Landmarks Preservation Commission
September 19, 1995; Designation List 266
LP-1895

PUBLIC SCHOOL 27, 519 St. Ann's Avenue, Borough of the Bronx.
Built 1895-97; architect C.B.J. Snyder, Superintendent of School Buildings, New York City Board of Education.

Landmark Site: Borough of the Bronx Tax Map Block 2274, Lot 23.

On June 2, 1992, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of Public School 27 and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 11). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. There were seven speakers in favor of this designation, including the school principal. No one spoke in opposition to designation. Letters and other statements have been received supporting this designation.



Summary

Constructed in 1895-97, Public School 27 is one of the earliest buildings produced by C.B.J. Snyder during his long career as Superintendent of School Buildings for the Board of Education of New York City. Snyder became Superintendent as huge waves of immigrant children were flooding New York schools, and shortly before consolidation of the city. Each of the city's five boroughs needed many new school buildings, and Snyder was responsible for the design and construction of them all. At first Snyder continued many of the stylistic traditions of his predecessor, George W. Debevoise, as seen in the massive rectangular shapes of his early schools and his emphasis on a central entrance tower. In P.S. 27, as well as other of his schools from this period, Snyder used such design elements from New York's Dutch and Federal periods as the stepped gables and polygonal tower. P.S. 27 represents Snyder's successful effort to create a school building that would be an important and imposing neighborhood structure while meeting the requirements of the Board and the children who would use it.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Development of the Area[1]

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. However, as massive immigration and industrialization began to alter the character of New York City to the south, it was inevitable that the northward march of urbanization would eventually engulf the Bronx as well. The first immigrants to come to the Bronx were the Irish who arrived after 1840 and settled primarily in Mott Haven, adjacent to the Harlem River. This area, within the section called Morrisania, 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. Beginning in 1842, the Irish participated in the construction of the Harlem and Hudson River railroads 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 further to 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, with the western section being joined to New York in 1874 and the remainder 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[2]

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. This endeavor was hindered initially by a tremendous shortage of existing school buildings, which was created primarily by two factors: new laws establishing mandatory education for children, and huge waves of immigration at the end of the nineteenth century which increased the population density of many areas of the city.

The 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 for school buildings in Manhattan and the Bronx, providing space for more than 132,000 new students.[4] However, this new construction 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[6]

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

> *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 healthful and safe as possible for the students, and focused much attention on the development of fire protection, ventilation, single directional lighting, and smaller classrooms. A major problem in the design of many of the city's public schools was the need to accommodate the requirements of students and teachers on the relatively small sites necessitated by the high cost of land acquisition. As a result, Snyder concentrated on efficient and economical school planning, implementing the H-plan for floor layouts. This design provided increased light and better ventilation, and also permitted adequate space for safe recreation areas.[8]

Snyder's concerns also embraced architectural style. Unlike many New York schools built after his retirement, Snyder's designs were inventive, solid, and handsome. His earliest schools 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, a style which he successfully used for more than twenty years.

Public School 27

Public School 27 (originally P.S. 154, also called the St. Mary's Park School) was one of the many school buildings constructed during the last decade of the nineteenth century in New York City. The 1894 *Journal of the Board of Education* lists proposed schools and school sites that would accommodate "upwards of thirty-one thousand children."[9] Early in 1894, the Board discussed the need for a school in the vicinity of East 147th Street; Board members noted that it was halfway between two existing schools, P.S. 85 and P.S. 90.[10] By March 1894 the Board passed a resolution to purchase land on St. Ann's Avenue between East 147th and East 148th Streets. It took the Board the rest of that year and most of the next to condemn and purchase the site.[11] Plans were in place and a building permit issued late in 1895;[12] bids began to go out in 1896. Meanwhile, the need for classrooms in this area was so great that private homes and stores were used while construction was proceeding.[13] The school did not open until the fall of 1897, but the result was an important and imposing neighborhood structure.

The early stages of Snyder's development as an architect and a planner are evident in P.S. 27. At this time the prevailing practice was to construct schools on corner lots to allow more light and air into the buildings. Thus P.S. 27 faces St. Ann's Avenue with side facades on the narrower side streets. Although most of the schools up to this time were built this way, the siting of school buildings only on main thoroughfares became prohibitively expensive. In response to this problem, Snyder developed his H-plan, which was more conducive to siting on side streets. The side extensions of the "H" created courtyards that provided light and air for the classrooms and created sheltered areas for playgrounds. Early steps toward this idea can be seen at P.S. 27, which, though primarily rectangular in plan, has small rear extensions that turn it into a C-plan and partially shelter a rear play yard.

By 1896, Snyder was using skeleton steel construction in all his buildings. This framing method was relatively cheap and fast to erect, an important consideration when schools were so urgently needed. In addition, this type of framework enabled the architect to use thinner walls, thus allowing more light and air to enter the classrooms.

Because of the need to produce so many buildings in such a short time, each school produced by Snyder's office built upon the design and planning ideas of the others.[14] For P.S. 27, Snyder chose design elements from the Dutch and Federal periods, reminiscent of New York's colonial past. The Dutch influence is seen primarily in the stepped gables along the roofline. These large dormers were common elements on Snyder's schools, providing light and air to the gymnasia Snyder tended to place on the top story.[15] The polygonal bell tower that crowns the center of the roof of P.S. 27 also suggests early America in its design. The use of a central tower on New York City school buildings was a long-standing tradition, first appearing in 1868 on P.S. 56, a school in the Second Empire design in the Chelsea section of Manhattan.[16] Within a year after

P.S. 27 was built, however, Snyder's designs began to demonstrate a growing commitment to the Collegiate Gothic style. In P.S. 31 (constructed 1897-99, a New York City Landmark), for example, the stepped-gabled dormers so prominent in the earlier schools became steeply pitched, the rounded doorways developed pointed-arch openings, and the banked windows sprouted stone tracery.

Description

Public School 27 has a broad, uninterrupted main elevation facing St. Ann's Avenue, across from St. Mary's Park. Narrower facades, formed by the extended wings of the building's C-plan, are on East 147th and East 148th Streets. The five-story building has a hipped roof at the front and sides, ending in a flat roof toward the rear. The original slate roofing material has been replaced by copper.[17] The school is faced in light buff brick, with terra-cotta ornament. Limestone is used on the keyed window surrounds, the entrances, the corner quoins, and the string courses that are located above each floor. A flat areaway surrounds the building and is enclosed by an iron fence with scroll work, most of which is original to the building. The building sits on a high stone water table that has been painted.

St. Ann's Avenue Facade. The building's main facade on St. Ann's Avenue is thirteen bays wide and is symmetrically arranged around a slightly projecting, five-bay central pavilion. The single windows on the ground story have limestone surrounds and are linked by brick banding. At the center of the ground story, a limestone entranceway with angled projections and columns is composed of three round-arched entrances with keystones. Each houses a recessed, metal replacement door. Over the center door is a broken pediment with a bulls-eye containing an eagle, shields, and garlands. Centered above this, on the second and third stories, is a pair of windows framed by columns and topped by a round-arched pediment with foliate designs. At the fourth story is another group of three windows crowned by more ornament in the form of a shallow pediment, garlands, shields, brackets, and moldings. To each side of this central section, the windows are single or grouped in threes, set in surrounds with keystones, and have nine-over-nine wood-frame sash.[18] The windows of the first two stories are covered by metal grilles.

The fifth story rises above a prominent copper gutter. This story is composed of large dormers in a variety of shapes, symmetrically arranged around the largest, central dormer. The central dormer has four windows framed by engaged columns supporting an entablature with a stepped pediment above it. A narrow window opening is centered within the pediment and is topped by more foliate ornament and a finial. Smaller dormers with a single window capped by a round-arched pediment are located to each side of the central dormer. To each side of this central grouping are two more, larger dormers, each with paired windows and capped by stepped pediments with a centered, narrow window opening. Between each of these is a small shed dormer, located higher up in the roof. At the crest of the hipped roof is a painted metal, polygonal bell tower with a faceted, domed roof. Narrow, vertical strips of louvers are located on each face.

East 147th Street Facade. The East 147th Street facade is a simplified version of the main facade. Five bays wide, it is symmetrical around a three-bay center section. The windows are either single or grouped in threes, with surrounds and sash similar to those in the front, and the entrance consists of two keyed, round-arched openings set in a flat limestone surround and framed by columns on angled wing walls. At the roofline are three large dormers, with similar motifs to those on the front of the building.

East 148th Street Facade. The East 148th Street facade shows the most irregularity. While this facade is symmetrical around the central section, the center section itself is not symmetrical. The western half has banked windows similar to those found throughout the building. The eastern half has short windows, set in groups of threes, at each floor. The central entranceway on this facade has three, round-arched, keyed openings set in limestone and flanked by columns on angled wing walls. The dormers on this facade mirror the three dormers on the East 147th Street facade.

Rear Elevation. The rear of the building overlooks a fenced and walled paved play yard and is visible from the street. It is faced with brick painted a buff color and has very regular, squared window openings with cast-iron sills and lintels. The windows are single or grouped in twos and threes. At the roofline of each narrow end of the "C" is located one dormer with a paired window that faces the rear of the building. Stepped dormers of plain brick face the interior courtyard and the long side of the building has a flat roof. Two large, plain brick chimneys rise next to the building along this facade.

Report prepared by
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NOTES

1. Information on the history of the Bronx was compiled from : LPC, *Public School 31* (LP-1435) by Virginia Kurshan (New York: City of New York, 1986); LPC, *Morris High School Historic District Designation Report* (LP-1258) by Deborah Schwartz and Charles Hasbrouck (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]), 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), 53.

4. *New York Times*, December 19, 1897, 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), 35.

6. Information on 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; LPC, *Curtis High School Designation Report* (LP-1214), by Shirley Zavin (New York: City of New York, 1982); and LPC, *High School of the Performing Arts Designation Report* (LP-1241), by Anthony W. Robins (New York: City of New York, 1982); and LPC, *Public School 31* (LP-1435), by Virginia Kurshan (New York: City of New York, 1986).

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. *Journal of the Board of Education of the City of New York* (New York: Board of Education, 1894), 1484.

10. *Ibid.*, 313-315. Further discussion of the need for this school and the Board's decision to purchase the land can be found on pp. 176, 357, and 833.

11. Snyder complained of the long delays in getting new sites for building. *55th Annual Report*, 250.

12. New York City, Department of Buildings, The Bronx, Block 2274, Lot 23, NB 1241-1895.

13. "New Public School Building; Details of the Fine Structure on St. Ann's Avenue," *NYT*, April 4, 1897, 5:17.

14. Thus P.S. 28 on Anthony Avenue beween Mt. Hope Place and Tremont Avenues, which was built at the same time as P.S. 27, is almost identical.

15. The stepped gables on P.S. 27 were similar to those used on many other schools of this period, including P.S. 5 (Edgecombe Avenue at West 140th Street, built 1894), P.S.10 (St. Nicholas Avenue, built 1894), P.S. 60 (Rivington and Suffolk Streets, built 1897-99), P.S. 166 (West 89th Street, near Columbus, built 1898-99), and P.S. 169 (Audubon Avenue, near West 168th Street, built 1898-99).

16. For a discussion of the development of this element on New York public schools, see LPC, *Public School 73 Designation Report* (LP-1289), by James Dillon (New York: City of New York, 1984).

17. The New Building permit specified slate for the roof. A historic photo of the building published in the *Annual Report* (1906-08) and Photo #5099 (April 1934) from the Board of Education Archives, both available in the Special Collections, Milbank Memorial Library, Teachers College, Columbia University, show the roof covered with slate.

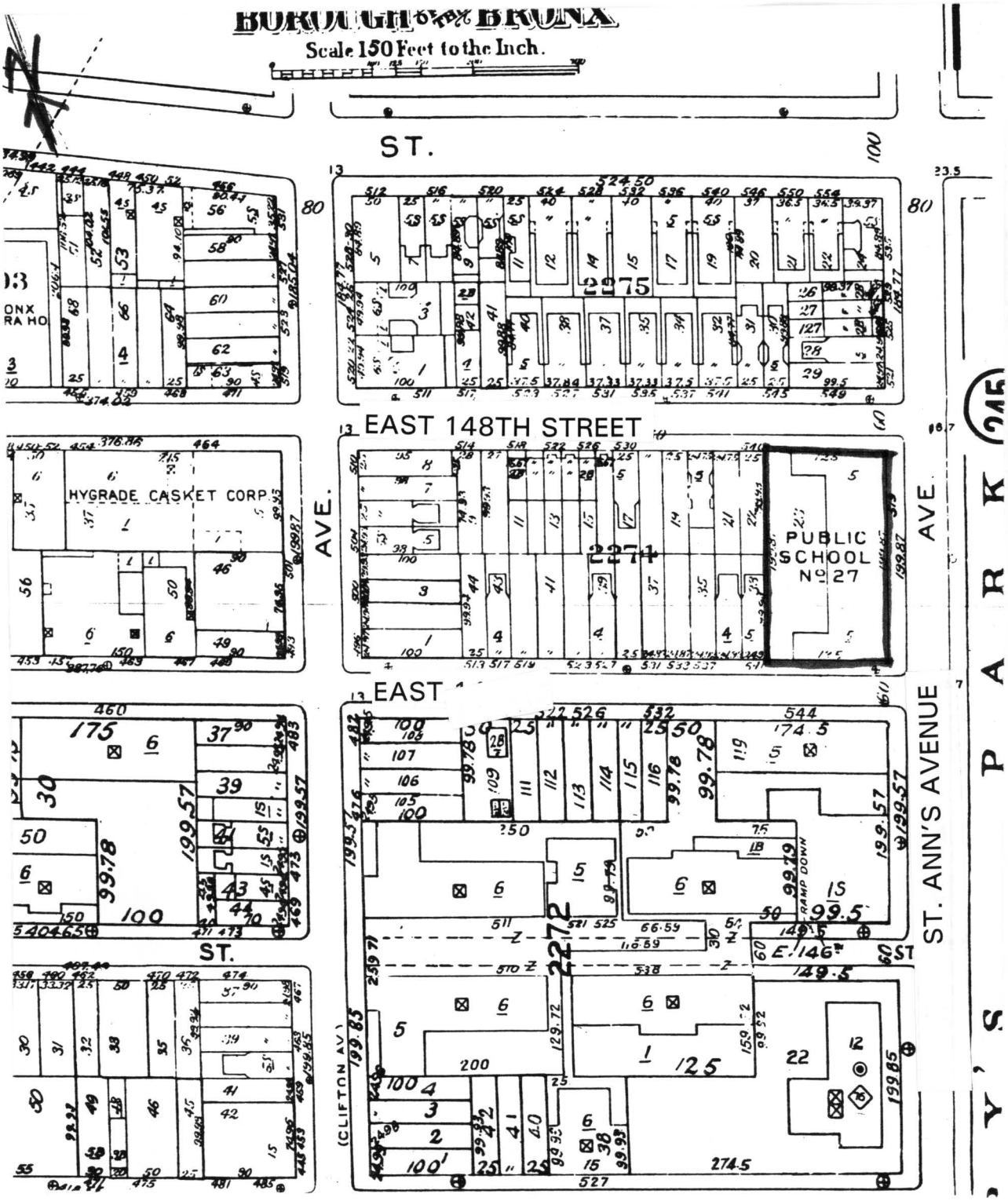
18. The historic photo in the *Annual Report* (1906-08) shows that the windows at the second through fifth stories had six-over-six sash set below multi-paned transoms. The sash had been changed to their current configuration by the time of the 1934 photo.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

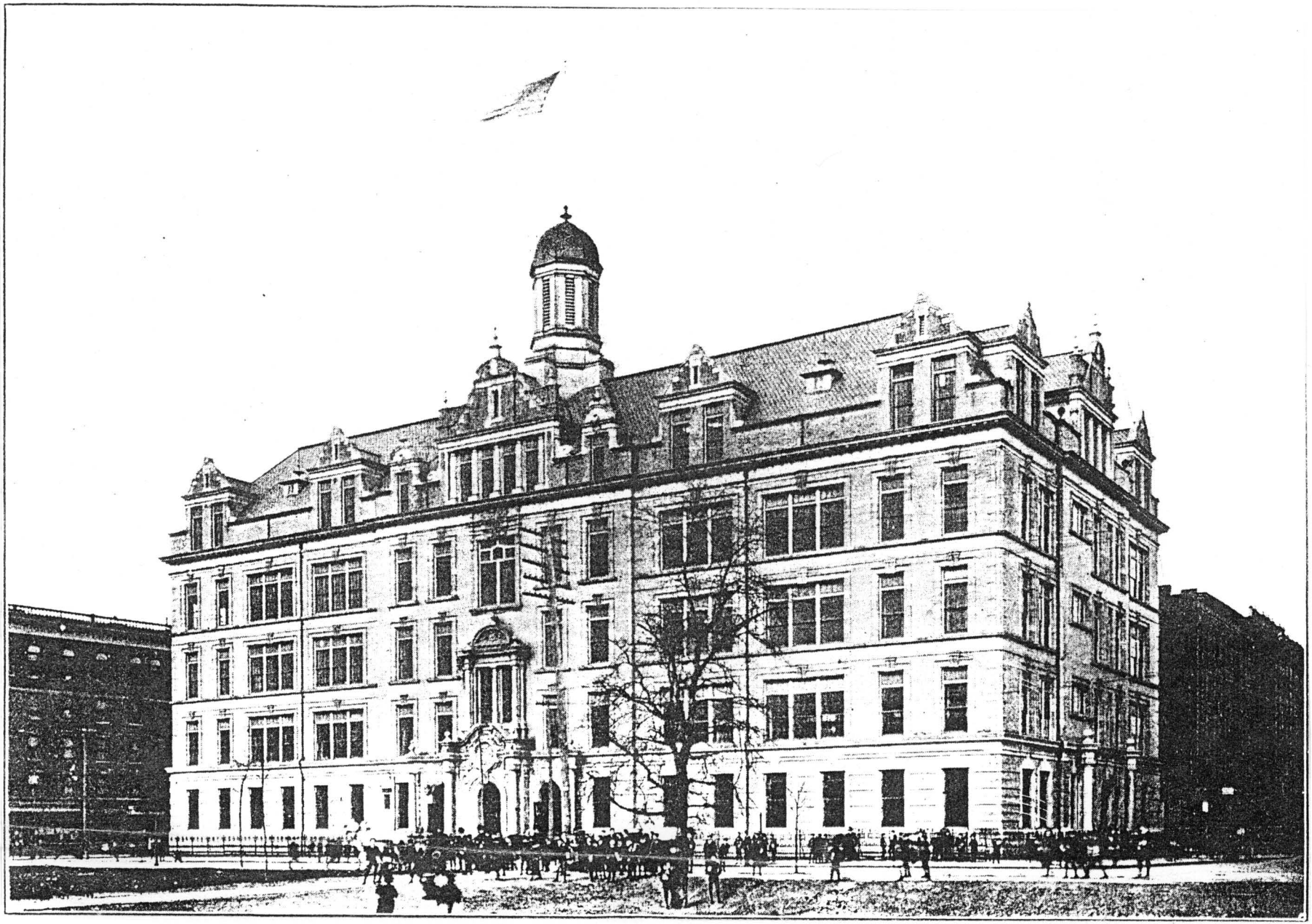
On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, architecture, and the other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that Public School 27 has a special character, and a special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, Public School 27 is a fine example of the numerous schools built by the City of New York during the last decade of the nineteenth century to accommodate the waves of new students created by immigration and new mandatory education laws; that P.S. 27 represents the early design period of the City's prolific Superintendent of School Buildings, C.B.J. Snyder, during which he based his work on existing traditions of rectangular massing and emphasis on a central tower; that in P.S. 27, Snyder was also beginning to develop his new ideas of planning which would lead to his use of the H-plan on his later buildings; and that Snyder used design elements of Dutch and Federal period architecture to enhance an imposing and important neighborhood structure.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020, of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark Public School 27, 519 St. Ann's Avenue, Borough of the Bronx, and designates Borough of the Bronx Tax Map Block 2274, Lot 23, as its Landmark Site.



Public School 27, 519 St. Ann's Avenue, Borough of the Bronx
Graphic Source: Realty Atlas, *Bronx Land Book*, vol. 1 (1994), pl. 252.



Historic view of Public School 27, Borough of the Bronx

Source: Annual Report (1906-08)



Public School 27, 519 St. Ann's Avenue, The Bronx
Main facade on St. Ann's Avenue

Photo credit: Carl Forster



Public School 27, 519 St. Ann's Avenue, The Bronx
East 147th Street facade

Photo credit: Carl Forster



Public School 27, 519 St. Ann's Avenue, The Bronx
Entrance detail



Public School 27, 519 St. Ann's Avenue, The Bronx
Detail of tower with cupola

Photo credit: Carl Forster



Public School 27, 519 St. Ann's Avenue, The Bronx
Detail of stepped gable at roofline

Photo credit: Carl Forster



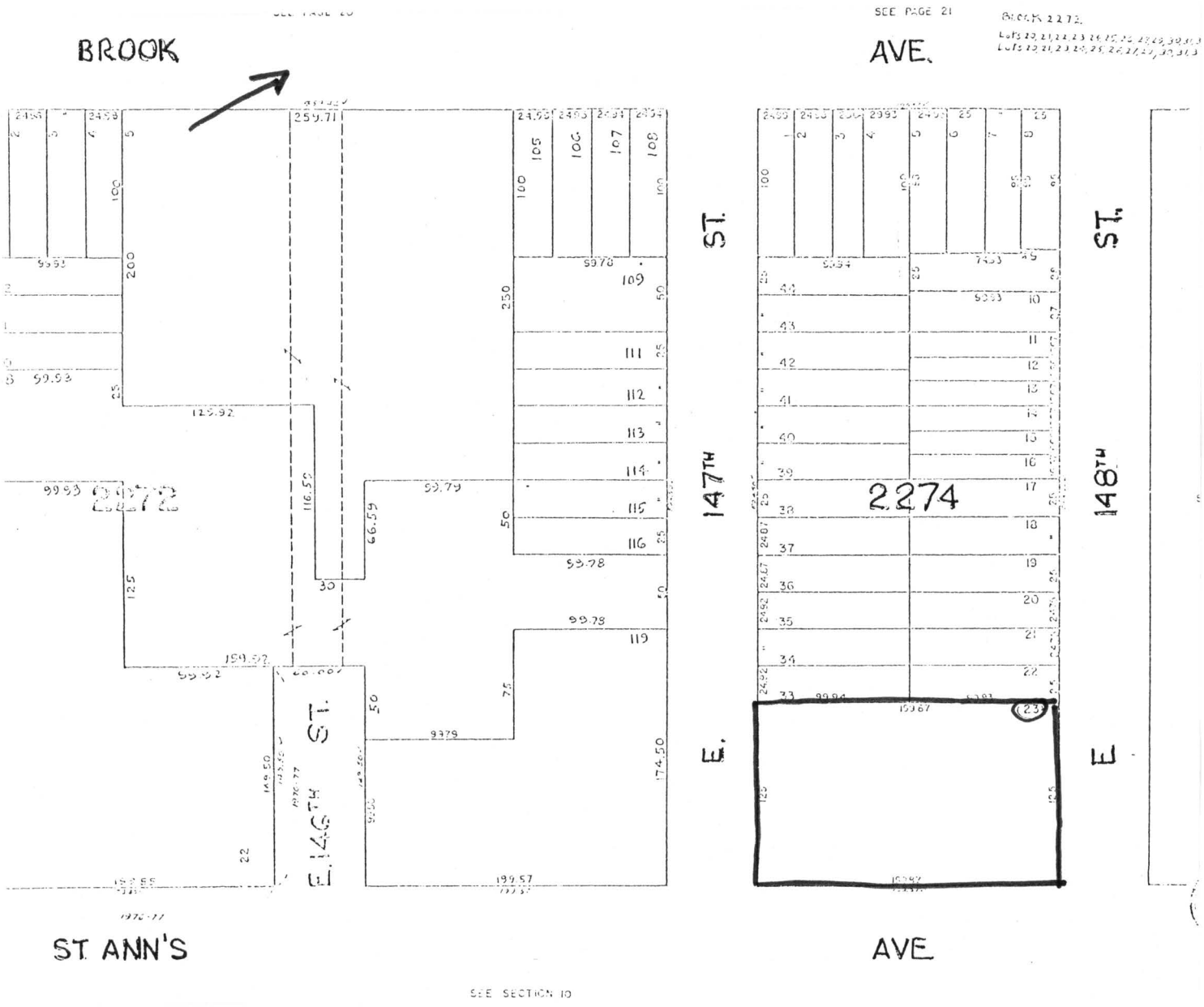
Public School 27, 519 St. Ann's Avenue, The Bronx
East 148th Street facade

Photo credit: Carl Forster



Public School 27, 519 St. Ann's Avenue, The Bronx
Rear elevation

Photo credit: Carl Forster



Public School 27, 519 St. Ann's Avenue, The Bronx Landmark Site: Bronx Tax Map Block 2274, Lot 23
Source: Dept. of Finance, City Surveyor, Tax Map