

PUBLIC SCHOOL 31, 425 Grand Concourse, Borough of the Bronx. Built 1897-99; architect C.B.J. Snyder.

Landmark Site: Borough of the Bronx. Tax Map Block 2346, Lot 1.

On June 14, 1983, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of Public School 31 and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 10). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no witnesses in opposition to designation. The Commission has received many letters and other expressions of support in favor of this designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Public School 31, constructed 1897-99, represents an important step in the development of the Collegiate Gothic style as applied to public school architecture in New York City. Designed by C.B.J. Snyder during the early years of his lengthy term as Superintendent of School Buildings for the Board of Education of New York, P.S. 31 is one of the first New York public schools to display numerous late Gothic details, such as Tudor-arched doorways, and pointed windows topped with stone tracery. These and other elements, such as the central entrance tower and gabled bays, were further developed on Snyder's larger, borough-wide high school buildings, such as Morris and Curtis High Schools. P.S. 31 was one of a large number of school buildings constructed around this time to accommodate the huge waves of immigrants moving into the Bronx from other parts of New York, as well as from abroad. By designing so many schools in a relatively short period, Snyder had a tremendous influence on the developing New York City school building, both on its exterior appearance, as well as on its components and their arrangement.

Development of the Area

From 1639, when the Dutch West India Company purchased from the Mohegan Indians all the land that falls within the boundaries of the present borough, through the mid-nineteenth century, the Bronx retained its rural character.¹ However, as massive immigration and industrialization began to alter the character of New York to the south, it was inevitable that the northward march of urbanization would eventually engulf the Bronx as well. The earliest immigrants to come to the Bronx were the Irish who arrived after 1840 and settled primarily in Mott Haven. This area, within the section called Morrisania, was adjacent to the Harlem River, and was

named for Jordan L. Mott, inventor of the coal burning stove and founder, in 1828, of the Mott Iron Works on East 134th Street. The Irish participated in the construction of the Harlem and Hudson River railroads, beginning in 1842, and the Croton Aqueduct, and they were joined after 1848 by an influx of Germans. The new railroads opened up great potential for industrial development, and during the second half of the century factories were erected along the Harlem and East River waterfronts. The population of the Bronx rose from 28,981 in 1870, to 81,255 in 1890, and 200,507 in 1900, with even greater increases in the following years.

Politically, the Bronx remained a part of Westchester County from 1683 until the area was annexed to the city of New York. This change occurred in two stages, the western section joining New York in 1874, with the rest following in 1895. In 1898 the Charter of the City of Greater New York was implemented, creating the five boroughs, including the Borough of the Bronx.

Schools in Greater New York

A major effect of the new charter was to create a unified educational system out of numerous independently administered school districts with a variety of curricula, grade divisions, educational policies and standards for personnel selection.² This endeavor was hindered initially by a tremendous shortage, both in number and quality, of existing school buildings, created primarily by two factors: new laws making the education of children mandatory, and huge waves of immigration at the end of the nineteenth century which increased the population density of numerous areas of the city.

This problem was noted even before consolidation, in 1896, in the Board of Education's Annual Report:

Insufficient school accommodations have furnished cause for very general complaint on the part of the citizens of New York during the past ten years. The unprecedented growth of the city, together with unexpected movements of population, rendered it almost impossible to keep pace with the demands in given localities or to anticipate the needs of certain sections of the city that speedily outgrew the accommodations that were provided. During the past year...the question of increased and improved school accommodations was kept constantly in mind.³

Between 1884 and 1897, the Board of Education acquired 125 new sites in Manhattan and the Bronx, providing space for more than 132,000 new students.⁴ Yet, it was still not enough. By July 1899, schools in Manhattan and the Bronx could accommodate 232,931 students, many in half day sessions, but many more children had to be turned away for lack of space.⁵

C.B.J. Snyder and His Work

The architect who planned and was responsible for the building of all the new and expanded schools was the Board of Education's Superintendent of School Buildings, C.B.J. Snyder (1860-1945).⁶ Snyder had been appointed to the position in 1891 when the Board oversaw only Manhattan and those parts of the Bronx which constituted nineteenth-century New York. He remained on the job until his retirement in 1923, with responsibility for buildings in all five boroughs after the city's consolidation. Little is known of Snyder's background. He was born in Stillwater, New York, and studied architecture with William Bishop. His architectural accomplishments focused on school buildings, and in this area he was a recognized leader. In a 1905 architectural periodical it was noted:

Possibly it was not the best, probably it was not the most economical, certainly it was not the most expeditious way to have all the school-houses the city stood in such sore need of designed and built by the official architect to the Department of Education. But since that method had to be followed, it is a matter of wonderful good fortune that the official architect chanced to be such a man as is Mr. C.B.J. Snyder, who not only at the outset showed such distinct capacity for his task, but has proved himself a man able to grow as his opportunities opened before him. Mr. Wheelwright in Boston, Mr. Ittner in St. Louis, Mr. Mundie in Chicago...have done excellent service to their respective cities in the way of building school-houses...but they have not had to do their work under the same sort of pressure that has been put upon Mr. Snyder, and they have not had to adopt their architectural treatment to as closely restricted sites.⁷

Snyder was particularly concerned with making his schools as healthy as possible for the students, and focused much attention on the development of fire protection, ventilation, unilateral lighting, and reduced classroom size. One of the main problems in the design of many Manhattan public schools was the accommodation of the requirements of students and teachers to small sites which were necessitated by the high cost of land acquisition. In searching to overcome this problem in Manhattan as well as in other boroughs, Snyder concentrated much effort on school planning and created the H-plan for floor layouts, which provided increased light and better ventilation, and also permitted adequate space for safe recreation areas.⁸

Snyder's concerns also embraced architectural style. Unlike the designs of many New York schools built after his retirement, Snyder's work was inventive, solid, and handsome. His earliest designs continued the Romanesque Revival style of the architect who was his predecessor as Superintendent of School Buildings, George W. Debevoise. Snyder later moved into Gothic idioms, and was credited with the introduction of the Collegiate Gothic style to New York public school architecture. According to the 1905 source previously cited:

When first the New York school-house made its appearance in Gothic attire, it seemed as if a very doubtful experiment were being tried, but little by little the designer discovered new confidence in himself, and some of the later buildings are markedly successful as pieces of consistent and satisfying architectural composition.⁹

Collegiate Gothic architecture, also called English Collegiate,¹⁰ was inspired by, and modelled after, buildings at Eton, and at Cambridge and especially Oxford Universities. This late Gothic Revival (as differentiated from the early Gothic Revival which began to appear by the second quarter of the nineteenth century) started being used on schools and churches in the United States in the early 1890s, due, in part, to a reaction against academic classicism. Finding acceptance because of the eclectic spirit of the period, this archeologically correct form of Gothic building provided a picturesque and romantic setting for intellectual pursuits.¹¹

Introduced on college campuses in the United States in 1893 by architects Cope and Stewardson at Bryn Mawr, University of Pennsylvania, and Princeton University, the style was quickly adopted by numerous other schools throughout the country. Other early major examples include: Charles B. Haight's Vanderbilt Hall at Yale (1893-94), Henry Ives Cobb's plan for the University of Chicago (1893), and Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson's designs for the campus of West Point (1902). The style became so widespread, in fact, that by the time the City College of New York opened its new campus at Morningside Heights in 1907, an observer could state that "One might say that Collegiate Gothic is the proper and only dress for a home of learning."¹²

At the same time, this style was being employed for private preparatory schools such as St. Paul's and Groton, designed by Henry Vaughan in the 1890s.¹³ Ralph Adams Cram was one of the leading proponents of this style and did much to publicize and popularize it. In addition to his work, numerous articles by and about him and other architects of this style appeared in the professional press. It is little wonder then that these same building forms were picked up and used by designers of public school buildings, designers such as C.B.J. Snyder.

It was not long after this style began appearing in the architectural press that Snyder began using certain characteristic elements of it in his schools. It took him several attempts before he completely incorporated this new style however. In an 1894 school on Edgecombe Avenue between 140th and 141st Streets the few Gothic details gave some suggestion of his future direction. P.S. 27 and P.S. 28, built in 1896, are square, block-like buildings, but high gables (some pointed, some stepped) rise up at the roofline as on later works. In P.S. 31 Snyder first successfully integrated numerous details into an overall late Gothic composition.¹⁴ This style was to be even more fully explored in such later, more elaborate works as Morris High School nearby on Boston Road, and Curtis High School on Staten Island. These buildings display numerous details of ornamentation and massing which can readily be compared to some of the prominent early Collegiate Gothic buildings on university campuses, such as Princeton's Vanderbilt Hall (1893-94).

P.S. 31

While Snyder was exploring new stylistic territory, he was also continuing the use of some design elements of earlier buildings. Snyder had not completely evolved the H-plan which he used in his large high school buildings at the time he was working on P.S. 31. This building is basically rectangular in plan, with slightly projecting gabled end pavilions on the front facade and central entrance towers on both the front and rear facades. The projecting, central tower follows a tradition in New York City school buildings, started in 1868, when the first school with such a tower was constructed in Manhattan.¹⁵ The actual Gothic details in P.S.31 are found primarily within the area of the central towers and at the roof line. They can be seen in the main entrances with their large Tudor arches and carved foliate designs in the spandrels, the tracery of the windows at the first, second and fifth floors within these towers and in the slit windows pierced in the octagonal piers themselves. The oriels at the building's narrow ends and the label moldings over the windows at the fourth floor show Gothic inspiration as well. The roofline, with its steeply pointed gables and irregular outline, is part of the picturesque effect sought by architects of this style.

Description

P.S. 31 is a five-story, light brick and limestone-clad building located between the Grand Concourse and Walton Avenue, at East 144th Street. Sited higher than the surrounding streets, the school is visible from all four sides. The building is basically rectangular in plan and each facade is symmetrically organized around a central element. Many of the building's decorative details are located in these central areas, as well as along the roofline.

Originally the eastern, major facade of the building overlooked a broad lawn supported by a low brick wall at the lot line. With the widening of the Grand Concourse in 1939, the lawn was replaced by a high stone retaining wall topped by a metal fence. To the rear of the school, facing Walton Avenue, is a play yard supported and enclosed by a high brick and rubble stone wall. This layered retaining wall is topped by a high brick fence with a terra-cotta coping, and appears to be contemporary with the building. Two Tudor-arched entrances with wooden doors and elaborately curved strap hinges are set into this retaining wall at ground level but are no longer functional. This original section of wall extended for a small distance on both the north and south sides of the lot as well. In 1905, the wall on the north side was extended and further renovations to both the north and south side walls were carried out in 1940. Presently modern stone stairways, inset into the walls, lead up to the building at each side and at the front.

The eastern facade of the building is seven bays wide, symmetrically arranged around the projecting central entrance tower. To each side of the tower, the fenestration patterns are the same for each bay and continue in the slightly projecting end pavilions. On floors one through four, each opening contains five narrow windows in a rectangular grouping. A continuous label molding tops the windows of the first story, while

limestone ashlar cladding on this level creates the effect of a solid base for the rest of the building. The next two stories are of plain brick with keyed stone surrounds on each group of windows. A projecting band course carried on carved human and animal heads rings the entire building at the sill line of the fourth floor. Also at this level, each group of windows is topped by individual stone label moldings. The fifth or attic level has more variety of treatment. A pair of narrow windows topped by a label molding is centered within a steeply pitched gable at each end pavilion. Between the end pavilions and the center tower on each side are two smaller curved Flemish-type gables. Each contains a pair of narrow windows under its own label molding. Narrow, pointed finials originally adorned each of these gables but they were removed early in the twentieth century. A steeply pitched roof rises behind the gables.

The central entrance tower is formed by two octagonal piers, pierced by slit windows, which rise through the height of the building to become turrets above the fifth floor. Between the piers, at the ground floor level is the building's main entrance. Here, within a Tudor arch, the paneled, wood, double doorway is topped by an overdoor which is subdivided by wood-framed lancet windows. Beyond the arch are carved stone spandrels with foliate motifs, while narrow lancet windows crowned by stone tracery are located to each side of the doorway. A wide stone band course with a carved frieze containing panels with shields and the inscription "Public School 31" is located between the first and second floors and wraps around the piers at this level. On the second through fifth floors, the narrow windows of this central bay are grouped 1-4-1. Those of the second story are crowned by a heavy label molding enriched by carved heads. The windows of this floor are subdivided by stone tracery to create a double row of window openings within the grouping. Carved grotesque animal figures are located in the corner, between the windows and the octagonal piers at this level. The central windows of the second and third stories are plain, with stone enframements. A flagpole extends at the third story sill line, while the band course which rings the building at the fourth floor sill line continues around the piers and across this central area as well. The central fourth floor windows are also topped by a label molding. At the fifth floor, the enframement between the central windows becomes more elaborate with stone tracery creating shallow pointed arches above each narrow window. Another broad band course carried on carved heads projects above the fifth floor windows and continues around each of the turrets. A square panel with a carved stone design is centered above this, with two narrow band courses above it. The parapet between the two turrets is now filled with plain brick but originally it was composed of open stonework. Early in the twentieth century, the small onion domes which originally capped each turret, were removed.

The western or rear facade is very similar to the front facade, with the following exceptions. The end bays do not project but remain in the same plane as the rest of the facade. At the roofline, three of the four Flemish gables have been removed and the fourth has been shortened. The roofline has been raised to accommodate window groupings of a similar size to those of the floors below. Within the central bay there is less ornamentation, particularly on the second floor, where the windows are plain.

The narrow side facades are identical to each other. Three bays wide, each facade is symmetrically arranged around a two-story oriel which is topped by a parapet. A tall pointed gable rises above this central element at the fifth story and contains a group of three smaller windows. An entrance with a Tudor-arched enframingent is located in the central bay at the first level but the small, squared door is a modernization. The window shapes and enframingents, the band courses, decorative elements and materials continue the patterns found on the front facade.

Conclusion

Public School 31 stands as a handsome brick and stone structure in the Morrisania section of the Bronx. Built in 1897-99, this school serves as a reminder of the tremendous population growth in this area at the end of the nineteenth century. One of many schools designed by architect C.B.J. Snyder, P. S. 31, with its Tudor arches, label moldings, stone tracery, central entrance tower, and gabled bays, is one of his early essays in the Collegiate Gothic style. During his lengthy tenure as Superintendent of School Buildings for New York's Board of Education, Snyder's designs evolved from simple, Romanesque Revival to richly adorned, Collegiate Gothic, as seen in his major high school buildings. In the process, he created a tremendous legacy of handsome school buildings throughout the five boroughs of New York, of which Public School 31 is a part.

Report prepared by
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Notes

1. Information on the history of the Bronx was compiled from: Landmarks Preservation Commission, Morris High School Historic District Designation Report (LP-1258) (New York: City of New York, 1982); Stephen Jenkins, The Story of the Bronx, 1639-1912 (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1912); James Wells et. al., eds., The Bronx and Its People, A History, 1609-1927 (New York: The Lewis Historical Publ. Co., Inc., 1927).
2. Board of Education, City of New York, The First Fifty Years: A Brief Review of Progress, 1898-1948 (New York: n.p., [1948]), pp.2-20.
3. Fifty-fifth Annual Report of the Board of Education of the City of New York for the Year Ending December 31, 1896 (New York: Hall of the Board of Education, 1897), p.53.
4. New York Times, December 19, 1897, p. 22:5
5. First Annual Report of the City Superintendent of Schools to the Board of Education for the Year Ending July 31, 1899 (New York: Department of Education, 1899), p.35.

6. Information on C.B.J. Snyder was compiled from: Who Was Who in America, Vol.4, 1961-68 (Chicago: Marquis-Who's Who, Inc., 1968), p.883; "Obituary," National Architect, 2 (January, 1946), 13; Landmarks Preservation Commission, Curtis High School Designation Report (LP-1214), by Shirley Zavin (New York: City of New York, 1982); and Landmarks Preservation Commission, High School of the Performing Arts Designation Report (LP-1241), by Anthony Robins (New York: City of New York, 1982).
7. "Editorial," American Architect and Building News, 88 (July 29,1905), 33.
8. C.B.J.Snyder, "Public School Buildings in the City of New York," American Architect and Building News, 93 (January 25, 1908).
9. "Editorial," p.33.
10. C. Matlock Price, "A Study in Scholastic Architecture," The Architectural Record, 35 (January 1914), 1.
11. For general discussion of Collegiate Gothic as a style, see: Marcus Whiffen, American Architecture Since 1780; A Guide to the Styles, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1969), p.174, and Calder Loth, The Only Proper Style, Gothic Architecture in America, (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1975), p.154.
12. Engelbert Neus, "The Architecture of Our New Buildings," The City College Quarterly, 3 (December, 1907), 188.
13. Ralph Adams Cram, "Recent University Architecture in the United States," Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects, 19 (May 11, 1912), 508.
14. Based on an examination of schools listed in the Real Estate Section of the Annual Financial and Statistical Report of the Transactions of the Board of Education of the City of New York for the Fiscal and Calendar Years 1908-1909-1910-1911-1912, in the archives of the Board of Education, Teachers College, New York.
15. Landmarks Preservation Commission, Public School 11 Designation Report (LP-1179), by James T. Dillon (New York: City of New York, 1981).

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 31 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, Public School 31 is an important early example of Collegiate Gothic architecture as applied to public school buildings, as seen in its Tudor arches, stone tracery, label moldings and its central entrance tower defined by octagonal piers rising to turrets; that P.S.31 represents the early work of C.B.J. Snyder who, as Superintendent of School Buildings for the City of New York, was a prolific and influential architect; that in this building Snyder began his movement toward this new but highly popular style, which was to dominate academic architecture for many years to come; that this building is an important reminder of the period, around the turn of the century, of tremendous population growth in this area; and that Public School 31 is part of the tremendous legacy of handsome school buildings created by Snyder throughout the five boroughs of New York.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534, 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 31, 425 Grand Concourse, Borough of the Bronx and designates Tax Map Block 2346, Lot 1, Borough of the Bronx, as its Landmark Site.

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Built 1897-99
C.B.J. Snyder, architect

Public School 31
425 Grand Concourse
Bronx, NY
Eastern Facade

Photo by:
Carl Forster, 1986



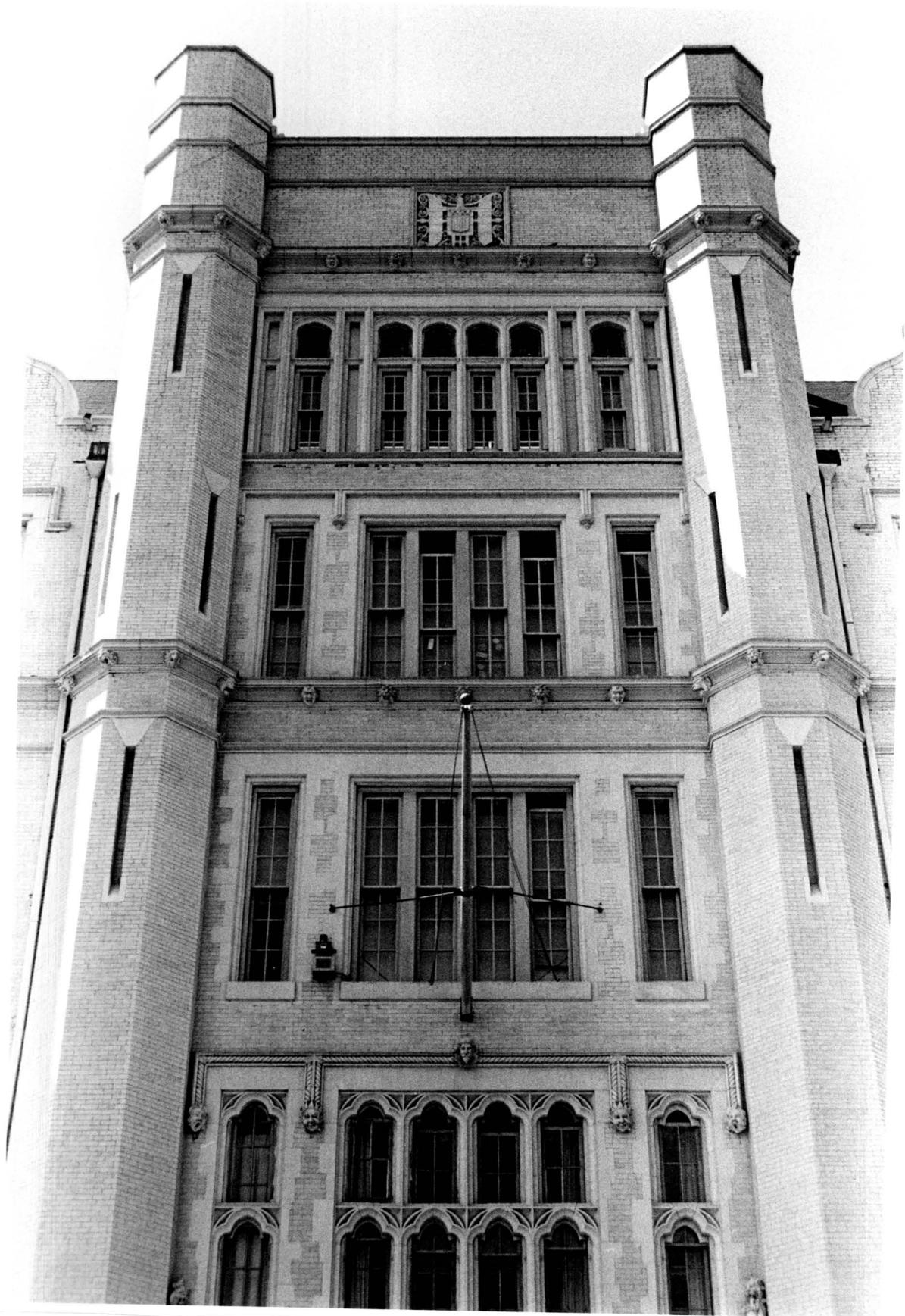
Public School 31
Western Facade



Public School 31
Northern Facade



Public School 31
Southern Facade

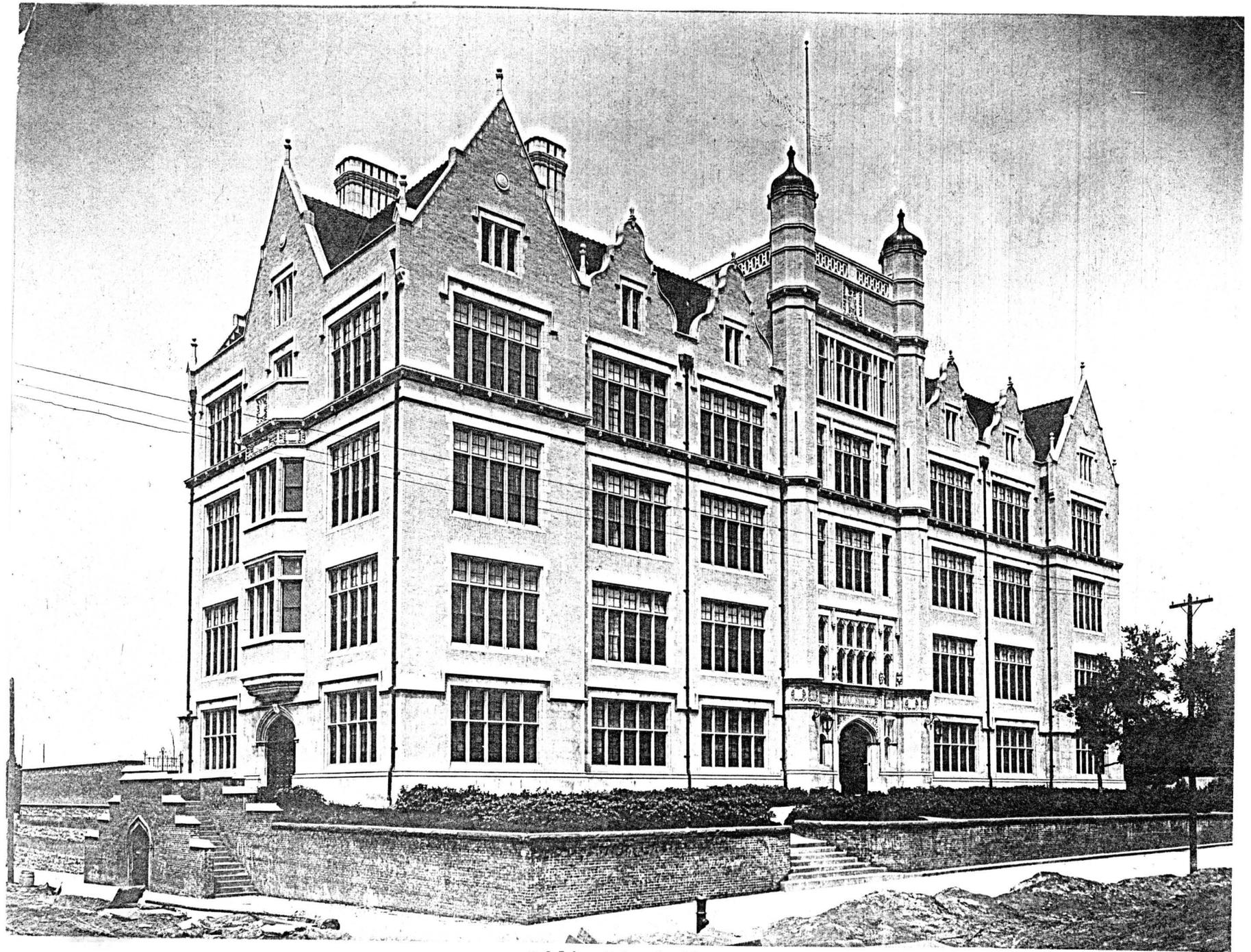


Public School 31
Detail, Main Facade



Public School 31

Detail, Main Entrance



Early photograph,
shortly after construction.
From the archives of:
Board of Educaton

Public School 31
Bronx, NY

Photo in the collection of
Teachers College,
Columbia University

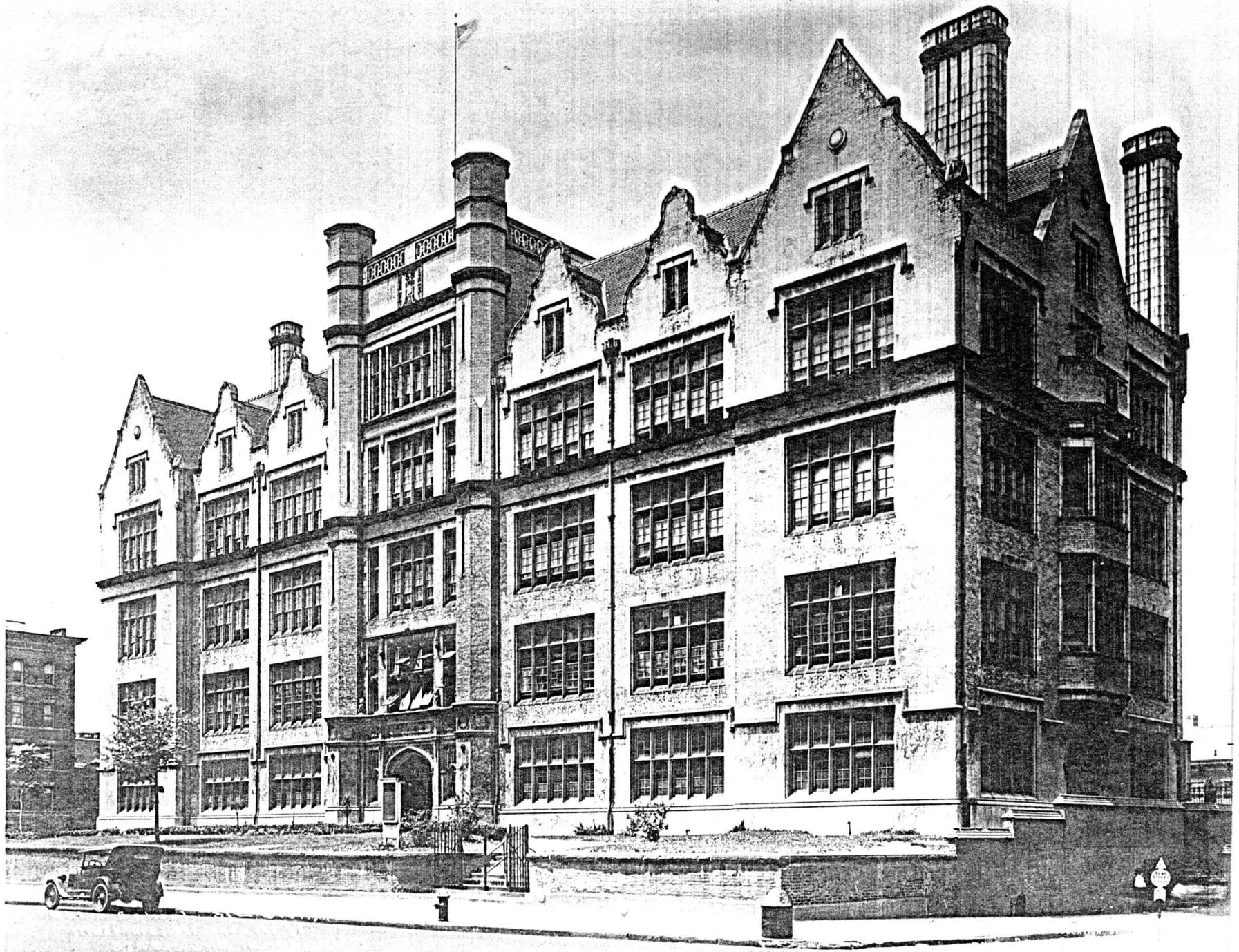


Photo #3725
June 16, 1930

From the archives of:
Board of Education

Public School 31
Bronx, NY

Photo in the collection of
Teachers College
Columbia University