

RICHMOND COUNTY COURTHOUSE, Richmond Terrace, Borough of Staten Island.
Designed 1913; built 1913-1919; architects Carrère & Hastings.

Landmark Site: Borough of Staten Island Tax Map Block 7, Lot 12.

On September 9, 1980, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Richmond County Courthouse 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. Four witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Richmond County Courthouse is an impressive temple-fronted building set on Richmond Terrace in Staten Island's civic center. Designed in 1913 by the prominent American architectural firm of Carrère & Hastings, this structure is part of a grand scheme of governmental buildings initiated by Staten Island's first borough president, George Cromwell. The L-shaped courthouse stands to the north of Carrère & Hastings' Borough Hall and is separated from it by a formal French garden planned by the architects as an integral part of the courthouse design. Together Borough Hall and the Richmond County Courthouse form an imposing gateway to Staten Island, visible to all who arrive on the island on the ferry.

Prior to Staten Island's incorporation into New York City, its governmental seat was located at Richmondtown. The first courthouse was erected in Richmondtown in 1729 at the corner of present day Richmond Road and Richmond Hill Road. This building was replaced in 1794 by a new courthouse at Arthur Kill Road. In 1837 the Third County Courthouse was built. This Greek Revival temple-fronted structure remained in use until 1920 and is now the administration building of the Richmondtown Restoration. Consolidation in 1898 brought with it the abolition of the incorporated villages of Richmond County and the end of county government. Borough-wide civic offices were moved from Richmondtown to St. George because St. George was situated in a more convenient location. It was easily accessible from Manhattan's Civic Center and was the terminus of the ferry lines to Manhattan and of the island's growing mass transit system.

Staten Island Borough Hall was the first major building erected in the new civic center. When completed in 1906 the Borough Hall had "to hobnob with wooden and brick structures of no distinction whatever."¹ Borough President George Cromwell envisioned the transformation of this area of Staten Island into a grand governmental center. He was "determined to make the approach to it [Staten Island] as notable in its architectural features as it is already in its natural surroundings."² Cromwell, the first borough president of Staten Island, remained in office for five terms, from 1898 to 1913. He planned to buy all of the land along present-day Richmond Terrace (then Jay Street) between Park Square and

Borough Place and build a series of public buildings "each harmonizing with the other and each standing in a garden of its own. By this means he would create overlooking the Bay a noble row of municipal and governmental offices which would add dignity to this end of Staten Island."³ Besides the County Courthouse, Cromwell hoped to see the construction of a Federal Building and Post Office and a home for the Staten Island Museum. Unfortunately these buildings were not built. John M. Carrère of the architectural firm of Carrère & Hastings, designers of Borough Hall, chose the site for the new civic buildings, and did the general layout of the area. The choice of Carrère to aid in the planning of the new civic center was appropriate since he was the most prominent architect residing on the island. The firm of Carrère & Hastings was closely involved with the development of the new governmental center, designing the Borough Hall (1903-1906), the new ferry terminal (1904, burned), the Richmond County Courthouse (1913-1919), and the St. George Branch of the New York Public Library at 10 Hyatt Street, as well as other public libraries throughout the borough.

John Mervin Carrère (1858-1911) and Thomas Hastings (1860-1929) were the leading American exponents of the design philosophy of the French Ecole des Beaux-Arts, while both men had attended the Ecole in the late 1870s and early 1880s, each architect belonged to a different atelier and they did not meet until after their graduation when both were employed by the office of McKim, Mead & White. In 1885 the two architects established a partnership, first renting space in a small back room of McKim, Mead & White's office and then moving to an old Federal style residence at 3 Bowling Green. According to David Gray, who wrote a biography of Hastings in 1933, it was Hastings who did most of the firm's design work, while Carrère managed the office and negotiated with clients and contractors.⁴

The firm's earliest commissions were from real estate developer Henry Flagler. Flagler was a friend and parishioner of Thomas Hastings' father, the Rev. Docotr Thomas Hastings, minister of the West Presbyterian Church in New York and president of the Union Theological Seminary. For Flagler, Carrère & Hastings designed the Ponce de Leon and Alcazar Hotels in St. Augustine, "Whitehall," the Flagler estate in Palm Beach, and several churches. Flagler's patronage established the success of the firm and commissions for residences, churches, hotels, and office buildings followed. In 1891 Carrère & Hastings gained prominence for the design they submitted to the competition for the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. The proposal placed second to Heins & LaFarge's winning scheme. It was, however, their winning design in the New York Public Library competition that established Carrère & Hastings as one of the leading firms in the United States.

Most of the buildings designed by Carrère & Hastings were in the French Renaissance tradition. Borough Hall is one of the finest examples of their French-inspired work. Only occasionally did Carrère & Hastings design buildings based on other stylistic modes. The Richmond County Courthouse, designed after Carrère's death, is unusual in the firm's oeuvre because it shows the influence of Roman Classical, Italian Renaissance, and Northern Renaissance architecture. The courthouse does not imitate a specific Classical or Renaissance structure, but reflects Hastings' belief that contemporary architecture should adapt past work to modern needs. The courthouse design shows that Hastings was familiar with the Roman Pantheon, but the building is not a copy of it. Hastings borrowed classical details from the Pantheon, such as the Corinthian temple front, alternating bands of wide and narrow rustication, and upper story pilasters, which are combined with rusticated wall surfaces and rhythmically placed pedimented windows. These fixtures resemble elements on Roman palazzi of the early sixteenth century, which in turn were based on classical precedents.

All of these details and forms are used to create a courthouse that clearly dates from the early twentieth century.

The use of a temple front, an architectural motif that had come to be associated with justice, clearly placed the building within the tradition of courthouse design, while the details borrowed from the Pantheon, the greatest of all surviving Roman monuments, symbolized the importance of Roman law for the American legal system. The temple-fronted courthouse had been popular in America since the earliest days of the republic and the form was used extensively in the early years of the twentieth century, culminating the design for the United States Supreme Court in 1935.

The courthouse has a formal dignity that is enhanced by the geometrically-arranged French garden set on raised terraces along the harbor frontage. These formal parterres, terraces, and fountains were planned to create a green area that would break up the stretch of grand municipal buildings that Carrère and Cromwell envisioned for the area.

The main entrance to the L-shaped limestone courthouse is on Richmond Terrace. Infrequently used today, this entry is marked by a pedimented temple front supported by six giant Corinthian columns that project from the face of the building and are flanked by recessed Corinthian pilasters. The columns are set at the top of a long flight of steps in much the same way as the colonnaded front of a Roman temple. The wall of the front elevation is coursed with rusticated limestone laid in alternating wide and narrow bands. A massive entrance enframing surrounds wooden double doors and a bronze transom. The side walls of the entrance porch have arches, the ceiling is coffered, and a Greek key band runs along the walls at the level of the column capitals.

The north and south elevations of the main mass of the courthouse are similar to one another. Each facade is marked by a pair of pilasters that form the transition between the temple front and the rusticated wall area. These pilasters take the place of the open colonnade on the side elevation of Roman temples. The seven-window wide sides have smooth limestone bases. The first floor of each elevation is heavily rusticated and is articulated by rectangular windows. The rusticated second stories have alternating simple rectangular windows and pedimented windows set above balustrades. An attic story lit by small rectangular windows is located below the projecting cornices. A balustrade runs along the roofline.

The ell, which fronts onto the garden, is divided into eight window bays, articulated by a heavily rusticated ground floor. The two end bays and the single bay closest to the main court building project slightly and are punctuated by second floor windows with pediments and balustrades. The five central bays are marked by Corinthian pilasters that separate rectangular windows and carved plaques. A full cornice, a balustrade, and a hipped roof crown the building. The side elevations of the extension are seven bay wide with plain and pedimented windows.

The rusticated rear facade, which now functions as the main entrance to the courthouse, is thirteen windows wide. The focal point of this elevation is the massive entry enframing with its Northern Renaissance inspired portico with banded columns, Doric frieze, and bracketed cornice. This portico is attached to a rusticated wall surface pierced with a round-arched entrance into which have been set pairs of wooden and bronze doors. To either side of the entrance are four window bays simply articulated by rectangular windows. The two end bays on either side project slightly and have pedimented window

enframements on the first floor.

The formal French garden on Richmond Terrace is one of the most unusual features of the courthouse. This beautifully planned and laid out open space was designed by Hastings in such a way as to set off the courthouse, giving it greater monumentality. The garden is laid out on three levels and is landscaped with a combination of formal parterres, paved walks, sculpted elements, and fountains in a manner typical of seventeenth and eighteenth-century French gardens. The lower level is a narrow grassy strip that runs along Richmond Terrace. It is separated from the main garden by a stone wall with balustrade. This wall is interrupted by stairs and by a pair of handsome fountains. Each fountain has a stone urn, a basin, and representational sculpture in the form of shells, dolphins, and cascading water. The major garden expanse includes grassy areas and paved walks. A stone retaining wall separates this section from the upper garden with its handsome Renaissance fountain. This fountain is in the form of a monumental stone structure supported by Doric columns and crowned by a segmental arch embellished with a cartouche. A lion's head is set within a niche and water gushes from it into a series of basins. Unfortunately this garden, which is unique in New York City, is poorly maintained. With only a minimal amount of care this could be one of Staten Island's most beautiful open spaces.

The Richmond County Courthouse remains one of New York City's most impressive judicial buildings. It stands as a symbol of justice and rule by law and, along with the neighboring Borough Hall, it forms the centerpiece of Staten Island's civic center.

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FOOTNOTES

1. New York Times, March 31, 1912, part 5, p. 9.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. David Gray, Thomas Hastings Architect (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1933), p. 30.

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 Richmond County Courthouse 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 Richmond County Courthouse is an imposing civic structure representative of justice and rule of law; that it is a major presence in Staten Island's civic center; that it was designed by Carrere & Hastings, one of the leading architectural firms in America at the turn of the century; that it is an unusual design in Carrere & Hastings oeuvre, using Italian Renaissance and Classical forms rather than French Renaissance forms; that the building is graced by a formal French garden which is one of the most unusual and beautifully designed open spaces in the city; and that the building with its impressive, temple front is visible to all who arrive in Staten Island on the ferry.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Richmond County Courthouse, Borough of Staten Island and designates Tax Map Block 7, Lot 12, Borough of Staten Island, as its Landmark Site.

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Photo: Carl Forster

RICHMOND COUNTY COURTHOUSE
(East Elevation and Garden)
Built 1913-19

Architect: Carrère & Hastings



RICHMOND COUNTY COURTHOUSE
(West and South Elevations)
Built 1913-19

Photo: Carl Forster

Architect: Carrère & Hastings