

STATEN ISLAND BOROUGH HALL, Richmond Terrace, Borough of Staten Island.
Designed 1903, built 1904-1906; architects Carrère & Hastings.

Landmark Site: Borough of Staten Island Tax Map Block 7, Lot 1.

On September 9, 1980, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Staten Island Borough Hall and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 4). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Five witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Borough Hall, Staten Island's grandest civic monument, was designed in 1903, five years after the consolidation of Greater New York. The magnificent structure was the work of Carrère & Hastings, one of the leading architectural firms in New York at the turn of the century. The building is a testament to the belief of the firm's partners that French Renaissance design, as adapted to American needs, was the most appropriate style for that period. The brick and stone building, dramatically sited on a hill above the St. George terminal, is visible to all who arrive in Staten Island by ferry, and its tall clocktower is a welcoming beacon to resident and visitor alike.

Prior to Staten Island's incorporation into New York City, its governmental seat was located at Richmondtown, near the center of the island. Established as the county seat in 1729, Richmondtown became the site of the county court, the county clerk and surrogate office, public stocks, and a jail. Consolidation in 1898 brought with it the abolition of the incorporated villages of Richmond County and the end of county government. Civic offices to serve the new borough were moved from Richmondtown to St. George because the latter 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. Prior to the construction of Borough Hall, civic offices were located in the Richmond Building on the corner of Richmond Terrace and York Avenue in New Brighton. In 1904 construction began on the new building and the New York Times wrote:

Staten Island formally acknowledged, declared, and gloried yesterday afternoon that she was an integral part of the Greater New York on the occasion of the laying of the cornerstone of the Richmond Borough Hall at St. George.¹

Designed with a scale and grandeur that rivaled that of City Hall, Brooklyn Borough Hall (formally Brooklyn City Hall), and the new Borough Hall in the Bronx, Staten Island's Borough Hall was to be a symbol of the unified borough and a source of pride to all Staten Island residents. The commission for the new Borough Hall design was awarded to the prestigious firm of Carrère & Hastings. The firm was an appropriate choice for this civic monument since John Carrère was the most prominent architect residing on the island. Carrère, who was closely involved with the development of Staten Island's new civic center,

aided in the choice of sites for the borough's new buildings, and Carrère & Hastings designed the new ferry terminal (1904, burned), the County Court-house (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 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.² The firm's earliest commissions were from real estate developer Henry Flagler. Flagler was a friend and parishioner of Thomas Hastings' father, the Rev. Doctor 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 work designed by Carrère & Hastings was in the French Renaissance tradition and this accorded with the philosophy espoused by Thomas Hastings in his numerous articles and lectures. Hastings believed that American life was still motivated by the forces that had brought about the Renaissance. He saw himself as a Renaissance architect and believed that only architecture based on Renaissance precedents was applicable to modern building.³ These forms were seen as appropriate to contemporary culture, while the use of styles other than those of the Renaissance was inappropriate. He noted, in a 1913 lecture, that "the irrational idiosyncrasy of modern times is the assumption that each kind of problem demands a particular style of architecture"⁴ and believed that the use of medieval styles "has shown a want of life and spirit, simply because it is an anachronism."⁵

It was Hastings' belief that architects needed to be educated in one style and that this should be a style that reflected their own time. This style, however, should not be an imitation of past architecture, but an adaptation of past work to modern needs. Hastings chose to adapt French Renaissance precedents because he felt that only in France was architecture "consistently modern."⁶ To Hastings, French architecture had evolved a style that was distinctly representative of the nineteenth century. This was because of the "high classic standard of study which has...always been adhered to by the authorities in the art schools."⁷

An overview of the Carrère & Hastings oeuvre shows how closely they worked within this philosophy. Almost all of their work is based on French Renaissance prototypes, and it shows the influence of the educational system of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. The New York Public Library, with its classical forms, bold carving, and union of architecture, sculpture, painting, and the decorative arts is the firm's most famous Beaux-Arts design, but city and country residences, churches,

office buildings, government buildings, and other works by Carrère & Hastings also reflect a consistent design outlook with roots in the French Renaissance. Among the major French-inspired works designed by Carrère & Hastings are the Henry T. Sloane residence (1894-1896) at 9 East 72nd Street, the Henry Hammond residence (1902-1903) at 9 East 91st Street, the arch and colonnade approach to the Manhattan Bridge (1912-1915), and the Frick Collection (1913-1914) at 1 East 70th Street, and indeed, the majority of the firm's buildings show the influence of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French design. Occasionally Carrère & Hastings designed works in other Renaissance-inspired styles. For example, Hastings showed an interest in English architecture, particularly evident in the Fort Washington Presbyterian Church (1914), 21 Wadsworth Avenue at West 174th Street. In addition, Italian Renaissance precedents are prominent at the Richmond County Courthouse.

The Staten Island Borough Hall is one of a small number of buildings modeled after the early Renaissance architecture popular late in the reign of Henry IV (1589-1610) and during the reign of Louis XIII (1610-1643). Such buildings are sober, severe structures with little of the luxurious ornament seen on buildings designed in other French-inspired modes. It is an economical design mode that made use of inexpensive and durable materials used in a manner that rationally expressed a building's use and structure. The buildings are frequently characterized by an extensive use of brick, contrasting stone trim, heavy classical ornamental forms, and steep mansard roofs punctuated by dormers. These features are evident in one of the great monuments of French Renaissance architecture, the Place des Vosges (1605) in Paris, as well as at such chateaux as Guermantes (early 17th century), Courances (after 1622), and Balleroy (1626-1636). This style was used by the firm for a number of prominent residential structures. Of particular note are the William Starr Miller residence (1912-1914), a town house located at 1048 Fifth Avenue and East 86th Street, and three grand country estates -- "Blairsdon" (1898), the C. Ledyard Blair house in Peapack, New Jersey, the Walter Jennings residence (1897) in Cold Spring Harbor, New York, and the Giraud Foster residence (1897) in Lenox, Massachusetts.

The Staten Island Borough Hall is perhaps Carrère & Hastings' finest work based on Early French Renaissance precedents. It is not known why Carrère & Hastings chose Early French Renaissance brick architecture as the model for this structure rather than the stone architecture they utilized in the design of four other major governmental buildings. Prior to the Staten Island commission, Carrère & Hastings had entered the competitions for the City Hall at Worcester, Massachusetts and for the Rhode Island State Capitol (winning neither commission), and they had designed and built the City Hall at Paterson, New Jersey. Shortly after the completion of the Staten Island building they received the commission for the new City Hall at Portland, Maine.

All of these buildings rely on French Renaissance precedents. There are several possible explanations for the choice of the Louis XIII mode for the Staten Island work. Although design specifications have been lost, the program may have required a brick building since the manufacture of brick was a major industry on Staten Island. In addition, the use of Early French Renaissance forms may have been a reference to Staten Island's early settlers, many of whom were French Huguenots. The Huguenots were particularly prominent in French life early in the seventeenth century.

Despite the differences in style and material, Carrère & Hastings' three completed municipal buildings have a great deal in common and reflect the firm's ability to adapt Renaissance forms to contemporary uses. The Staten Island and Portland buildings are quite similar in their basic massing. Both have massive central pavilions crowned by mansard roofs, each has projecting wings that form an open court at the front elevation, each is entered via an imposing flight of steps,

and both are surmounted by clock towers that form the focal point of their respective civic centers. The Paterson building is smaller than those of Staten Island and Portland. It has extremely shallow wings, but is also crowned by a tall clock tower. The three buildings were modeled after French Renaissance Hotels de ville (city halls) such as that at Lyon. The Lyon building is a three-story structure with a central pavilion, projecting wings, and a tower. Carrère & Hastings' scrapbooks, which are preserved at the New York Public Library, contain an illustration of the Lyon building⁸ and it is probable that both architects had visited it during their long stays in France.

Although clearly modeled on Louis XIII design precedents, the ornament of the Staten Island Borough Hall is not as bold as that on Early French Renaissance prototypes. The building is an imposing structure with crisply modeled detailing that gives it the softer, more elegant tone, appropriate to a twentieth-century civic symbol. The main entrance to the building faces Richmond Terrace and New York harbor. Infrequently used today, the entrance is reached by climbing twenty steps to a courtyard, and then proceeding, via a narrow flight of stairs to a round-arched entrance. The stairs and courtyard are ornamented by bronze lamp standards. The five-bay wide projecting central pavilion is constructed primarily of smooth limestone. On the first story, the round-arched central entrance is flanked by four segmental-arched windows. The base supports six engaged Doric columns set in antis between two wide limestone piers. The columns are linked by stone balustrades that rise in front of the recessed second-floor windows. The wall surfaces between the stone columns are constructed of red brick laid in Flemish bond and the windows are set within heavy limestone enframements. The window enframements of the second floor are ornamented with foliate brackets, fasces friezes, and projecting lintels. The colonnade supports a Doric frieze, projecting cornice, and a balustrade. A two-story mansard with slate shingles rises above the balustrade. The base of the mansard is articulated by five segmental-arched dormers, while five small shed dormers have been placed above.

Flanking the central pavilion are one-bay wide sections that serve as transitional links between the main pavilion and the side wings. These connectors are recessed and give a sense of plasticity to the facade that is not always evident on the Early French Renaissance prototypes. Each of these sections has a round-arched entrance, heavy limestone window enframements, and an oeil-de-boeuf dormer projecting from the mansard.

The projecting wings are extremely simple in their massing and detail. Each has a limestone base that extends around the front, side, and rear elevations. Above this base, the walls are faced with brick and punctuated by limestone window enframements; each wing is crowned by a mansard lit by pedimented and shed dormers.

The original rear elevation of the Borough Hall, facing onto Stuyvesant Place and St. George, is now used as the main entrance to the building. This elevation is simpler in its detailing than the front facade. The main mass is a seven-bay wide central pavilion set on a limestone base. The central bay has a rectangular entrance topped by a slab lintel. A flight of nine steps leads to the doorway. Four two-story window bays with limestone trim flank the entrance. Pairs of rusticated limestone piers, each separated by a tall rectangular window, mark the ends of the central pavilion. The use of rusticated piers to give added emphasis to a building was a popular Early French Renaissance design motif. A simple stone cornice rises above the second floor and forms the base for an attic story which is a transitional element between the lower floors and the mansard and tower. The mansard is lit by four small shed dormers and its mass is broken by the tall square brick tower that rises flush with the main Stuyvesant Place facade. The tower is ornamented by a single stone balcony and is topped by a stone frieze and a crowning balustrade and flagpole. The most prominent features of the tower

are the clocks on the east and west fronts; each clock face is set within a foliate surround and each is placed beneath a pediment that is supported by elongated brackets.

The general form of the Staten Island Borough Hall is the same today as it was on May 21, 1906 when it was first occupied. Exterior changes to the building are limited to the replacement of all of the original wood window sash by aluminum windows, the addition of a ramp for the handicapped on Stuyvesant Place, and the placement of three bronze plaques near this entrance. The finest of the three plaques is a World War I memorial designed by A. Weinert. The other plaques commemorate Verazzano's discovery of Staten Island and Commodore John Barry, father of the American Navy.

Although not part of this designation, certain features of the interior of Borough Hall are noteworthy. Of particular importance are a series of murals and reliefs, commissioned as part of the Works Progress Administration's arts projects. The thirteen murals painted by local artist Frederick Charles Stahr in 1940, depict outstanding events in the history of Staten Island and include such scenes as the Huguenot settlement of Staten Island, the evacuation of British troops, the erection of Fort Tompkins, the first steam railroad on the island, and the opening of the Bayonne Bridge. The sculpted classical reliefs placed above the murals are ancient and modern personifications of the various branches of science, education, industry, and civic development.

When it was completed, the imposing Borough Hall had "to hobnob with wooden and brick structures of no distinction whatever."⁹ It was the dream of Staten Island's first Borough President, George Cromwell, to build a major civic center in the surrounding area. Over the next decades Cromwell's vision came to fruition with the construction of court buildings, a police station, and a post office. The Borough Hall stands prominently as Staten Island's greatest Beaux-Arts monument. It is one of the few high-style edifices erected on the island and its design is a tribute to John Carrère and his interest in the design of the borough's civic center. When it was built, Borough Hall represented the civic aspirations of Staten Island's residents. In recent years Staten Island's importance has increased dramatically and today the building stands not only as a reminder of those civic aspirations, but also as a symbol of Staten Island's prominent position in New York City.

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FOOTNOTES

1. New York Times, May 22, 1904, p. 5.
2. David Gray, Thomas Hastings Architect (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1933), p. 30.
3. Gray, p. 32.
4. Thomas Hastings, "Modern Architecture," paper read before the Royal Institute of British Architects, May 26, 1913, reprinted in Gray, p. 101.
5. Ibid, p. 107. An examination of Carrere & Hastings' church designs shows the firm's adherence to this philosophy. They did not design religious buildings with Gothic or Romanesque forms, but chose Renaissance forms instead. New York City's First Church of **Christ, Scientist** (1899-1903) on Central Park West and West 96th Street, with its Ionic columns, stone spire, and cartouches, is one of the best examples of this type of church.
6. Thomas Hastings, "The Influence of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts Upon American Architecture," Architectural Record, Beaux Arts Number, January 1901, p. 89.
7. Ibid.
8. "Carrere & Hastings Scrapbooks," Vol. 29.
9. New York Times, March 31, 1912, part 5, p. 9.

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 Staten Island Borough Hall 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 Staten Island Borough Hall is a major work by Carrère & Hastings, one of the leading architectural firms in America at the turn of the century; that the building reflects Carrère & Hastings' design philosophy which favored French Renaissance style precedents for contemporary buildings; that the building is an unusual work based on infrequently used Early French Renaissance precedents; that it is perhaps Carrère & Hastings' finest work in the Early French Renaissance design mode; that it was built shortly after the formation of Greater New York, as a symbol of Staten Island's civic aspirations; that its imposing position above the ferry terminal makes the building one of Staten Island's most prominent; and that today it stands as a symbol of Staten Island's importance in New York City.

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 Staten Island Borough Hall, Richmond Terrace, Borough of Staten Island and designates Tax Map Block 7, Lot 1, Borough of Staten Island, as its Landmark Site.

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"The Work of Messrs. Carrère & Hastings." Architectural Record 27 (January 1910), 1-120.



STATEN ISLAND BOROUGH HALL
(West Elevation)
Designed 1903; Built 1904-1906

Photo: Carl Forster

Architect: Carrère & Hastings



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