

**Fire Engine Company No. 47**

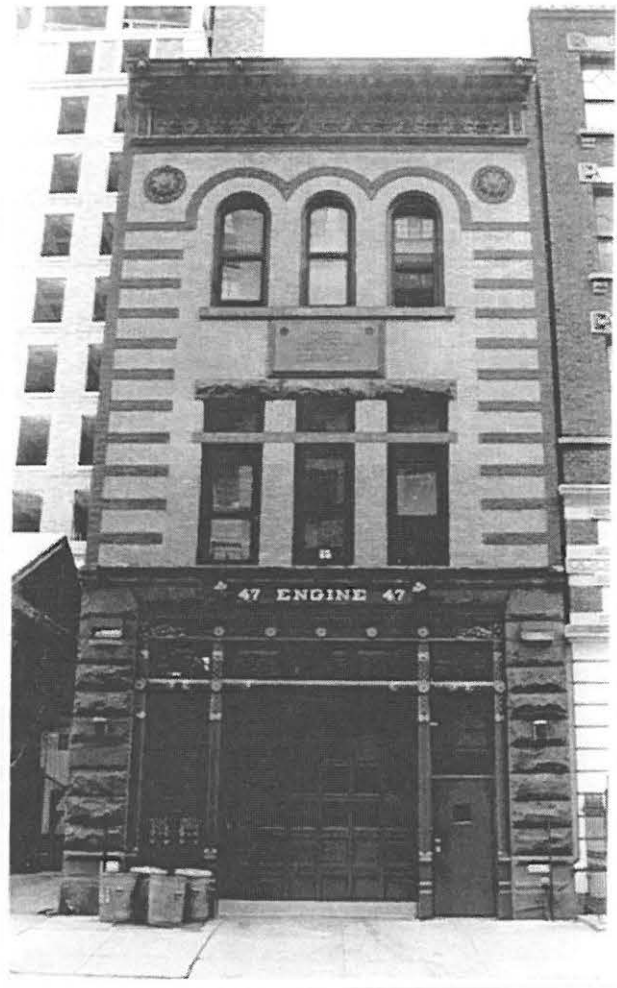
500 West 113th Street, Borough of Manhattan.  
Built 1889-90; architects, Napoleon LeBrun & Sons.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1884, Lot 38.

On April 15, 1997, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of Fire Engine Company No. 47, and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 2). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three speakers testified in favor of designation; there were no speakers in opposition to designation.

Summary

Fire Engine Company No. 47, built in 1889-90, is a distinguished firehouse designed by the architectural firm N. LeBrun & Sons. Stylistically, it combines features of Romanesque Revival and Classical Revival styles, representing the transition between architectural movements at the turn of the century. Between the years of 1880 and 1895, N. LeBrun & Sons helped to define the Fire Department's expression of civic architecture, both functionally and symbolically, in more than 40 buildings. Fire Engine Company No. 47 is characteristic of N. LeBrun & Sons' numerous mid-block firehouses, reflecting the firm's attention to materials, stylistic detail, plan, and setting. Built early in the period of intensive growth in northern Manhattan, this firehouse also represents the city's commitment to the civic character of essential municipal services.



## DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

### The Fire Department of the City of New York<sup>1</sup>

The origins of New York's Fire Department date to the city's beginning as the Dutch colony New Amsterdam. Leather fire buckets, first imported from Holland and later manufactured by a cobbler in the colony, were required in every household. Regular chimney inspections and the "rattle watch" patrol helped protect the colony during the Dutch period. By 1731, under English rule, two "engines" were imported from London and housed in wooden sheds in lower Manhattan. The Common Council authorized a volunteer force in 1737, and the Volunteer Fire Department of the City of New York was officially established by an act of the state legislature in 1798. As the city grew, this force was augmented by new volunteer companies. Between 1800 and 1850, seven major fires occurred, leading to the establishment of a building code and the formation of new volunteer fire companies on a regular basis. The number of firemen grew from 600 in 1800 to more than 4,000 by 1865.

Intense rivalries among the companies developed, stemming in large part from the Volunteer Fire Department's role as a significant political influence in municipal affairs. The Tammany political machine was especially adept at incorporating the fire department into its ranks. Since the 1820s it was common knowledge that "a success in the fire company was the open sesame to success in politics."<sup>2</sup>

During the peak years of Tammany's power, increasingly intense competition among companies began to hinder firefighting, creating public exasperation with the volunteer force. Brawls among firemen at the scene of fires and acts of sabotage among the companies became commonplace. In the 1860s, an alliance between the Republican controlled state legislature (which wanted to impair Tammany Hall's political control) and fire insurance companies (who wanted more efficient firefighting) played on this public sentiment to replace the volunteers with a paid force. On March 30, 1865, the New York State Legislature established the Metropolitan Fire District, comprising New York and Brooklyn. This act abolished New York's Volunteer Fire Department and created the Metropolitan Fire Department, a paid professional force under the jurisdiction of the state. By the end of the year, the city's 124 volunteer companies with more than 4,000 men had

retired or disbanded to be replaced by thirty-three engine companies and twelve ladder companies operated by a force of some 500 men.

With the creation of a professional Fire Department in 1865, improvements were immediate. Regular service was extended to 106th Street in Manhattan, with suburban companies further north, and its telegraph system was upgraded. Early in 1865 there were only 64 call boxes in New York, none of them located north of 14th Street. Within the next year and a half, the number had increased to 187.<sup>3</sup> Horse-drawn, steam-powered apparatus were required for all companies.<sup>4</sup> The firehouse crews were standardized at twelve men (as opposed to a total of up to 100 men per firehouse under the volunteer system), and the Department took on a serious, disciplined character.<sup>5</sup>

In 1869, "Boss" William Marcy Tweed's candidate for New York State governor was elected, and he quickly regained control of the Fire Department through the Charter of 1870 (commonly known as the "Tweed Charter"). Only three years later, this charter was revoked when Tweed was sentenced to prison for embezzling millions from the city. Permanently under city control after 1870, the Fire Department (separated into a New York Department and a Brooklyn Department) retained its professional status and proceeded to modernize rapidly. While no new buildings were built until 1879-80 (the last one built prior to this was the Fireman's Hall in 1854<sup>6</sup>), the companies continually invested in modern apparatus and new technologies.

### Firehouse Function and Planning in the LeBrun Era<sup>7</sup>

With the creation of the Metropolitan Fire Department in 1865 -- and the supposed removal of Tammany control of the companies -- the Common Council hoped to filter out remaining Tammany influence by banning any firehouse construction for five years. The ban, for reasons unknown, lasted until 1879, when, under Fire Chief Eli Bates, the department embarked on a major campaign for new firehouse construction throughout the city, but especially in northern sections.

N. LeBrun & Sons designed all of the Fire Department's forty-two structures built between 1880 and 1895. It is not clear exactly why the LeBrun firm was commissioned by the Fire Department to serve as its sole architect during these years. Napoleon LeBrun had a personal interest in

promoting the use of professional architects rather than contractors for municipal building projects. In 1879, LeBrun was the representative of the American Institute of Architects on the Board of Examiners of the Building Bureau of the Fire Department, a position he held for eighteen years. This position may well have led to the commission, which ultimately did set a standard for firehouse design in New York.

With the professionalization of the firefighting force in 1865, the spatial requirements of the firehouse were established.<sup>8</sup> The ground floor functioned primarily as storage for the apparatus, and the second and third floors housed the dormitory, kitchen, and captain's office. While the basic function of the house had not changed by 1880 (and is essentially the same today), LeBrun is credited with standardizing the main program components, while introducing some minor, but important, innovations in the plan.

For example, when horses were first introduced into the system, they were stabled outside behind the firehouse. Valuable time was lost in bringing them inside to the apparatus. LeBrun's firehouses included horse stalls inside the building, at the rear of the apparatus floor, and some houses had special features related to the horses' care and feeding.<sup>9</sup> The LeBrun firehouses also neatly accommodated the necessity of drying the cotton hoses after each use, incorporating an interior hose drying "tower" which ran the height of the building along one wall, thus economizing valuable space in the firehouse.

#### History of Engine Company No. 47<sup>10</sup>

Engine Company No. 47 had its origins in Combination Engine Company No. 47, which was organized in 1881 in a firehouse on 149th Street in the Bronx. In 1882, the company moved to a firehouse at 766 Twelfth Avenue [Amsterdam Avenue] (this firehouse was sold by the city in 1960). Combination companies were intended for use in less developed areas, where they operated a "ladder" truck -- usually a city service truck -- in addition to its engine apparatus. The non-regulation ladder trucks would provide a degree of ladder service until a regulation ladder truck arrived on the fire scene. These combination companies were short-lived in Manhattan, as the city developed northward and required the department's regular, more efficient service in those areas.

As reported in the Fire Department's *Annual Report* of 1889, the department recognized the need

to prepare for the encroaching development of the city northward in Manhattan:

There is also imperative need of a number of additional companies north of One Hundred and Tenth Street, where no increase in the fire-extinguishing force has been made since the organization of the Department, to keep pace with the large growth in population and buildings.<sup>11</sup>

Less than a decade after moving to upper Manhattan, Combination No. 47 was reorganized as Engine Company No. 47. In 1891, it moved into its new firehouse at 500 West 113th Street, designed by the architectural firm N. LeBrun & Sons.<sup>12</sup> In that year, the company was staffed by twelve firemen and four horses (two for its steam engine and two for its wheel and tender); it responded to 57 alarms and fought sixteen fires. This firehouse continues to serve Engine Company No. 47.

Built in the middle of a fifteen-year period in which LeBrun designed more than forty buildings for the Fire Department, Engine Company No. 47 is representative of the firm's approach to firehouse design in a highly politicized period for the Fire Department and a time of intense urbanization for the city at large. Engine Company No. 47 was one of the earliest urban buildings in Morningside Heights, built just prior to its transformation to an urban neighborhood. Morningside Park is the eastern border of the neighborhood, running from 110th to 123rd Streets, one block east of Engine Company No. 47. The park (designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux) was built in 1887, when the area began its urban development. For much of the nineteenth century, the Bloomingdale Insane Asylum and the Leake & Watts Orphan Asylum occupied large tracts of land in the area. By 1890 both institutions had moved to Westchester County, and other large-scale, but more urban, institutions built on those sites. Columbia University, Teachers College, St. Luke's Hospital, and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine all began building in the early 1890s. In 1890 the New Croton Aqueduct began service; its gatehouse adjacent to Engine No. 47 was completed before this service began.

Today, Engine Company No. 47's block is filled with five- to eight-story apartment buildings. This building exerts a strong architectural presence in a neighborhood filled with monumental landmarks. Particularly in its harmonious relationship to the Croton Gatehouse, this firehouse is an important

symbol of the city's municipal development in the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup>

#### N. LeBrun & Sons, Architects<sup>14</sup>

Napoleon Eugene Charles LeBrun (1821-1901) was born to French immigrant parents in Philadelphia. At fifteen years of age he was placed in the office of classicist Thomas Ustick Walter (1804-1887), where he remained for six years. LeBrun began his own practice in 1841 in Philadelphia where he had several major commissions -- including the Cathedral of SS. Peter and Paul (1846-64) and the Academy of Music (1852-57) -- before moving to New York in 1864. His Second Empire Masonic Temple competition submission of 1870 did much to establish his reputation in New York. In the same year his son Pierre joined him and the firm became Napoleon LeBrun & Son in 1880. In 1892 the firm became Napoleon LeBrun & Sons in recognition of his youngest son, Michel. All three were active members of the American Institute of Architects.

Napoleon LeBrun was first commissioned by the Fire Department of the City of New York in 1880. Until 1895, N. LeBrun & Sons designed more than 40 buildings for the Fire Department throughout Manhattan, including many firehouses, a warehouse, and a fire pier.

The firm's fifteen-year building campaign resulted in an average of two to three firehouses each year. In some cases, nearly identical buildings were erected; Engine Company No. 47 has a twin in Engine Company No. 18 at 132 West 10th Street (1891, located in the Greenwich Village Historic District). Most of the designs used classical detailing and overall symmetry (in part dictated by the large vehicular entrance on a narrow lot), but there is also a wide range of aesthetic expression.

The firm created two large, elaborate buildings for the Fire Department during this period: the Fire Department Headquarters at 157-159 East 67th Street (now Engine Company No. 39/Ladder Company No. 16, 1884-86), and Engine Company No. 31, 87 Lafayette Street (1895, a designated New York City Landmark). The Headquarters building is a strong expression of the Romanesque Revival style, and in the years following its completion, several smaller firehouses were designed in a subdued version of that style. Engine Company No. 47 is one example.

In Engine Company No. 31, the firm's best known firehouse design is the least representative of

their tenure with the Fire Department, and marks a transition between the restrained, classical elegance of the majority of their firehouses and the increasingly monumental designs of other architects which followed at the turn of the century. Engine Company No. 31 is a freestanding structure for a triple engine company modeled on sixteenth-century Loire Valley chateaux. It was a distinct departure from their usual "storefront" design, and is considered the firm's most impressive civic design. Also of note was the firm's acclaimed Hook & Ladder Company No. 15 at Old Slip (1885, demolished), which was designed in the style reminiscent of a seventeenth-century Dutch house.

While they are best known in New York City for the firehouses, the LeBrun's designed several churches including the Church of the Epiphany (1870, demolished), Saint John-the-Baptist (1872), 211 West 30th Street, and Saint Mary-the-Virgin (1894-95, a designated New York City Landmark), 133-145 West 46th Street. At the turn of the century, N. LeBrun & Sons achieved renown for office building design in Manhattan, most notably the home office of the Metropolitan Life Building at 1 Madison Avenue (1890-92, and annex tower, 1909, designated New York City Landmark)<sup>15</sup> and the Home Life Insurance Company Building, 256-257 Broadway (1892-94, a designated New York City Landmark).

#### Building Description

Engine Company No. 47 is a 25-foot wide, three-story brick and brownstone structure, faced with classically-inspired brownstone and terra-cotta detailing. While the predominant style of the building is Romanesque Revival, expressed through round-arched windows, the rusticated brownstone base, and the decorative, terra-cotta quoining, the building also exhibits influences of the then newly-emerging Classical Revival style, reflected in the richly ornamented entablature below a heavy cornice, and the large medallions just below.

Base: A cast-iron frame encompasses the building's large vehicular entrance, centered between the pedestrian doorway on the west and the house watch window on the east. A tripartite transom lights each of these openings. The window sash and transom lights are metal-framed replacements. The cast-iron frame incorporates fishscale motifs, sunflower motifs, and wave motifs in the lintel above the



transoms. A protruding brownstone course terminates the brownstone base.

Upper stories: The second and third stories are faced with orange-colored brick. Diaper-patterned terra cotta creates the effect of quoins, and continues across the facade, outlining the round-arched windows of the third story. The second and third story tripartite fenestration is boldly defined. The one-over-one, double-hung windows with metal-framed replacement sash are divided by thick piers, but share a common brownstone sill, transom bar, and lintel. The third story one-over-one round-arched windows (also with metal-framed replacement sash) share a common sill, and are highlighted by the terra-cotta detailing above. A brownstone plaque set between the second and third stories bears the name of the Fire Commissioners and the architects.<sup>16</sup> The facade is finished with a richly-ornamented terra-cotta entablature below a heavy cornice. Foliate terra-cotta medallions are prominently placed between the terra-cotta arch outline and the entablature.

East elevation: Since the firehouse overlooks the Croton Aqueduct gatehouse immediately to its east, the architects were able to articulate the design of the east elevation. Several features of the street facade are repeated, albeit more simply. Common red brick is trimmed with brownstone, and a simple version of the terra-cotta quoining is repeated. Three sets of paired windows with metal-framed replacement sash light each story, and the third story duplicates the round-arched windows of the street facade.

A small outbuilding at the rear of the firehouse that was built to store horse feed and equipment has since been incorporated into the firehouse and now serves as the company's kitchen. Several integral interior features are intact, such as the circular iron staircase, the brass sliding poles, the interior hose drying "tower," and the pressed-tin ceiling. (The interior is not included in this designation.)

Report prepared by  
Laura Hansen  
Landmarks Consultant

#### NOTES

1. The following sources were consulted for this section: John A. Calderone and Jack Lerch, *Wheels of the Bravest, A History of Fire Department of New York Fire Apparatus 1865-1992* (Staten Island, New York: Fire Apparatus Journal Publications, 1984); Augustine E. Costello, *Our firemen, A history of the New York fire departments, volunteer and paid* (New York: A.E. Costello, 1887); Kenneth Holcomb Dunshee, *As You Pass By* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1940); "A Festival of Firehouses," *Architectural Record* 176 (March 1988), 110-125; Fire Department of the City of New York, "The Midnight Alarm," performance souvenir program (November 23, 1935); Fire Department of the City of New York, "Fiftieth Anniversary of the Organization of the Fire Department of the City of New York, review and presentation of medals for 1914," (June 15, 1915); Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Engine Company No. 7/Ladder Company No. 1* (LP-1719), report prepared by Charles Savage (New York: City of New York, 1993); Lowell M. Limpus, *History of the New York Fire Department* (New York: Dutton, 1940); Daniel Pisark, "Old New York and Brooklyn Firehouses: Their Evolution, Architecture, and Preservation" (unpublished typescript, New York Landmark Scholar report, 1976).
2. "Fiftieth Anniversary...", p. 34. The most famous political career to have begun in -- and benefitted greatly from -- the Volunteer Fire Department was William M. "Boss" Tweed. He served in four companies before forming his own, the Americus Co. 6 in 1848. Ten years later, the infamous "Tweed Ring" (included Tweed and three city officials) controlled Tammany, and effectively, New York.
3. The first telegraph fire alarm system, for police and fire, was installed in 1851. The city was divided into eight districts, each with a strategically located watch tower. The Fire Alarm Telegraph system was upgraded in 1884 to serve all of Manhattan; its Central Office was located in the new Headquarters

Building at East 67th Street. Telephones were installed in firehouses in the 1890s.

4. There was widespread resistance to horses and steam engines by the volunteer companies. The firefighters felt the new apparatus diminished their status and strength, which was proudly displayed by racing the hand-pulled apparatus through the streets to a fire.
5. A significant reminder of that period is the military personnel terminology, which is still in use today. The department was organized into divisions and battalions; titles of rank changed from chief engineer to colonel, from foreman to captain, from engineer of steamer to sergeant, etc.
6. This building, located at 153-157 Mercer Street, within the SoHo-Cast Iron Historic District, no longer functions as a firehouse.
7. The following sources were consulted for this section: Christina Huemer, "Visible City," *Metropolis* (May 1986), 47-48; Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Fire Engine Company No. 65* (LP-1545), prepared by David M. Breiner (New York: City of New York, 1990); Amy C. Martin, "Facades and Reality: Firehouses of N. LeBrun and Sons" (M.A. thesis, Columbia University, 1993); U.S. Department of Interior: Heritage, Conservation, and Recreation Services, National Register of Historic Places, Inventory-Nomination Form, "New York City Firehouses: National Register Thematic Group" (Form prepared by Christopher Gray for the New York City Landmarks Conservancy, 1980); Daniel Pisark; Donald Martin Reynolds, *The Architecture of New York City* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1984); John Tauranac, *Elegant New York, the Builders and the Buildings 1885-1915* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985); Rebecca Zurier, *The American Firehouse, An Architectural and Social History* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1982).
8. Boss Tweed was responsible for introducing living quarters in the firehouse. Tweed recognized the firehouse's potential as an ideal place for political gatherings, and constructed the Henry Street firehouse for his Americus Co. 6 to include meeting space as well as a dormitory, library, kitchen and other comforts. The firehouse as a place to store equipment gave way to the firehouse as a social center; this transition cemented the Fire Department's influence in New York City politics.
9. The time it took for a company to respond to a fire alarm was critical to firefighting success. During the late nineteenth century, numerous innovations (many invented by firemen) helped decrease the response time. These included the brass sliding pole (which quickly became a standard feature that is still in use today); a "quick hitch" handing harness for the horse team; and steam pipe systems which would automatically disconnect from a departing engine; among others. Reynolds, 292-293; Zurier, 102-107.
10. The following sources were used for this section: American Society of Planning Officials, "Fire House Location Planning," *Advisory Service Information Report No. 98* (May 1957); John A. Calderone, *Services Not Required* (Staten Island, New York: Fire Apparatus Journal Publication, 1996); Charles Lockwood, *Manhattan Moves Uptown* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976); *Report of the Fire Department of the City of New York*. (1889, 1890, 1891); *Robinson's Atlas of the City of New York*. (1885, 1890). The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Jack Lerch and Dan Maye, librarians at the New York City Fire Department Library, and Firefighters Michael Boucher and Eddie Callahan.
11. One firehouse siting consideration through the end of the nineteenth century was the distance a team of horses could run at full speed, which suggests that the distance between these firehouse locations was based on this response time factor. Nearly all firehouses built in this period were located in middle and working class neighborhoods.
12. The property was deeded to the Mayor, Aldermen, and Commonalty of the City of New York from the Trustees of the Leake & Watts Orphan House on March 12, 1888. (New York County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances, Liber 2114, Page 353.)

13. A new highrise building is currently under construction at the northeast corner of 112th Street and Amsterdam Avenue. This building is being linked to the Croton Gatehouse and will be flush with the firehouse at its southwestern rear wall.
14. The following sources were consulted for this section: Constance M. Greif, "Napoleon LeBrun," *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects*, Adolf K. Placzek, ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1982); Landmarks Preservation Commission, *(Former) Home Life Insurance Company Building* (LP-1751), report prepared by Charles Savage (New York: City of New York, 1990); Montgomery Schuyler, "The Work of N. LeBrun & Sons," *Architectural Record* 27 (May 1910), 365-381.
15. The firm served as architects to the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company from 1876 until at least 1909.
16. This plaque reads: "AD 1889, Commissioners Henry D. Purroy, President; S. Howland Robbins; Anthony Eickhoff; N. LeBrun and Sons Archts." The firehouse was constructed under NB 1079-1889.

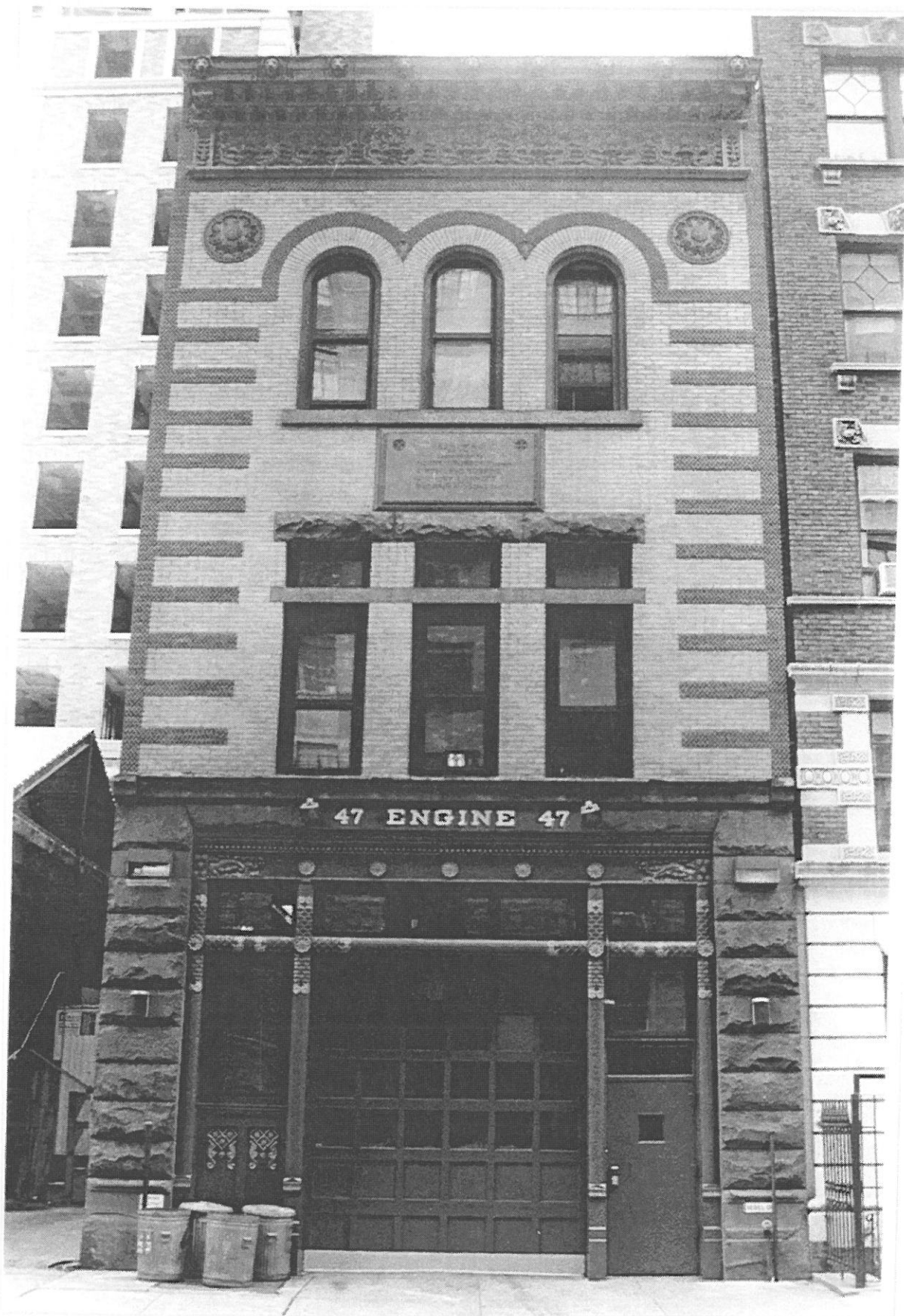
## FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that Fire Engine Company No. 47 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, Fire Engine Company No. 47, built in 1889-90, is a distinguished firehouse designed by the architectural firm N. LeBrun & Sons; that, stylistically, it combines features of Romanesque Revival and Classical Revival styles, representing the transition between architectural movements at the turn of the century; that between the years of 1880 and 1895, N. LeBrun & Sons helped to define the Fire Department's expression of civic architecture, both functionally and symbolically, in more than 40 buildings; that Engine No. 47 is characteristic of N. LeBrun & Sons' numerous mid-block firehouses, reflecting the firm's attention to materials, stylistic detail, plan, and setting; that among its significant features are the brownstone and terra-cotta ornament and intricately detailed cast-iron vehicular entrance; and that built early in the period of intensive growth in northern Manhattan, this firehouse also represents the city's commitment to the civic character of essential municipal services.

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 Fire Engine Company No. 47, 500 West 113th Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1884, Lot 38, as its Landmark Site.





Fire Engine Company No. 47, 500 West 113th Street, Manhattan  
Photo: Carl Forster



Fire Engine No. 47, View of top section  
Photo: Carl Forster

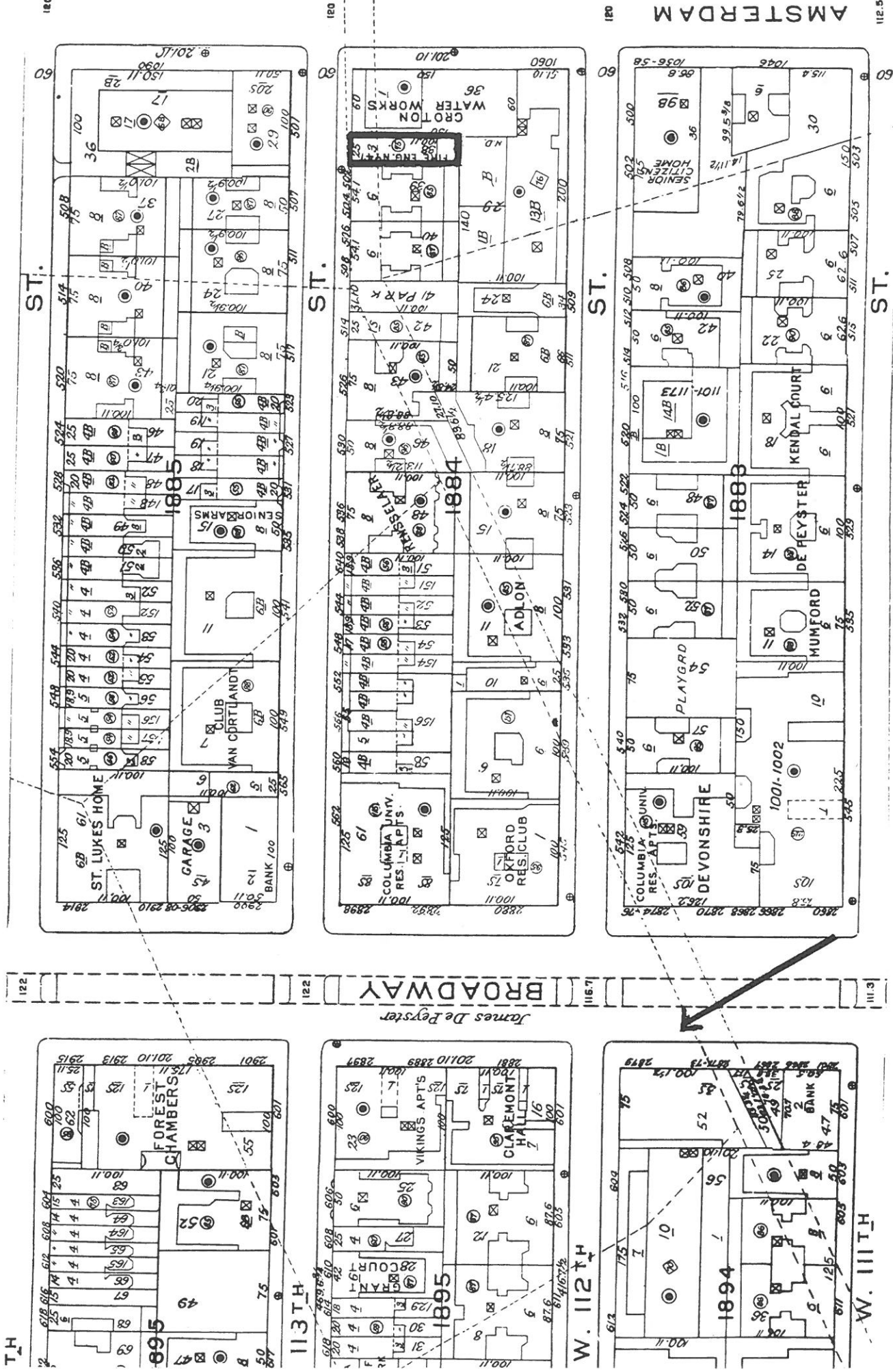


Fire Engine No. 47, View of base  
Photo: Carl Forster



Fire Engine Company No. 47  
View of front and east elevation  
Photo: Carl Forster





Fire Engine No. 47, 500 West 113th Street, Manhattan  
Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1884, Lot 38  
Source: Sanborn Manhattan Landbook, 1996-1997, pl. 126

BROADWAY

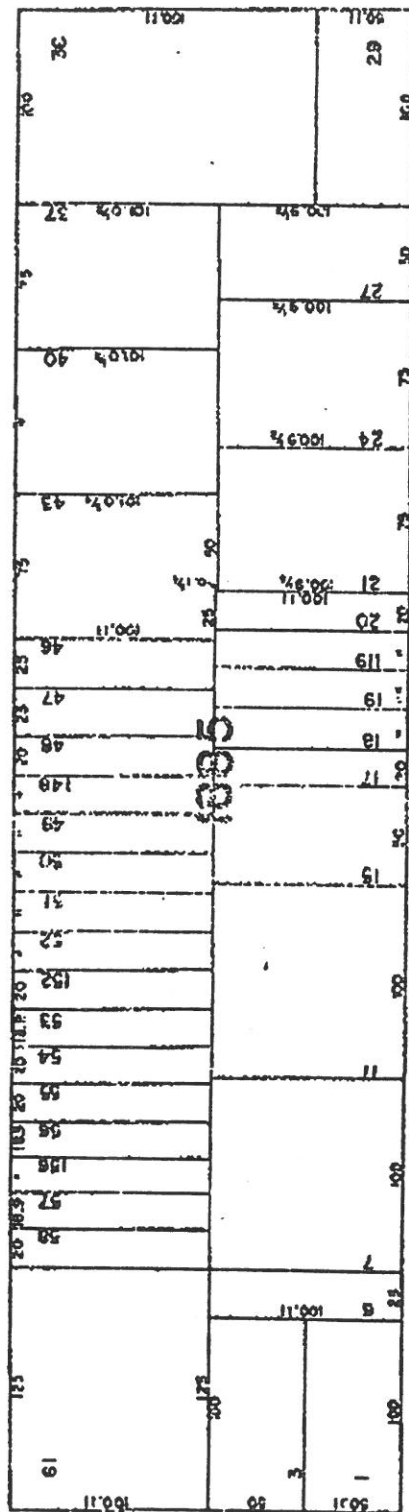
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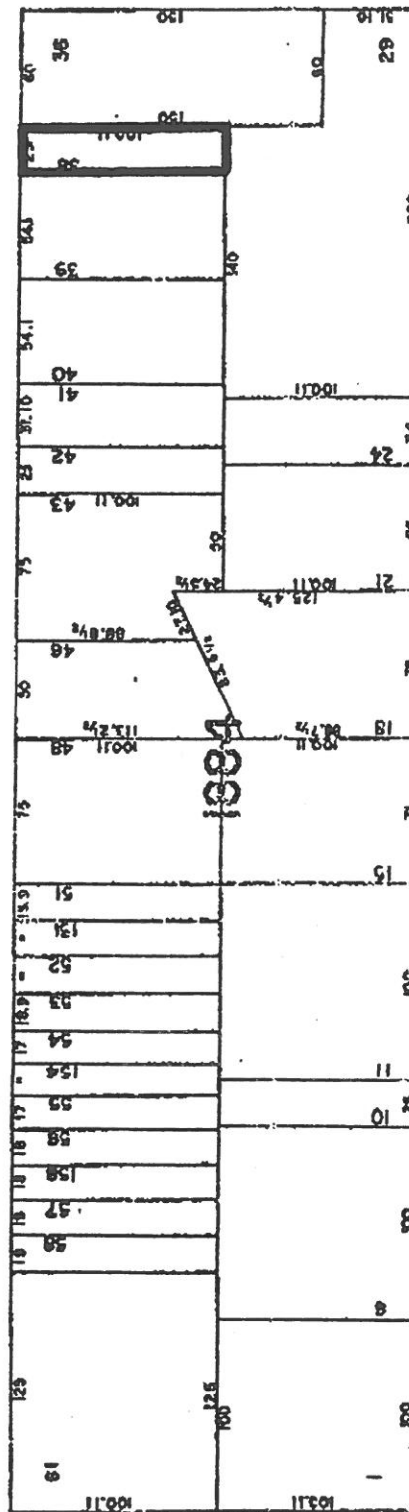
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AMSTERDAM

Fire Engine No. 47, 500 West 113th Street, Manhattan  
Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1884, Lot 38  
Source: Dept. of Finance, City Surveyor, Tax Map