

Landmarks Preservation Commission
July 28, 1981, Designation List 145
LP-1076

BRONX BOROUGH COURTHOUSE East 161st Street between 3rd and Brook Avenues.
Built 1905-1915. Architect Michael J. Garvin.

Landmark Site: Borough of the Bronx, Tax Map Block 2365, Lot 35.

On July 12, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Bronx Borough Courthouse and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 5). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Two witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Bronx Borough Courthouse, occupying a prominent site on 161st Street between Brook and Third Avenues, was built between 1905 and 1915. Designed by Michael J. Garvin, a local architect, the courthouse is a fine example of a classically-inspired Beaux-Arts style civic structure. Built to serve various borough courts, the courthouse also came to symbolize the county status which the Bronx achieved in 1914.

The Bronx was one of the last boroughs to be developed. The area was primarily farmland until the 3rd Avenue El reached 169th Street in 1888 and rapid urbanization began.¹ In the early 1860s the site of the Bronx Borough Courthouse was apparently an open "square" with only a shed and watering trough in the middle. On the edges were low-scale brick and wood frame structures used mostly as homes, boarding houses, and hotels.² By 1888 the courthouse site was covered with small wood-frame buildings. Just a block south at 160th and 3rd Avenue stood the Morrisania Town Hall which until 1905 doubled as a police station.

By 1900 the Bronx was the fastest growing borough; the once rural area now had a population approaching 500,000. A small brick building which housed the Civil and Police Courts was located on the southeast corner of 158th and 3rd Avenue. This soon proved to be inadequate and it was determined that a new courthouse was needed for the Municipal and Magistrate's Courts and the Coroner's Office, and the 161st Street site was ultimately agreed upon. Construction funds of \$300,000 were appropriated in 1904. Construction began early in 1905 and it was thought that the building would be complete within two or three years.³

The courthouse commission had been given to Michael J. Garvin, a Tammany Hall Democrat who had served as the first Commissioner of Buildings for the Bronx and as Secretary to the President of the Borough. A native of the Bronx, Garvin was born in Morrisania of Irish parents on January 31, 1861. He attended public school and Mannattan College before beginning a long association with Joseph M. Dunn, formerly of Renwick & Sands, architects of St. Patrick's Cathedral.

Rather than a two or three year construction period at an estimated cost of \$800,000, the courthouse took ten years to complete and cost two million dollars. The delays caused both ridicule and indignation. Stephen Jenkins, writing in The Story of the Bronx: 1639-1912, (1912) stated that he could not remember when the Courthouse was not under construction and that if it were ever completed it would probably take as long as the Manhattan County Courthouse (1912-1927) and be as costly as the State Capitol Building in Albany.⁴ There were also charges of corruption and protests from local citizens (during this period Borough President Louis F. Haffen was charged with corruption and ousted from office). In 1913 the Aldermen were directed to investigate the delays. Their report, submitted on June 8, exonerated Garvin and blamed the lengthy construction time on the piecemeal contracting out of work. Other reasons given for the delays and high costs were inflation, poor work which had to be done over, political squabbling over the appropriation of extra funds once the initial \$800,000 was depleted, and controversy over the quantity and type of granite to be used on the upper floors.⁵

Ironically, the delayed completion of the Courthouse coincided with a most significant event: the Bronx's attainment of county status. Consequently, though the interior was unfinished and there was little furniture, the courthouse officially opened on January 6, 1914, as a symbol of the new powers and responsibilities of Bronx County. In accordance with the recommendations of the Bar Association in 1913, the courthouse also accommodated the Supreme, Surrogate and County Courts as well as the District Attorney's Office.⁶

There were speeches and much fanfare at the opening sessions of each of the Courts. County Counselor Louis O. Van Doren, at the opening of the Supreme Court commented:

May this Courthouse and this chamber be
from now on the centre from which shall
radiate over this community Justice and
equity...

New York University Chancellor Emeritus Henry MacCracken designed the new county seal -- a five-pointed star (the Bronx being represented by the northern-most point) with a motto from the "Vulgate": "The world is waiting for the law of God." MacCracken noted that:

It was selected because the chief function
of the new County is to maintain the Courts
of law with places of records for legal
purposes.⁸

The Courthouse consequently came to symbolize the county status of the Bronx.

Stylistically the courthouse is in the Beaux-Arts classical tradition which was so popular for civic architecture at the turn of the century and into the 1920s. Examples of the style, cultivated by the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in France, may be seen in such works as Carrere and Hastings' New York Public Library, Cass Gilbert's U.S. Custom House and John R. Thomas's and Horgan and Slattery's Surrogate's Court and Hall of Records, all in Manhattan.

The Bronx Borough Courthouse occupies the entire irregular five-sided block on which it is situated. The block is bounded by Third Avenue on the south and east, Brook Avenue on the west, and East 161st Street on the north; these streets intersect here in this commercial section of the south Bronx.

The four-story granite courthouse building, which may be viewed from all sides, roughly conforms to the shape of the block, although designed in a symmetrical manner with projecting central pavilions at the north and south elevations. The main entrance facade is oriented to East 161st Street. The two-story base, above a heavy water table, is faced with rusticated stone bands, punctuated by deeply recessed windows and by double-height arched entrances on the north and east elevations. The stone bands and mortar channels form stylized voussoirs above the first-story windows, while at the arched entrances these elements form archivolts. Oversized keystones with torch motifs are in the arches.

The upper two stories form an architectural unit, faced with granite laid in smooth courses of alternating twelve-inch and eight-inch bond. Two-story pilasters flank the window bays and form corner piers. The central pavilion on the 161st Street elevation has two window bays flanking monumental columns which frame the recessed central section with its arched window opening. In front of the opening is a figure by J.E. Roine carved in Tennessee marble depicting "Justice"--unblindfolded but holding the traditional attributes of a sword and tablet.

There seems to have been some discussion as to whether or not Justice should be blind-folded. She was completed without the blind-fold.⁹ Roine, a sculptor and metal engraver, was born in Nantes, France in 1857. He was a student of Leopold Morice, the sculptor who completed the bas relief over the principal door at St. Etienne in Tours and the statue Republique at the Place de la Republique in Paris. In 1886-94 Roine spent time in New York where he participated in the decoration of several churches.¹⁰ Returning to France, Roine apparently entered the employ of Louis Richards the American sculptor. Richards applied several times for the commission to complete the statue of Justice for the Courthouse but was rejected. Roine soon thereafter submitted his own model and was awarded the commission.

The central pavilion on the south elevation facing Third Avenue has two-story piers flanking arched openings at the third floor and rectangular openings at the fourth floor.

A full entablature with triglyph and metope frieze and modillioned cornice encircles the building. Above is a paneled parapet, shielding an

attic story, which follows the line of the central pavilions. In the pavilion section on the north elevation is a panel with the inscription "Bronx Borough Court House" flanked by miniature pavilion sections surmounted by small domes.

When the new County Courthouse was finished in 1934, a designated New York City Landmark at 851 Grand Concourse, the "Old Borough Courthouse," became the Criminal Court of the City of New York-Bronx Branch. In 1977 this Court moved to 161st Street and Sheriden Avenue and a year later the Bronx Borough Courthouse was vacated, and is now sealed at the ground floor with cinder block.

The Courthouse is a fine example of Beaux-Arts Classicism. It is one of the few buildings of this style and this era in a borough which developed rapidly and late. In its use of forms and materials, it displayed civic pride and symbolized the strength and authority of government. In addition, it is the only direct symbol of the Bronx's attainment of county status.

FOOTNOTES

1. Harmon H. Goldsmith and Martha Dalrymple, History Preserved, New York: Shoken Books, 1976. pp. 340-343.
2. Stephen Jenkins, The Story of the Bronx: 1639-1912, New York: G.P. Putnam & Sons, 1912. p.365.
3. New York Times, January 1, 1914, Section VIII, p.2.
4. Jenkins, p. 375-376.
5. New York Times, January 1, 1914, Section VIII, p.2.
6. New York Times, June 15, 1913, Section VIII, p. 2.
7. North Side News, Bronx County Progress Edition, May 17, 1914, p. 14.
8. Ibid. p. 11.
9. Courtesy of the Municipal Arts Society.
10. E. Benezit, Dictionnaire des Peintres, Sculpteurs, Dessinateurs et Graveurs, France: Librairie Guild, 1966.

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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 Bronx Borough Courthouse 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 Bronx Borough Courthouse is a fine example of Beaux-Arts style architecture; that it is a rare site in the Morrisania section; that it is adorned with monumental sculpture by J.E. Roine; that it is a symbol of civic pride, and; that it is a direct symbol of the Bronx's attainment of county status.

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 Bronx Borough Courthouse Borough of the Bronx and designates Tax Map Block 2365, Lot 35, Borough of the Bronx, as its Landmark Site.

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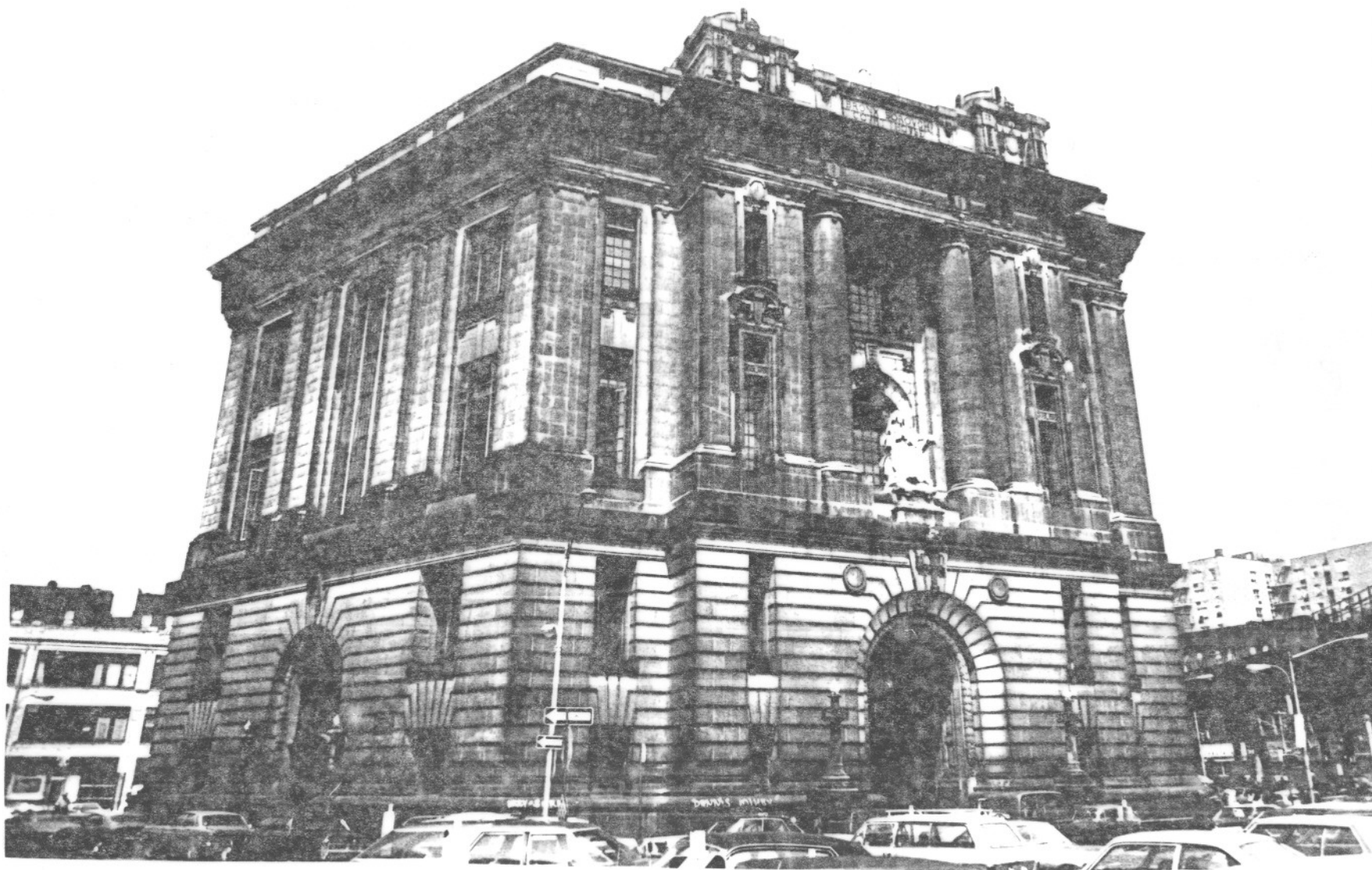
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New York Times. June 15, 1913, section 8 p. 2; January 1, 1914, section 8
p. 2; January 6, 1914, p. 12.

North Side News. (Bronx County Progress Edition), May 17, 1914.



BRONX BOROUGH COURTHOUSE
East 161st Street between Third Avenue and Brook Avenue, The Bronx

Photo: Daniel Burnetto, Landmarks Preservation
Commission, 1973

Architect: Michael J. Garvin
1906-15