

PUBLIC SCHOOL 34, 131 Norman Avenue, Borough of Brooklyn. Built 1867, 1870 and 1887-88; Samuel B. Leonard architect; James W. Naughton architect of extensions.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn, Tax Map Block 2622, Lot 28.

On April 13, 1982, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of Public School 34 and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 12). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Two witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Public School 34, the Oliver H. Perry School, named in honor of the hero of the Battle of Lake Erie during the War of 1812, has been a neighborhood institution in the Greenpoint section of Brooklyn for one hundred and fifteen years. Begun in 1867, the school occupies the entire blockfront on the north side of Norman Avenue between Eckford Street and McGuinness Boulevard. A handsome brick building with stone trim, it was designed, by Samuel B. Leonard in the Early Romanesque Revival or Round Arch style with Italianate ornamental motifs.

Greenpoint was a largely rural, undeveloped section of the town of Bushwick until the 1850s when the shipbuilding industry began to leave Manhattan and settle on the Greenpoint shoreline of the East River. With this industry came a rapid increase in the population giving Greenpoint, though small, a distinctly urban character. On January 1, 1855, Greenpoint along with the rest of Bushwick and the City of Williamsburgh were subsumed by the burgeoning city of Brooklyn.¹ Prior to incorporation with Brooklyn, education in Greenpoint was largely a private effort although the Dutch had established a public school in Bushwick in 1662.² Martin Kalbfleisch, an important early industrialist who moved to Greenpoint in 1842, established a school for his own children and others in the area because of his dissatisfaction with the quality of education provided by the public schools. A few years later, the first school house in Greenpoint was erected, largely due to Kalbfleisch's efforts, on Manhattan Avenue between Java and Kent Streets.³ The educational affairs of the community following consolidation with the city of Brooklyn became a public responsibility administered by the Board of Education of the city of Brooklyn. The small school house built under the auspices of Kalbfleisch was the forerunner of a more commodious brick structure built by the city of Brooklyn on the south side of Java Street between Manhattan and Franklin Avenues. This school, known as Public School 22, stood until about 1970. With the increased growth of Greenpoint during the ten year period between 1855 and 1865, the facilities provided by Public School 22 were no longer adequate. To meet the additional needs, Public School 34 was built in 1867.

Public School 34 was designed by Samuel B. Leonard who served as Superintendent of Buildings for the Board of Education from 1859 until 1879 when James W. Naughton was appointed to the position.⁴ Leonard is also responsible for Public School 111, a designated New York City Landmark, which was also built in 1867 and is stylistically very similar to P.S. 34. The style of both buildings, Early Romanesque Revival is derived from German sources of the 1830s. The earliest example of the style in New York City and one of the first in the country is Richard Upjohn's Church of the Pilgrims (1844-46) in Brooklyn Heights on the corner of Henry and Remsen Streets. Typical features of the style are the use

of brick and brownstone, either singly or in combination, round-arched openings, often compound, pilaster strips, and arched corbel tables. The pilaster strips are attenuated piers executed in slight relief without bases or capitals that, in Romanesque Revival architecture, often meet an arched corbel table -- a raised band of arches carried on corbels. The effect is often austere but powerful.

Throughout the next thirty years after Upjohn's introduction of the mode, the round-arched, Early Romanesque was a popular style of architecture for institutional and religious buildings due, in part, to the inherent qualities attributed to it by contemporary architects. These qualities which would have been attractive to school officials and politicians who had to raise taxes to build the schools included: rapidity of construction; economy in material and workmanship; durability; ample fenestration; and the ease of adding compatible extensions to the original structure.⁵ The popularity of German culture and the massive immigration to this country of Germans after the Rebellion of 1848 undoubtedly also contributed to the widespread use of the mode.

The central, oldest section of Public School 34, rises two-and-one-half stories above a rusticated brownstone base (now stuccoed). The gable-fronted brick facade is pierced by compound arched windows at each story. The central round-arched entrance, approached by a modern concrete stoop, has a handsome brownstone enframingent with details characteristic of the Italianate style, the other round-arched style so popular during this period. Paneled pilasters with central circles support ornate foliate console brackets that carry a segmental-arched pediment. Paneled double doors are set below a fanlight. A tall round-arched opening at the second floor above the entrance contains a tripartite window and an arched transom with circular motif. These two central openings are flanked by shorter, arched window openings, and all three bays are united within three graceful corbeled arches that rise through the open bed of the raking cornice. The inscription "Public School 34, 1867" can be seen carved in a stone band beneath the central corbeled arch. This central portion, is flanked by arched window openings that are encompassed within two-story high piers that carry round arches. The piers are crowned by paired brackets that carry the lower chord of the pediment. Originally the cornice was enhanced by modillions. The side elevations of the original building facing Eckford Street and McGuinness Boulevard are rendered in a straightforward fashion. Above broad brownstone water tables, the facades are pierced by three groups of square-headed, triple-windows and crowned by wooden cornices. These cornices have also been stripped of their modillions. In 1870, peaked and flat roof extensions were added to the rear of the building.⁶ They are pierced by square-headed windows with flush brownstone lintels and topped by wooden cornices now missing their modillions.

The flanking pavilions on the front, Norman Avenue, side were added about 1887-88 by James W. Naughton, the Superintendent of Buildings for the Board of Education who succeeded Leonard. Naughton (1840-98), born in Ireland, was brought to Brooklyn by his parents at the age of eight. He received his early education in the public and private schools of Brooklyn. At the age of fifteen, Naughton went west, settling in Milwaukee, where he worked as an apprentice in the architectural firm of J. & A. Douglas. In 1859, having completed his apprenticeship, he entered the University of Wisconsin at Madison to study architecture. After two years, he returned to Brooklyn and continued studying architecture at Cooper Union in Manhattan. He was active in Brooklyn politics, and for two

years between 1874 and 1876, he served as Superintendent of Buildings for the city of Brooklyn. He succeeded Leonard as Superintendent of Buildings for the Board of Education in 1879 and held that position for nearly twenty years until his death in 1898. All the schools built in Brooklyn during this period were designed by Naughton.

The two-story pavilions, which are compatible with the original design, have shallow hipped roofs topped by small square ventilators. The two window openings at each floor are segmentally arched with stone sills and brick voussoirs. Stylized brick acroteria enhance the sills of the second floor windows. Under each second floor window are saw toothed panels. Two-story high piers flank the windows and carry paired brackets that support the continuous metal cornice -- a stylistic reference to similar elements on the older part of the school. The pavilions are joined to the central section by recessed sections with two segmental-arched window openings at the first floor and a handsome arcade of diminutive windows with raised extrados and continuous stone sills at the second floor. Beneath the arcades are continuous saw-toothed panels. Intricate brick entablatures top each recessed section.

At the time the pavilions were added, extensions were also made to the rear 1870 addition. One extension faces Eckford Street, the other McGuinness Boulevard. Each elevation has three windows at each floor: the first floor windows have segmental arches with cap molded lintels; and the second floor windows have square-headed windows with flush stone lintels. Below each second-floor window is a saw tooth panel as on the Norman Avenue pavilions.

Of the many handsome school buildings which proudly stood in Brooklyn's 19th-century neighborhoods, Public School 34 is the oldest that survives and continues to serve the purpose for which it was originally built -- to provide a suitable environment for the education of young children. It has done so for one hundred and fifteen years, becoming a living link with Greenpoint's rich history and a symbol of the traditional concern for education expressed by the people of Brooklyn. In addition, it remains a tribute to the architectural skills of Samuel B. Leonard and James W. Naughton, successive Superintendents of Buildings to the Brooklyn Board of Education.

Report prepared by
James T. Dillon
Landmarks Preservationist

Report typed by
Barbara Sklar

FOOTNOTES

1. Henry R. Stiles, ed., A History of Kings County Including the City of Brooklyn, vol. 1 (New York: W.W. Munsell & Co., 1884), pp. 292-304.
2. Ibid., p. 282.
3. William L. Felter, Historic Green Point, (New York: The Green Point Savings Bank, 1918), p. 43.
4. Teachers College Archives, Columbia University, Notes on Brooklyn Public Schools, c. 1900 (unpublished).
5. Carroll V.L. Meeks, "Romanesque Before Richardson in the United States", The Art Bulletin, 25 (March 1953), pp. 20, 22.
6. Teachers College Archives.
7. Henry B. Howard, ed., The Eagle and Brooklyn: History of the City of Brooklyn From Its Settlement to the Present Time, (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 1893), p. 726.

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 Public School 34, has a special character, special heritage 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 Public School 34 is the oldest functioning primary school in Brooklyn; that it is a handsome building in the Early Romanesque Revival style with Italianate ornamental motifs; that the later additions blend harmoniously with the original building; that Public School 34 is a tribute to the architectural skills of Samuel B. Leonard and James W. Naughton who designed all the public schools in Brooklyn between the time of its consolidation in 1855 and Incorporation in 1898; that it is one of the few surviving 19th-century school buildings in New York City; it is a symbol of the traditional concern for education expressed by the people of Brooklyn.

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, Public School 34, 131 Norman Avenue, Borough of Brooklyn and designates Tax Map Block 2622, Lot 28, Borough of Brooklyn, as its Landmark Site.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Armbruster, Eugene L. The Eastern District of Brooklyn. New York, 1912.

Felter, William L. Historic Green Point. New York: The Green Point Savings Bank, 1918.

Howard, Henry B., ed. The Eagle and Brooklyn: History of the City of Brooklyn From Its Settlement to the Present Time. Brooklyn: Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 1893.

Landmarks Preservation Commission. Greenpoint Historic District Designation Report, (LP-1248). Report prepared by James T. Dillon. New York: Landmarks Preservation Commission, 1982.

New York City School Buildings, 1806-1956. City of New York: Board of Education, 1956.

Ravich, Diane. The Great School Wars, New York City, 1805-1973, A History of Public Schools as Battlefields of Social Change. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1974.

Souvenir of Our Public Schools, 1892. New York: E.J. Whitlock, 1892.

Stiles, Henry R., ed. The History of Kings County Including the City of Brooklyn. New York: W.W. Munsell & Co., 1884.

Teachers' College Archives, Columbia University. Unpublished Notes on Brooklyn Public Schools, c. 1900.



Photo Credit:
Landmarks Preservation Commission

Public School 34
131 Norman Avenue

Architects:
Samuel B. Leonard
James W. Naughton