsome marble enframements with lotus and scroll motifs executed in bas-relief. Above the doorway flat pediments with cornices are flanked by scrolls. The windows on the fourth floor are surmounted by large cartouches with plaques containing grimacing open-mouthed masks flanked by oak branches. Brackets decorated with triglyphs support a cornice shelf above each door, while a flat pediment, similar to those used on the third floor, rises above it. Flat cornice shelves are placed over the fifth floor windows, while the cornices over the doors are supported on console brackets and adorned with garlanded cartouches. At the ceiling on the inner walls in the east and west corridors are placed elongated acanthus branches flanking a shield and sphere. Rising from the fifth floor, the stairway is graced by a handsome wrought-iron and brass railing.

The North and South Court Rooms on the fifth floor are fitting and impressive seats of justice for the Surrogate's Court. The two rooms, designed as a pair, are both symmetrically planned with galleries at mezzanine level. While such architectural features as door and window placement are similar, each courtroom is given an individual character through the use of distinctive ornamental detail.

The South Court Room, finished in rich Santo Domingo mahogany, has an almost somber, yet dignified air. A staircase at each end of the room leads to the gallery. The tall windows and end doors are surmounted by arched pediments with torch-embellished cartouches flanked by acanthus scrolls. The broken arched pediments surmounting the hall doors have shields bearing the City Seal held by female figures. On the door panels are large cartouches carved with scales of justice. An elaborate entablature at the ceiling is decorated with eagles, books, and shields which alternate with vertical scrolled and garlanded brackets.

Mask panels accent the entablature below the gallery. The ceiling is divided into panels by Greek-fret borders--a detail repeated in the floor pattern and in gilt on the plaster above the wall paneling. Classical foliate bronzed ornament executed in high relief adds further interest to the ceiling. Graceful crystal chandeliers with cut glass pendants light the room. The striking red Numidian marble fireplaces at each end of the room are in themselves elaborate classical compositions. A pedimented overmantel, flanked by stylized composite pilasters, incorporates a winged blindfolded head of justice above a wreath-enframed shield. Elaborate classical moldings surround the fireplace. The centrally-placed judge's bench is enhanced by classical carving. Behind the judge's chair is a freestanding pedimented panel with the carved figure of enthroned Justice holding a book on her lap. The inscription "Sap." (an abbreviation of the Latin word for Wisdom) and an hourglass, representing time, flank her head. A wrought-iron and brass railing leads to the bench from the judge's chambers.

The North Court Room has tawny quarter-sawn English oak paneling. Eared enframements surrounding the doors and windows support a shallow cornice. The door panels are adorned with lions' heads above shields displaying the scales of justice and the word "LEX." The wall panels are flanked by engaged fluted pilasters supporting a Doric frieze of triglyphs and metopes with a series of six repeating motifs in alternation with a convex disk. The six motifs include boukrania, scales of justice, staffs of Mercury with cornucopia, military standards, ancient weapons, and tablets with staffs. Large wood panels elaborately carved in low relief present allegories inscribed "Wisdom," "Truth," "Civilization," and "Degradation" in emblematic compositions. Three wall panels enframe portraits of former Surrogates: Abner C. Thomas, by C. Seymour Thomas; and Daniel G. Rollins and Frank T. Fitzgerald by John W. Alexander. The gallery overlooking the room is entered from a fifth floor mezzanine. Panels, set in the gallery balustrade above the main entrance doors from the corridor, are carved in low relief with boukrania and garlands flanked by cornucopias. A gilt stylized foliate border adorns the plaster wall above the paneling above which the entablature at the ceiling has garlands set between vertical console brackets in the frieze. The paneled ceiling is decorated with intricate gilded ornament in high relief, surrounded by rich borders of garlands. Symbols of warfare are included in the ceiling, continuing the military theme which characterizes the entire courtroom. The handsome chandeliers are like those in the South Court Room. The great fireplaces of pale olive green Easton marble have overmantels with broken arched pediments featuring circular escutcheons. The mantel shelf supported on heavy console brackets is set above an emblem composed of ancient weapons and a stylized helmet. The judge's bench, like that in the South Court Room, has a freestanding pedimented panel behind the judge's chair. An enthroned figure of Justice holds a sword while the inscription "Lex" (Law) and a lamp signifying truth flank her head.

This magnificent building is a tribute to the talents of the architect who intended it as a showcase of city government. Careful attention was lavished on the building encompassing even such small details as light fixtures and bronze doorknobs. Many skilled craftsmen--masons, sculptors, mosaicists, bronze casters, and wood carvers--helped to make this an irreplaceable building, one which could not be duplicated today. Much appreciated for its beauty, the building also continues to play a vital role in City government as the Surrogate's Court and the Hall of Records.

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 Surrogate's Court (Hall of Records), First Floor Interior consisting of the Foyer, Main Lobby and surrounding Corridor, Grand Staircase, East Vestibule and West Vestibule; Second Floor Interior consisting of the Grand Staircase and Gallery opening onto the upper half of the Main Lobby; Third Floor Interior consisting of the Grand Staircase and Corridor around the Light Court; Fourth Floor Interior consisting of the Grand Staircase and Corridor around the Light Court; Fifth Floor Interior consisting of the Grand Staircase and Corridor around the Light Court, Court Room and Gallery ("A") on the south side of the building, and Court Room ("B") on the north side of the building, have 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 Surrogate's Court (Hall of Records) is a building which inspires a strong and justifiable sense of civic pride, that it was planned as a magnificent architectural symbol of the prosperity, importance and achievement of New York City, that the opulence, grandeur, and lavish decoration of the interiors are highly characteristic of the Beaux-Arts style, that the main lobby, a vast and imposing architectural space, is one of the most splendid interiors in New York City, that the magnificent mosaics of the ceiling in the foyer and vestibules are indicative of the high degree of artistic attention lavished on the building, that the North and South Court Rooms on the fifth floor are unusually splendid and fitting seats of justice for the Surrogate's Court, and that the building continues to play a vital role in City government as the Surrogate's Court and Hall of Records.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of 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 an Interior Landmark the Surrogate's Court (Hall of Records), First Floor Interior consisting of the Foyer, Main Lobby and surrounding Corridor, Grand Staircase, East Vestibule and West Vestibule; Second Floor Interior consisting of the Grand Staircase and Gallery opening onto the upper half of the Main Lobby; Third Floor Interior consisting of the Grand Staircase and Corridor around the Light Court; Fourth Floor Interior consisting of the Grand Staircase and Corridor around the Light Court; Fifth Floor Interior consisting of the Grand Staircase and Corridor around the Light Court, Court Room and Gallery ("A") on the south side of the building, and Court Room ("B") on the north side of the building, 31 Chambers Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 153, Lot 24 Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.