

PRATT INSTITUTE LIBRARY, 224-228 Ryerson Street, Borough of Brooklyn. Built 1896: architect William B. Tubby.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn, Tax Map Block 1919, Lot 1 in part consisting of the land on which the described building is situated.

On October 9, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Pratt Institute Library 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 speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Pratt Institute Library, built in 1896, is a handsome example of the Renaissance Revival style. Designed by William B. Tubby, the building was constructed to house the Pratt Institute Free Library, the first free public library in the city of Brooklyn.

The library is located on the campus of Pratt Institute, founded by Charles Pratt for the training of artisans, foremen, designers, draftsmen, and other technicians. The school was an outgrowth of Pratt's interest in manual training and his belief that the best way to help others was to teach them how to help themselves. The type of technical training established at Pratt was unprecedented in the United States at that time.

Charles Pratt (1830-1891) was born in Watertown, Massachusetts. In 1851 he moved to New York City and worked for the firm of Schenck & Downing, dealers in paints and oils. He joined the firm of Reynolds, Devoe & Pratt, which manufactured and sold paints and related products in 1854. In 1867, Pratt established the firm of Charles Pratt & Co. with the intention of marketing a less flammable kerosene for lighting, one that would have a flashing point of more than 100 degrees F. "Pratt's Astral Oil" gained a worldwide reputation, and the firm began to manufacture tools, cans, petroleum barrels, and similar products. The Pratt Manufacturing Co. was founded to produce sulphuric acids and other chemicals used in petroleum refining. Pratt's business interests were acquired by John D. Rockefeller of Standard Oil in 1874. At that time Pratt's refineries had a capacity of 1500 barrels of oil a day and were regarded as the most successful in the country. Pratt remained with the company and quickly became a major force at Standard Oil.

Pratt, whose philanthropic interests were wide ranging, not only founded the Pratt Institute and its Free Library but also endowed the Adelphi Academy in Brooklyn, Amherst College, and the University of Rochester. He built the Astral Apartments, a model tenement development in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, near his oil refineries, and gave \$100,000 towards the construction of Clinton Hill's Emmanuel Baptist Church, a designated New York City Landmark. Pratt had moved into the Clinton Hill area in the 1870s, building his large mansion at 252 Clinton Avenue in 1875. He also bestowed houses in the neighborhood as wedding presents for his sons, and all were built on Clinton Avenue after Charles Pratt's death in 1891.

The belief in self help which led Pratt to establish the institute also led him to an interest in the public library movement with its emphasis on self education. An active supporter of the New York Mercantile Library, Pratt resolved to establish a library in Brooklyn open to all. Provisions were made to accommodate the Free Library in the Pratt Institute Main Building, and it was opened to the public in 1888 - the first free public library in the city of Brooklyn. That same year a branch of the Free library was established in the Astral Apartments. The collection and number of users of the Free Library rapidly expanded, necessitating the construction of a separate library building, which opened on May 28, 1896, with 61,000 volumes. The building was designed by William B. Tubby.

Tubby (1858-1944), born in Des Moines, Iowa, studied at the Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute and in the office of Ebenezer L. Roberts. In 1883 he established his own practice and designed buildings throughout New York City including five Carnegie Libraries, the Brooklyn Wallabout Market buildings, and the 83rd Precinct Police Station, a designated New York City Landmark, in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn. Among his domestic commissions are rows of houses at 179-183 St. James Place (1892), 127-135 Cambridge Place (1894), and 864-872 Carroll Street (1887), the neo-Jacobean William H. Childs residence (1900-01) at 53 Prospect Park West, and most notably, the Romanesque Revival style Charles Millard Pratt residence (1895) at 241 Clinton Avenue.

Tubby designed the library building in a Renaissance Revival style that reflects the increasing popularity of classical styles in the 1890s. In the use of forms and materials, the design closely echoes Tubby's design for South Hall. These features also harmonize the library with the Romanesque Revival Main Building.

The freestanding three-story red brick library building, located near Hall Street, has slightly projecting end pavilions and a two-story stacks wing at the western end. The base of the building is faced with brick simulating rustication at the first floor and set off by brownstone bandcourses. Round-arched window openings, outlined by brick and brownstone moldings, accent the second story while rectangular window openings are at the third floor. The building is surmounted by a modillioned cornice supporting a balustraded parapet. A small arcaded porch, added in 1912 to provide access to the children's room, was removed in 1980 from the south side and has been relocated as a freestanding sculpture elsewhere on campus. The enclosed sandstone entrance porch on the north, which dates from 1936, is approached by asymmetrically disposed steps.

The porch features round-arched openings enframing smaller paired round-arched openings with decorative columns and paired tympana. The two-story stacks wing has the same treatment as the main block, but the modillioned roof cornice supports a plain parapet.

In 1940, the Pratt Institute Free Library was closed to the general public. By that time the Brooklyn Public Library had greatly expanded its activities, alleviating the need for Pratt's facility. The Library continues to serve the students and faculty of Pratt Institute, and construction is underway to enlarge the library building below ground.

Today the Pratt Institute Library remains a handsome Renaissance Revival building, harmonizing with other major campus buildings. As an example of the work of William Tubby, it is a reminder of that architect's associations with the Pratt family. The home of Brooklyn's first free public library, the building is a tangible symbol of Charles Pratt's belief in self-help and his interest in the public library movement.

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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 Pratt Institute Library 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 Pratt Institute Library, built in 1896, is a handsome example of the Renaissance Revival style; that the use of forms and materials echoes the architect's design for South Hall and harmonizes the library with the Main Building; that as an example of the work of William Tubby, it is a reminder of that architect's association with the Pratt family; that the building housed Brooklyn's first free public library; and that Pratt Institute Library is a tangible symbol of Charles Pratt's belief in self help and his interest in the public library movement.

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 Pratt Institute Library, 224-228 Ryerson Street, Borough of Brooklyn and designates Tax Map Block 1919, Lot 1 in part, consisting of the land on which the described building is situated, Borough of Brooklyn, as its Landmark Site.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Photo: LPC

PRATT INSTITUTE
LIBRARY
224-228 RYERSON STREET, BROOKLYN

ARCHITECT: WILLIAM B. TUBBY
BUILT: 1896