

OTTENDORFER BRANCH, NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY, 135 Second Avenue, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1883-1884; Architect William Schickel.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 464, Lot 37 in part.

On July 12, 1977, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Ottendorfer Branch, New York Public Library, and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 5). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Eighteen witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Ottendorfer Library is the oldest branch library in Manhattan and one of the earliest buildings in the city constructed specifically as a public library. Designed in 1883-1884 by the German-born architect William Schickel, it is a particularly interesting example of late Victorian architecture exhibiting elements of both the neo-Italian Renaissance and the Queen Anne styles. Built in conjunction with the German Dispensary, now the Stuyvesant Polyclinic, next door, the library was the gift of Anna and Oswald Ottendorfer, German-American philanthropists who concerned themselves with the welfare of the German population centered on the Lower East Side in the mid to late 19th century. The juxtaposition of the library and the clinic building is by no means coincidental. Rather it reflects the 19th-century philosophy, particularly influential in Germany, of developing the individual both physically and mentally. Ottendorfer's desire was to help to uplift both the body and the mind of his fellow Germans in the United States ("dem Körpern und dem Geisten zu helfen").

Early Development of Libraries in New York

The prominent architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner has noted that, "Socially ... speaking, the free public library is the most important nineteenth century development in the field of libraries." Although dispensaries, the 19th-century equivalent of health clinics, were widespread in New York City, the concept of the free circulating library, especially that which served the poorer segments of the population, was just beginning to receive considerable attention in New York. In the 1830s the first of a series of bills to encourage the growth of libraries was passed by the New York State legislature. The New York newspapers were filled with editorial criticism of the lack of library facilities, the failure to serve the poor, and the backwardness of New York, in contrast with other cities such as Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago, in establishing a free public library.

The New York Evening Post reported in 1880 that "only one class of people in our city are unprovided for in the matter of reading -- that is the very poor, some of whom cannot afford to procure their reading, and are not eligible for the free libraries." The New York Times, writing in the more political tone which characterized the movement for public libraries in the press, wrote in 1884: "It is not too much to say that next to a clean administration of its affairs a great free circulating library is the city's chief lack."

By the late 19th century, New York City had excellent research facilities in a number of privately owned libraries, but few general libraries that offered a wide variety of popular and serious reading to the general public. The Astor and Lenox Libraries founded respectively by the will of John Jacob Astor in 1849 and by the famous book collector and philanthropist James Lenox (1800-1880) in 1870 both served as great research libraries open to students and scholars. These two research institutions together with the funds of the Tilden Trust, established in 1886 by the will of Samuel J. Tilden (1814-1886), a former governor of New York, were consolidated in 1895 to form the New York Public Library. Despite these resources in research libraries, the reading needs of the general public, especially the poor and immigrant population, went largely unmet by any institution through most of the 19th century.

The influence of 19th-century moralistic philosophies is apparent in the earliest private efforts to provide free reading to the public. Most of the early public libraries were the philanthropic efforts of wealthy New Yorkers interested in aiding and encouraging the self-education of the poor. Libraries were seen as an agent to the improvement of the city as well as the lot of the poor. The historian Sidney Ditzion recounts that "the story of how a local library branch had driven a neighboring saloon out of business demonstrated one practical result of opening branches." The earliest of the philanthropic efforts in the city was the New York Free Circulating Library founded in 1878 and incorporated in 1880 with the express purpose, according to the First Annual Report (1880), of providing "moral and intellectual elevation of the masses." During its first few years the library grew impressively, and the board of the Library began discussing the possibility of establishing branches in the various neighborhoods of New York. The Second Annual Report of the New York Free Circulating Library (1880-81) stated that:

It is proposed to establish small libraries, located in the centers of the poorest and most thickly settled districts of the city. The books are to be selected with special reference to the wants of each community, carefully excluding all works of doubtful influence for good.

The first branch of the New York Free Circulating Library, the Ottendorfer Branch, was formally opened on December 7, 1884. One of the very first buildings in New York City to be designed specifically as a public library, it was the gift of Oswald and Anna Ottendorfer to the people of the Lower East Side.

The Ottendorfers

The library and the German Dispensary next door were among numerous charitable gifts of the Ottendorfers. Anna Ottendorfer (1815-1884) had immigrated to New York in 1844 with her first husband, Jacob Uhl, a printer. They purchased the German language newspaper, the New Yorker Staats Zeitung a weekly paper founded in 1834 (and still published today). At the death of her husband in 1853, Anna inherited the paper, by then a thriving daily publication, and six years later, married Oswald Ottendorfer, editor-in-chief since 1858. Oswald Ottendorfer (1826-1900) was educated at the Universities of Vienna and Prague and was politically active in Austria. After the Revolution of 1848 failed, he fled to Switzerland, and in 1850 to the United States. He worked first as a laborer and then joined the staff of the Staats Zeitung. Under his management the newspaper continued to grow in popularity, and was a highly respected, conservative paper, "severly classic in tone." By the 1870s the Staats Zeitung was housed in an elaborate building on "Newspaper Row" (Tryon Row, now the site of the Municipal Building). Ottendorfer, a leading citizen within the German community of the city, was politically influential both at the local and national levels. In 1872 he was a New York City alderman, and in 1874 as a staunchly anti-Tammany Democrat he ran unsuccessfully for Mayor. Both Ottendorfers were deeply concerned with philanthropic projects, although Mrs. Ottendorfer was more directly involved in their execution. She helped fund German schools in the city, gave a wing -- The Women's Pavilion -- to the German Hospital, and established the Isabella Home in Astoria (now located on Amsterdam Avenue and 190th Street in Manhattan). The Home, named in memory of her daughter who died as a young woman, was an institution which cared for aged and indigent German women.

The Ottendorfer Library and the German Dispensary were the joint gifts of the Ottendorfers. Mrs. Ottendorfer acquired the land in 1883 and commissioned the architect William Schickel to design a dispensary building. According to Oswald Ottendorfer in his speech at the opening ceremony, the land was sufficient for an additional building and it was decided to erect a library in conjunction with the Dispensary, thereby serving both the physical and mental well-being of the German community.

In November of 1883 the German Empress Augusta honored Anna Ottendorfer for her philanthropic work by presenting her with a silver medal of merit and a citation. Unfortunately Mrs. Ottendorfer died in early 1884, before the opening of either the Dispensary or the Ottendorfer Library. The dedication on May 27, 1884 of the Dispensary was also a memorial service for her. The opening of the Library on December 7 of the same year was well attended by leading members of the German community in New York, including the famous German-born statesman and politician, Carl Schurz (1829-1906), a personal friend of the Ottendorfers.

On January 10, 1884, -- even before construction was completed -- the Ottendorfers officially turned the library over to the New York Free Circulating Library and the Board of Trustees promptly named the building after the donors. Oswald Ottendorfer personally selected the first books for

the library. Numbering some 8,000, the books were equally divided between English and German titles. Ottendorfer also provided the library with an initial endowment of \$10,000, which he frequently augmented by additional gifts in later years. Ottendorfer's purpose in establishing the bilingual library was multi-fold. He not only wished to provide German reading material for the immigrant population, but also hoped that "they would naturally be attracted from the German books to those in English." He also hoped that the library would serve the needs of Americans interested in the German language. Like the Dispensary building, the Library was aimed at uplifting the community and easing the assimilation of the German population into American society.

Development of the Library System

The New York Free Circulating Library was supported wholly by private funds until public funding was added to its budget under state legislation in 1887. Many prominent and wealthy New Yorkers helped to further the library including Andrew Carnegie, J.P. Morgan, Cornelius Vanderbilt, Jacob H. Schiff, and Henry G. Marquand. Both Oswald Ottendorfer and John Jacob Astor, the son of the founder of the Astor Library, served for many years on the Board of Trustees. During the next seventeen years (1884-1901) the New York Free Circulating Library grew tremendously, adding branches in various parts of the city, increasing circulation impressively, and benefiting by increased public support and state funds. It was the desire of the trustees that the library serve the general public, and many, including a writer in the New York Times of 1884, saw the emerging system in just such terms:

The substantial growth of the New York Free Circulating Library since its modest beginning, four years ago, has made it clear that its founders and promoters have already laid the cornerstone of the city's future great free library.

By 1901 when the New York Free Circulating Library was incorporated with several smaller free circulating libraries in the city to form the Circulation Department of the New York Public Library (now the Branch Libraries System), the system had eleven branches throughout Manhattan and over 1,600,000 volumes, as well as a traveling branch. The Ottendorfer Library had also changed somewhat during that time, reflecting changing concepts of the social function of the small neighborhood library. Originally designed with cast-iron stacks and a circulation desk on the main floor, the library was somewhat remodeled in the late 1890s to experiment with the open-shelf system. It had been felt by the founders that the poor population which used the library could not be trusted to use an open library, but the pride and responsibility that was taken in the use of the collection led to such democratizing innovations. The original bindery of the New York Free Circulating Library was installed in the basement of the Ottendorfer Branch and began functioning in 1887; for many years it was the central bindery for the New York Public Library System as well. The

second floor of the library was originally designed with a separate reading room for the use of women. In 1900 a special children's room was established there as part of an attempt to increase service to children and encourage reading from an early age.

The Carnegie grant of the early 20th century resulted in a large scale construction of neighborhood branch libraries and is largely responsible for the New York Public Library System as it is today. As a forerunner of these later libraries, the Ottendorfer is an important example of the earliest philanthropic efforts on behalf of the popular education of the public.

Architectural Analysis and Description

At the dedication ceremony for the German Dispensary, Mr. Ottendorfer noted that his wife had taken a great interest in the construction of both the Dispensary and the Library and that she herself had selected the architect. William Schickel (1850-1907) was a native of Germany where he received his architectural training. At the age of twenty he emigrated to New York and worked as a draftsman for several architectural firms, including that of the well-known architect Richard Morris Hunt. In the 1880s Schickel established his own office and designed, in addition to the German Dispensary and the Ottendorfer Library, the Stuart Residence on Fifth Avenue at 68th Street (1881) and a building for St. Vincent's Hospital (1882). Schickel enlarged his firm calling it Schickel & Company in the late 1880s, and during this period designed several notable buildings such as the brick commercial structure, No. 93-99 Prince Street, now within the SoHo-Cast Iron Historic District, the Constable Building on Fifth Avenue of 1893 -- a handsome neo-Renaissance office building adjacent to the former Arnold Constable Department Store, and the Jefferson Building on West 23rd Street, an impressive structure of brick with terra-cotta trim. By 1896 Schickel had taken Isaac L. Ditmars as partner. The firm's most noted work was in church architecture of which numerous examples can be found in both Manhattan and Brooklyn, including the magnificent Church of St. Ignatius Loyola (1895-1900) on Park Avenue, a designated New York City Landmark.

The Stuyvesant Polyclinic and Ottendorfer Library were constructed together in 1883-1884 and are united in appearance by their materials and a number of design elements such as the alignment of floor levels and round-arched fenestration. Although both buildings are three stories in height, the Ottendorfer Library is smaller in overall height and width and more modest in its use of decorative detail. The library is an interesting and personal combination of elements from several late Victorian building styles, although many of its details such as the very clear separation of each of the three floors by decorative friezes are ultimately derived from Italian Renaissance sources. The contrast of deep red Philadelphia pressed brick with dark mortar joints and terra-cotta trim and the manipulation of classical details are common features of late Victorian architecture and of the Queen Anne style.

It is interesting to note that all the ornamental detail is executed in molded terra cotta, a building material then only recently introduced to New York. In the rebuilding of Chicago after the Great Fire of 1871 much architectural terra cotta had been used; whereas, in New York City it was not generally used until late in the 1870s. The first important building to employ terra cotta was designed by the eminent architect George B. Post. His Long Island Historical Society Building in Brooklyn Heights of 1880 is richly ornamented with terra-cotta and includes a series of portrait busts, like those on Schickel's richly decorated Dispensary Building.

The manufacturer employed by both Post and Schickel was the Perth Amboy Terra-Cotta Company, established in 1879. Schickel in using terra cotta so extensively for the Ottendorfer Library and the Dispensary ranks among the first architects in New York to make important use of this building material, which was to become popular by the turn of the century.

Although in scale and composition the facade of the Ottendorfer Library is similar to residential buildings, the broad arched entryway and the ornamental detail clearly distinguish this modestly scaled structure as a public building. The most interesting feature is the broad elliptically-arched entryway, at once monumental and inviting, with its infill of glass and iron. The broad, low stoop leading to the double doors is flanked by delicate curvilinear wrought-iron railings with spiral newel posts. The glazed entryway is subdivided by iron pilasters with overlapping medallions and a wide ornate iron transom bar with shells and fleur-de-lis details. French windows with iron grilles and pressed metal spandrel panels flank the central doors with their grilled transom. The broad arch is articulated by an enframingent of molded bricks and a terra-cotta arch with an egg-and-dart molding. The line of the transom bar is continued by terra-cotta band courses which flank the arch. Much of the ornamental detail of this broad entrance alludes to the function of the building and its role in the community. Urns and books, symbolic of learning, ornament the spandrel panels below the windows. Cartouches and urns are set in the floriated ornament of the terra-cotta arch. The terra-cotta band course is embellished by owls and globes, symbolizing wisdom and knowledge.

The terra-cotta entablature with its projecting cornice on corbel blocks further reinforces the symbolism of this entryway. The frieze which separates the first and second stories has floriated ornament with carved cherub heads flanking an unfurled scroll with the German inscription "Freie Bibliothek u. nd Lesehalle." (Free Library and Reading Room). An egg-and-dart molding extends across the facade above this frieze.

The second and third floors are very similar in organization and decorative embellishment. Each floor has three tall, narrow round-arched windows, eight feet in height, articulated by molded brick enframingents and terra-cotta voussoirs embellished by cartouches. These windows

echo the form of the paired windows on the adjacent Polyclinic building, and are further articulated by smooth flanking band courses set just above the terra-cotta entablatures. The frieze between the second and third floor is ornamented with hemispheres and cartouches as well as an egg-and-dart molding. The friezes separating each floor give a strong horizontal emphasis to the building in contrast to the vertical accents of the tall windows.

A terra-cotta frieze with panels of relief carving with wreaths and garlands, outlined by egg-and-dart and bead-and-reel moldings extends across the facade below the overhanging sheetmetal cornice. Supported on richly embellished terra-cotta brackets, this cornice handsomely crowns the facade.

The careful detailing and skillfully handled proportions of the Ottendorfer Library immediately distinguish this building. It remains much as it was when the Ottendorfers presented it to the New York Free Circulating Library in 1884. The Library is today as then a source of pride to its diverse neighborhood. It still attracts readers from all over the city and offers a variety of reading material in foreign languages with particular strength in its German collection, which includes many of the original books donated by Oswald Ottendorfer. As both an architectural and historical landmark, the Ottendorfer continues to play an active role in the life of the community.

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 Ottendorfer Branch of the New York Public Library 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 Ottendorfer Branch Library is a particularly interesting and personal interpretation of the Queen Anne style by the German-born architect William Schickel, that the use of terra-cotta on the facade was innovative when the building was constructed, that the library in combination with the adjoining Polyclinic was intended to "promote the bodily and mental health" of immigrants in New York City, that the Ottendorfer is the oldest branch in the New York Public Library system still in its original building and one of the oldest buildings in the city designed specifically as a public library, that it played an important role in the public library movement in New York in the late 19th century, that the building was the gift of two German immigrants who were important and influential figures in New York and noted philanthropists, that the building has long been associated with the German community in New York, that the Library provided reading material and knowledge for immigrants, and that it continues to play a vital role in community life today.

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 a Landmark the Ottendorfer Branch, New York Public Library, 135 Second Avenue, and designates as its related Landmark Site that part of the Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 464, Lot 37, on which the described building is situated.