

SIXTY-NINTH REGIMENT ARMORY, 68 Lexington Avenue, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1904-06; architects Hunt & Hunt.

Landmarks Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 881, Lot 6.

On November 18, 1980, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 69th Regiment Armory and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 14). The hearing was continued to February 10, 1981 (Item No. 7). Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of seven witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Sixty-Ninth Regiment Armory occupies much of the block bounded by 25th and 26th Streets and Lexington and Park Avenues. Like all of the armories built in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Sixty-Ninth is a highly specialized structure built to serve as a training and marshaling center for the National Guard. Designed by noted architects Hunt & Hunt in 1904-06, the building consists of the two standard elements of armory design: an administration building fronting on Lexington Avenue and a vast drill shed rising behind. Earlier armories had been designed in medieval styles, making use of fortress imagery. The Sixty-Ninth Regiment Armory, however, is recognized as the first of this building type to reject the medieval fortress prototype, employing instead a classically inspired design, still military in aspect, that is thoroughly expressive of its function. The armory is notable as the home of "The Fighting 69th," New York City's only official "Irish Regiment." It achieved further renown as the site of the legendary "Armory Show" of 1913 which brought national attention to the newest art forms of modern European and American artists.

New York City Armories

Following the Civil War, an increase in enrollment in the militia and the development of new and heavier military equipment led the State of New York to require by law that each county provide suitable armories for its volunteer regiments. By 1900, New York City held the foremost position in the organized funding and erection of armories through the work of the Armory Board of the City of New York.

Created in 1884 to support state-wide public defense efforts, the board acted quickly to improve the city's then deficient facilities, for the training of the militia and the storage of arms.¹ Prior to 1884 only one of Manhattan's eight regiments had its own armory headquarters.² Other National Guard units met and drilled in public markets, city arsenals, or rented loft space until funds from armory bonds were appropriated by the new board for the erection of suitable and permanent quarters for each of the city's regiments.

Stylistically, the armories that began to dot the grid of Manhattan in the late nineteenth century were modeled after the medieval fortress-like Seventh Regiment Armory of 1880 (a designated New York City Landmark located at 643 Park Avenue). The Sixty-Ninth Regiment Armory, completed in 1906, was the first to reject the picturesque medieval prototype. The building's internal organization is not hidden behind turrets, towers and crenellated parapets that marked earlier armories but is clearly expressed on the exterior.

While post-1906 armories erected in other boroughs and in other cities continued to incorporate medievalisms in their design, the three armories built in Manhattan after 1906 were, like the Sixty-Ninth, all of modern inspiration.³

Of the thirteen regimental armories built in Manhattan to date, seven still stand; only five still function as armories;⁴ two are designated New York City Landmarks. The red brick armory at 68 Lexington Avenue continues today to serve its original function as the home of the Sixth-Ninth Regiment of New York.

The Sixty-Ninth Regiment

Organized in 1851, the Sixty-Ninth Infantry was formed by Irish residents of New York who raised a regiment that was accepted into the State Militia, forerunner of the National Guard. Since its first call to action "the Fighting Sixty-Ninth" has served national interests with great distinction.⁵

The Sixty-Ninth Regiment fought in every major campaign of the Civil War from Bull Run to Appomattox; served in the Spanish-American War in 1898-99; and was active on the Mexican border in 1916. When the United States entered World War I in 1917, Colonel Douglas Mac Arthur selected the 69th to represent New York State in the famed 42nd Rainbow Division. Renumbered the 165th Infantry, the regiment received six campaign battle honors for its role in World War I. Among the famous Americans who served with the 69th Regiment were Colonel "Wild Bill" Donovan, Father Francis P. Duffy -- whose statue stands in Times Square, and poet Joyce Kilmer. For its distinguished service in the Pacific during World War II, the regiment received three campaign battle honors. A complete list of the Sixty-Ninth's battle honors is inscribed on the limestone tablets that are centered in each of the end pavilions of their Lexington Avenue headquarters.

The Sixty-Ninth shared quarters with purveyors at the Essex Market until 1880 when the Seventh Regiment vacated the Tompkins Market Armory at Third Avenue and Sixth Street. The cast-iron Tompkins Market (demolished in 1911) was to house the 69th for the next twenty-six years. However, in 1886, following the Regiment's request to the Armory Board, funds were appropriated and a site selection committee appointed to provide the 69th Regiment with new, permanent quarters.

The Site

The location of the new armory was determined by the site selection committee of the Armory Board. Because all earlier Manhattan armories were located above 59th Street the committee recognized the need for future armories to be erected "below 42nd Street."⁶ After rejecting the Tompkins Market site and yielding to storms of protest over the proposed acquisition of the plot occupied by the College of the City of New York at Lexington and 23rd Street,⁷ the Board finally began condemnation proceedings in 1901 to acquire land on Lexington Avenue between 25th and 26th Streets, and a competition for the design of the new armory was announced the following year.

The Sixty-Ninth Regiment Armory replaced thirty-two tenements and apartment houses⁸ which had occupied the site since the mid-nineteenth century. Land that had been part of the farm of John Watts in the 18th century,⁹ was divided and sold in the early 19th century as the area developed as a working-class neighborhood.

Hunt & Hunt

The competition for the design of the Sixty-Ninth Regiment Armory was won by the firm of Hunt & Hunt in 1903. The list of competing architects is an indication of the high level of interest in armory design commissions among prominent architects of the period. Robert W. Gibson, Grovesnor Atterbury, C.W. & A.A. Stoughton, Howells & Stokes, George B. Post and Henry J. Hardenbergh were each awarded \$500.00 as losing competitors.¹⁰

Richard and Joseph Hunt sons of noted architect Richard Morris Hunt, formed the firm of Hunt & Hunt in 1901, just a few years before the armory competition. The partnership continued for 23 years until the death of Joseph in 1924. Their father, dean of the American architectural profession through the last half of the 19th century, was the first American architect to study at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Richard Howland Hunt, the oldest son, studied architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. In 1887 he joined his father's offices as a draftsman and later become an associate. Richard Hunt completed the central unit of the Metropolitan Museum of Art after his father's death. He distinguished himself as the architect of private residences for wealthy clients. The impressive Beaux-Arts style mansion, now the Lotos Club, at 5 East 66th Street in the Upper East Side Historic District is another example of his fine work.

Joseph Howland Hunt studied at Harvard College, the School of Architecture at Columbia University, and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. His partnership with his brother began upon his return to New York in 1901. Together they continued a highly successful practice, designing distinguished country residences at Newport, Rhode Island; Tuxedo Park, New York; and on Long Island. Urban residences by Hunt & Hunt include the two Beaux-Arts houses designed for George W. Vanderbilt at 645 and 647 Fifth Avenue, known as "The Marble Twins." Only No. 647, a designated New York City Landmark, survives today.

In addition to the Sixty-Ninth Regiment Armory, Hunt & Hunt designed many institutional and educational buildings. Among them the Old Slip Police Station (a designated New York City Landmark), the Alumni Building and Williams Hall at Vassar College, Kissam Hall at Vanderbilt University, and Quintard and Hoffman Halls at Sewanee University.

The Sixty-Ninth Regiment Armory

The Sixty-Ninth Regiment Armory is an unusual example of what might be termed "Beaux-Arts Military" architecture. The armory strongly reflects the Hunt brothers' training in the academic design principles of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. The armory's symmetrical composition, monumental attic, grand arched entrance and clearly articulated parts are characteristic of a later, more refined stage of the Beaux-Arts tradition. The bold use of form, clear expression of function, and inclusion of gun bays gives the armory a decidedly military character.

In aesthetic expression, Hunt & Hunt's design represents a significant departure from the popular neo-medieval fortress mode identified with earlier armories. This unique approach to armory design was noted by architectural critic Montgomery Schuyler:

The Sixty-Ninth is of an entirely different inspiration from any of its predecessors. It seems even to be a protest and token revolt against them. It is noteworthy by the absence of the conventions of military architecture...your regular thing the architect seems to say, is not at all founded on facts, your crenelles and machicoulis are anomalies in the "present state of the art"...let us build a modern armory on modern lines. The requirements being of a great assembly room suitable for battalion drill, and of an administration building thereto, let us express them in a building. 11

This practical conception of an armory produced a comparatively unadorned brick structure that is clearly divided into two distinct sections based largely on nineteenth-century rail stations. Schuyler likens the administration building with offices and meeting rooms to a station "headhouse" while the vast drill hall is conceived of as a "train shed." The critic did not find this to be totally successful but labeled it "an interesting mistake" and praised Messrs. Hunt & Hunt for having "thoroughly carried through their conception."12

Description

The administration building extends the full length of the block along Lexington Avenue. A three-story brick structure with limestone trim, it is topped by a high two-story mansard roof. The main elements of the building's essentially symmetrical composition are two slightly projecting quoined end pavilions articulating the building's corners and a massive, deeply recessed arched entryway in the center bay. The arch is formed with concentric rows of brick headers. A sculptured winged eagle forms the keystone of the entry arch.

As there are no structural columns in the armory, the floors are carried by unusually thick walls, their massiveness emphasized by the contrasting smallness of its fenestration and by the depth of their reveals. A stone string course forms the lintels and sills of the first floor windows and continues to wrap both the administration building and drill hall providing a strong horizontal accent. At the second story, the facade is punctuated with transomed windows set in groups of three, alternating with projecting polygonal gun bays or "eyries." A large, bracketed limestone cornice tops an entablature pierced with attic windows on the Lexington Avenue facade. The cornice of the main building continues along the roof of the drill hall. A brick parapet rises above the cornice line abutting the high, two-story mansard roof that crowns the headhouse. The slate-covered roof was originally one story with circular dormer windows. In 1926 the roof was raised and windows altered. The new rectilinear and round-headed windows have classical surrounds of copper.

A small four-story wing designed to house a hospital at the southwest corner of the lot is identical in detailing to the administration building.

The great arched drill hall of the Sixty-Ninth Regiment Armory is nearly 130' in height. The hall, measuring 200' 11½" X 168' 10", has an arched roof carried by six pairs of three-hinged riveted steel trusses each with a span of 189' 8". The steelwork was executed by Milliken Bros. of New York.¹³ The innovative feature in the design of the drill hall is the method by which the trusses are carried on the exterior of the hall giving the interior a large clear span of open space. The arched roof of the shed rests on a base of brick trimmed with limestone. A skylight, now boarded over, extends the full length of the drill hall with total dimensions of 80' X 202'. The 90' arch in the east gable wall of the drill hall was the largest brick arch in the country at the time of construction.¹⁴ Originally sheathed in metal, the exterior of the drill shed roof has recently been covered with an aluminized fabric.

The Armory Show of 1913

The drill halls of New York City armories have frequently been rented for exhibition purposes. It was in this capacity that the Sixty-Ninth Regiment Armory became the site of the "International Exhibition of Modern Art" in 1913. More familiarly known as the "Armory Show," its influence on the American art world is legendary. The exhibition revolutionized America's artistic tastes and perceptions by bringing to national attention the newest art forms of modern European and American painters and sculptors.

The exhibition of close to 1,300 works of art was organized and presented by a small group of artists called the Association of American Painters and Sculptors. In selecting the place to show, the association began visiting Manhattan's armories after rejecting the old Madison Square Garden as too large and too expensive. Walt Kuhn, secretary for the group, found that the Sixty-Ninth Regiment Armory best suited the association's purpose and Colonel Conley of the Sixty-Ninth agreed to a one month lease of the drill hall on Lexington Avenue for \$5,500.00.¹⁵

A network of partitions hung with paintings formed eighteen octagonal rooms within the shell of the Armory which had been covered with bunting and streamers to provide a tent-like cap to the exhibition space. Four thousand visitors viewed the show on opening night, February 17, 1913, as Bayne's Sixth-Ninth Regiment band played from the balcony. More than 100,000 had visited before the show closed on March 17, 1913. Painters and sculptors who were among the exhibitors are today considered "masters" of modern art. Post-impressionist paintings shown for the first time in this country included the works of Cezanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin. Fauvism was represented in the paintings of Matisse and Rouault. Most provocative and alien were Cubist works exhibited by Picasso, Picabia, Bracque and Duchamp, whose "Nude Descending a Staircase" was among the most controversial paintings shown. The impressive list of American painters represented includes George Bellows, John Sloan, Maurice Prendergast, Arthur B. Davis, Walt Kuhn, John Marin, Edward Hopper and Joseph Stella.

The Armory Show that took place in the drill hall of the Sixty-Ninth Regiment is credited with changing the course of the American art movement and with establishing New York as the nation's art center.¹⁶

Conclusion

Today the Sixty-Ninth Regiment Armory serves its original function as the headquarters of and training center for the National Guard's "Fighting Sixth-Ninth" and continues to lend its drill hall for exhibition purposes. The new sheathing on the drill shed and the one-story addition to the administration building are the only major changes to the original appearance of the building. Architect George M. McCabe incorporated the additional story into the mansarded roof of the main building in a style consistent with the original Hunt & Hunt design. The alteration, completed in 1929, raised the mansard from one to two stories giving the regiment additional storage space.¹⁷

At the time of its construction in 1904, the Sixty-Ninth Regiment Armory was praised by the press as "one of the finest structures of its character in the country"¹⁸ and in retrospect it is viewed by historians as representative of:

the first step toward a modern or twentieth-century concept... more simple, restrained and honest in its exterior reflection of interior organization than any earlier example. It clearly points to the newer, more rational trends which at that time were beginning to develop in all phases of art.¹⁹

ENDNOTES

1. The Armory Board 1884-1911; Official Deliberations and Proceedings (New York: The Armory Board, 1912), p. 3.
2. Ibid., p. 5.
3. Post-1906 armories built in Manhattan are: the Twenty-Second Regiment Armory of 1911; the Three-Hundred Sixty-Ninth Armory of 1932; the Forty-Second Infantry Division Armory of 1970.
4. The following list of armories built in Manhattan puts the construction of the 69th Regiment Armory in perspective:

<u>Armory</u>	<u>Address</u>	<u>Completed</u>	<u>Demolished</u>	<u>Designated NYC LM</u>
7th Regiment	643 Park Avenue	1880	—	1967
12th Regiment	9th (Columbus) Ave. at 61st	1887	Post-1960	—
8th Regiment	Park Ave. at 94th	1890	1966	—
22nd Regiment	B'dway at 67th	1890	1929	—
71st Regiment	Park Ave. at 34th	1894	1902 (fire)	—
Squadron A	Madison Ave. at 94th	1895	1966 (partial)	1966
9th Regiment	125 W. 14th St.	1895	1965	—
1st Batalion	56 W. 66th St.	1901	—	—
71st Regiment	Park Ave. at 34th	1905	1972	—
69th Regiment	Lexington at 25th	1906	—	—
102nd Regiment	Ft. Washington at 168th	1911	—	—
369th Regiment	Fifth Ave. at 142nd	1932	—	—
42nd Division	125 W. 14th St.	1971	—	—

5. The history of the Sixty-Ninth Regiment that follows is largely based on Lieut. Col. Kenneth Powers' study entitled The Sixty-Ninth Regiment of New York -- Its History, Heraldry, Traditions and Customs. (typescript, n.d.)
6. The Armory Board..., p. 11.
7. Ibid., p. 15.
8. "The Sixty-Ninth Regiment Armory Drill Hall, New York," The Engineering Record, 51 (July 1904), p. 625.

9. Map of Farms in New York, 1815 (New York: E. Robinson, 1887), plate .
10. The Armory Board..., p. 21.
11. Montgomery Schuyler, "Two New Armories," The Architectural Record, 19 (April 1906), 262-263.
12. Ibid., 263.
13. Engineering Record, 619-25.
14. Ibid.
15. Walt Kuhn, The Story of the Armory Show, (New York, 1938), p. 6.
16. Milton W. Brown, The Story of the Armory Show, (New York: The Joseph Hirshorn Foundation, 1963).
17. New York City, Department of Buildings, Manhattan, Alteration Permit No. 1253-26 of 1926.
18. "Mayor Handles Trowel -- Lays a Cornerstone -- Sixty-Ninth Regiment sees Beginning of New Armory," New York Daily Tribune, April 24 , 1904, p.6.
19. Robert Koch, "The Medieval Castle Revival: New York Armories," Society of Architectural Historians' Journal, 14 (October 1955), 27.

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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 Sixty-Ninth Regiment Armory 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 Sixty-Ninth Regiment Armory is an outstanding example of military architecture, notable for its unique synthesis of Beaux-Arts design principles and clear expression of military function; that it is an important work of the firm of Hunt & Hunt; that the vast drill hall is an outstanding example of innovative engineering technology; that it is the headquarters of an illustrious military organization with a distinguished military record; and that the Armory achieved national renown as the site of the 1913 Armory Show, which changed the course of American art.

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 Sixty-Ninth Regiment Armory, 68 Lexington Avenue, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 881, Lot 6, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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SIXTY-NINTH REGIMENT ARMORY
68 Lexington Avenue
Manhattan

Photo: Gladis Rosa