

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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# NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*  
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

## 1 NAME

HISTORIC Cooper Union

AND/OR COMMON

Cooper Union

## 2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER Cooper Square, 7th Street and 4th Avenue

CITY, TOWN

New York

VICINITY OF

17

STATE

New York

CODE

36

COUNTY

New York

CODE

61

NOT FOR PUBLICATION  
CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

## 3 CLASSIFICATION

### CATEGORY

- DISTRICT
- BUILDING(S)
- STRUCTURE
- SITE
- OBJECT

### OWNERSHIP

- PUBLIC
- PRIVATE

BOTH

### PUBLIC ACQUISITION

- IN PROCESS
- BEING CONSIDERED

### STATUS

- OCCUPIED
- UNOCCUPIED
- WORK IN PROGRESS

### ACCESSIBLE

- YES: RESTRICTED
- YES: UNRESTRICTED
- NO

### PRESENT USE

- AGRICULTURE
- COMMERCIAL
- EDUCATIONAL
- ENTERTAINMENT
- GOVERNMENT
- INDUSTRIAL
- MILITARY
- MUSEUM
- PARK
- PRIVATE RESIDENCE
- RELIGIOUS
- SCIENTIFIC
- TRANSPORTATION
- OTHER:

## 4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME Cooper Union

STREET & NUMBER

Cooper Square, 7th Street and 4th Avenue

CITY, TOWN

New York

VICINITY OF

New York

STATE

## 5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE,  
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

New York County Hall of Records

STREET & NUMBER

31 Chambers St.

CITY, TOWN

New York

STATE

New York

## 6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

Historic American Engineering Record

DATE

1973

FEDERAL  STATE  COUNTY  LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR  
SURVEY RECORDS

Historic American Engineering Record

CITY, TOWN

Washington

STATE

D.C. 20240

# 7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED      DATE _____
<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

---

## DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Cooper Union, as it originally appeared following its completion in 1858, was a five-story, brownstone and brick structure, irregularly shaped to derive optimum use from its irregularly shaped plot. The exterior facade was Italianate with a full loggia on the north end, a two-story loggia on the south end and a first story arcade running the perimeter of the building. The arched windows alternated rhythmically from the full story windows of the first floor, to the half story windows of the first floor, to the half story windows of second and fifth floors, with the large two story windows occupying the third and fourth floors. The roof was flat and surmounted by a parapet. One outstanding feature of the structure was contained in the steel beam frame of the building, built using the rolled I-beams of Peter Cooper's Trenton iron works. These beams were first developed by 1854 and were calculated to reduce the danger of structural collapse in the event of fire. The twenty foot beams were used in floor construction, supporting segmental brick arches, which were then covered with concrete. Cast iron was used as well, in the form of columns of varying design which helped support the ceilings. The foundations of the building itself were three-tiered pyramids of granite, resting on sand. Although elevators had not yet been perfected, Cooper had the architect, Fred Peterson, incorporate a circular elevator shaft in the southwest corner of the building. A fan-forced ventilation system was another innovation which Cooper had installed during construction.

The interior of the Union was given a rather traditional treatment with the exception of the Great Hall in the basement. At the time of its completion, this auditorium was the largest in the city. The first two floors were given over to shops and offices, which rents were to help fund the school. The top three floors housed the library classrooms, and studios. Cooper had envisioned a rooftop garden at first, but instead a succession of additional floors were added and removed over the years. Today there are three additional floors; the sixth is a full floor, pierced with several skylights, circa 1895. The seventh and eight floors occupy only the southern end of the building and are used for offices. On the eighth floor is housed the original clock (although with an electric rather than the original spring motor) which faces down the Bowery. An additional feature of the building was the subterranean vault under Seventh Street, where Cooper had the building's power plant installed, for safety's sake. The vault now houses the school's air conditioning plant.

In 1972, an overall renovation of the interior of the Union was commenced. The southern end of the building was entirely gutted and rebuilt, although the circular elevator shaft was preserved. In the basement Great Hall, the seating area was contracted, but the original pillars, now covered with plaster, and the original seats were reinstalled. The original stage was moderately widened. A conventional rectangular elevator was also installed, opposite the circular shaft. Wood and cast iron structural members were removed, and the floors were covered with poured concrete. Many of these alterations were made to conform to fire safety regulations. The south end of the building now contains offices and gallery space. The library occupies the rest of the

# 8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW				
<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGION	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)	
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION			

SPECIFIC DATES      1858      BUILDER/ARCHITECT      **F.A. Peterson**

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The successful establishment of Cooper Union marked the fulfillment of Peter Cooper's dream of a free school to "improve and elevate the working classes of the City of New York." Since its opening in 1858, this pioneer landmark in the private support of public education has also served as a forum for important issues in the history of the last century. It was within the Great Lecture Hall there that Abraham Lincoln delivered the keynote address of his 1860 campaign.

The six-story Cooper Union was designed by F.A. Peterson with a mechanical ventilating system and other innovations planned by Cooper himself. It is located at its original site, fulfilling its original purpose, at Cooper Square, Seventh Street and Fourth Avenue, New York City.

### HISTORY

Cooper Union continues today to express in practice the civic philosophy of that unique millionaire and philanthropist, Peter Cooper. As early as 1830, before Cooper had ascended to the ranks of millionaires, he was considering plans for a public institution: " .... I determined to do what I could to secure to the youth of my native city and country the benefits of such an institution ... and throw its doors open at night so that boys and girls of this city, who had no better opportunity than I had to enjoy means of information, would be enable to improve and better their condition, fitting them for all the various and useful purposes of life."-1.

Over the next twenty-two years, as Cooper continued to amass one of the largest fortunes in the country, he was also developing schemes for such an school, and was steadily acquiring lots on Astor Place, between Third and Fourth Avenues. By 1852, the necessary land was assembled and the cornerstone of Cooper Union was laid the following year.

Public acceptance of the Cooper Union was overwhelming from the day its doors opened in May, 1858. The Union's many resources, which included a night curriculum of courses in chemistry, elementary physics, mathematics, music and drawing, as well as a school of design for women and the only large and well-stocked library open to the public in the city, were being utilized by as many as three thousand people a week. The widest influence however, was generated within the great basement Lecture Hall, where prominent

# 9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

- Edwin Burdell, "A Symbol In Brownstone," reprinted from the Cooper Union Alumni News, vol. 17, #.2, February, 1953.  
 Peter Lyon, "Peter Cooper, The Honest Man," American Heritage, vol. 10, #.2, Feb., 1959.  
 Allan Nevins, Abram S. Hewitt; With Some Account of Peter Cooper (New York, 1935).

# 10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY less than 1 acre

UTM REFERENCES

A	1 8	5 8 5 2 2 0	4 5 0 8 9 8 0	B			
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING		ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING
C				D			

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION Beginning at the intersection of Third Avenue and Astor Place, proceed west approximately 143' along the south curb of Astor Place to its intersection with the east curb of Fourth Avenue, thence south along the east curb for approximately 155', thence east along the north curb of Seventh Street for approximately 86' to its intersection with the west curb of Third Avenue, thence north along the west curb to the point of origin, approximately 195'. These boundaries enclose the landmark within the bounds of the block which it has occupied by itself since its construction.

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

# 11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE

Richard Greenwood, Historian, Landmark Review Task Force

ORGANIZATION

Historic Sites Survey

DATE

8/8/75

STREET & NUMBER

1100 L. Street

TELEPHONE

202-523-5464

CITY OR TOWN

Washington

STATE

D.C. 20240

# 12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL

STATE

LOCAL  landmark

Designated: July 4, 1966  
 Date

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

Boundary Certified:  
George J. Emery  
 Date: April 10, 1976

FEDERAL REPRESENTATIVE SIGNATURE

TITLE

DATE

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

DATE

11/24/75

ATTEST:

DATE

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

(NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARKS)

(NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARKS)

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CONTINUATION SHEET

1

ITEM NUMBER

7

PAGE

2

first floor, while the second through sixth floor. are all occupied by studios, classrooms, workshops and other facilities associated with the School of Art and Architecture. Alterations in the north end of the building were largely confined to repartitioning floorspace and to providing modern facilities, such as rest rooms on every floor, instead of every other floor. The restoration was completed in time for classes to resume in September, 1974. The architect of the restoration was Professor John Hejduk, head of the Union's division of architecture.

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CONTINUATION SHEET 1 ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE 2

public figures discussed the major issues and ideas of their time. It was there in February, 1860 that Abraham Lincoln delivered the speech which he later credited with winning him the Presidency. He was followed in time by such notables as Susan B. Anthony, Horace Greeley, Mark Twain, Ulysses S. Grant, Robert Ingersoll, Victoria Woodhull, Henry Ward Beecher, John Tyndall and Thomas Huxley.

The charter of Cooper Union was formulated by Peter Cooper over the six years between the commencement and completion of the building's construction. He solicited advice from such men as Francis Lieber, who had planned the curriculum of Girard College, Charles Matthews, a teacher of chemistry, Alan MacWhorter of Yale, and Nahum Capen, the postmaster of Boston in 1857 and a writer on education. Such institutions as Girard College, Rensselaer and the French Polytechnic were examined as well. Cooper further alloyed the concepts of the educational vanguard with the views garnered from his own experiences as a young man struggling to succeed in New York City, to produce a unique institution.

A basic tenet of the Union's educational format was the "union" of art and science. Cooper hoped that the student would strengthen his intellect in the study of the natural and social sciences and then, through the study of art, enrich his knowledge and especially his senses and skills, with an appreciation of beauty.

Just as Cooper Union was created to train its students vocationally, it was also designed to provide moral and spiritual education. Although Cooper formally espoused no religious doctrine, it may be that he was more concerned with the ideal rather than the mundane ends of education. His experience dictated that in this land of limitless opportunity, a man or woman needed only skills and self-reliance to succeed. Cooper Union continues today to provide solutions to these needs.

For a quarter of a century, until his death in 1883, scarcely a day went by that did not find Peter Cooper in the halls of his Union, where he attended classes and talked with students, workers and administrators alike. It was Abram Hewitt, his son-in-law, however, together with the Board of Trustees, who held the economic and managerial reins of the school. Cooper nonetheless was still influential in guiding the overall policy and in introducing new programs and features.

Although Cooper had planned to rely on rents and public donation to maintain the school, he and his family were frequently called upon to bolster finances. It was not until after Cooper's death that sufficient contributions were made

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CONTINUATION SHEET

2

ITEM NUMBER

8

PAGE 3

to allow for the removal of the commercial activities in the first two floors of the building. Cooper Union has continued to receive endowments which have enabled the institution to expand its curriculum and maintain a high standard of educational excellence as it now enters its second century of public service. Although it no longer houses the school in its entirety, the original building of the Cooper Union continues to stand as a living memorial to its founder, who expressed throughout his life his belief that:

The production of wealth is not the work of any one man, and the acquisition of great fortunes is not possible without the cooperation of multitudes of men; and ... therefore the individuals to whose lot these fortunes fall . . . should never lose sight of the fact that as they hold them by the will of society expressed in statute law, so they should administer them as trustees for the benefit of society as inculcated by moral law.<sup>2</sup>

1. Peter Cooper, quoted in, Peter Lyon, Peter Cooper, the Honest Man (Reprinted from American Heritage, vol. 10, No. 2, February, 1959) p. 8.
2. Peter Cooper, quoted in Peter Cooper, the Honest Man, p. 1