

68th POLICE PRECINCT STATION HOUSE AND STABLE, 4302 Fourth Avenue, Borough of Brooklyn. Built 1886; architect Emile M. Gruwe.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 728, Lot 36.

On March 11, 1980, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 68th Police Precinct Station House and Stable and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 11). The hearing was continued to May 13, 1980 (Item No. 2). Both hearings had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of six witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There was one speaker in opposition to designation. Letters have been received supporting designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The former 68th Police Precinct Station House and Stable, a handsome and imposing civic ensemble within the Sunset Park section of Brooklyn, are prominently located at the southwest corner of Fourth Avenue and 43rd Street. These buildings, designed in the Romanesque Revival style by Emile M. Gruwe and built in 1886, are a significant example of Brooklyn police station design and are among the few surviving structures of their type.

Development of the section of Brooklyn known as Sunset Park dates from the second half of the 19th century. Following the Civil War the Brooklyn waterfront was slowly developed as an industrial manufacturing base which attracted middle and working class residents to the area, while a ferry service to New York was established at Second Avenue and 39th Street to serve the expanding community. In an effort to meet the needs of the residents for recreational space, the City of Brooklyn planned Sunset Park in 1890 on eighteen acres of land in the heart of the area. The establishment of Bush Terminal during this period reinforced the community's growth.

Since the earliest settlement of the Town of Brooklyn there had been a number of different law enforcement bodies. Not until the 19th century, with a rapidly increasing population, was a regular police organization needed. The first "Police Department for the City of Brooklyn" was established in 1850; this was merged seven years later into the Metropolitan Board of Police, which operated out of 300 Mulberry Street in Manhattan. In time the Metropolitan system was found to be cumbersome, and it was felt to infringe upon the authority of local municipalities. Thus in 1870, both the State of New York and the City of Brooklyn passed the necessary acts to formulate and establish a Board of Police of the City of Brooklyn, which was modified under the charter of 1873 to become the Department of Police and Excise. As a consequence of its growing population, Brooklyn expanded its police force to meet local needs and opened new precincts and sub-precinct police stations. The Eighth Sub-Precinct was formed to cover the area west and south of Greenwood Cemetery, west of Seventh Avenue, an area which approximates the present Sunset Park community. In 1885 the Eighth Sub-Precinct became the 18th Precinct under the command of Captain James Kenney. Previously housed in a makeshift station in a tenement building on Third Avenue and 36th Street, the 18th Precinct moved in that year to the new Police Precinct Station House at Fourth Avenue and 43rd Street. In 1898 when Brooklyn was consolidated into Greater New York City, the Brooklyn Department of Police and Excise was merged with the seventeen police systems of other boroughs into one unified New York City Police Department. At that time the

various precincts were renumbered and the 18th became the 43rd Precinct. In 1915 the 43rd became the 143rd, which three years later became the 76th and subsequently changed in 1924 to the 32nd Precinct. Five years later the precinct became known as the 68th Precinct.

The 68th Police Precinct Station House with adjoining stable are handsome powerfully massed Romanesque Revival buildings. Elements of the Venetian and Norman Romanesque styles, both derived from Byzantine precedents, are combined to produce a skillfully balanced and unified composition. The dominating corner tower and massive round-arched forms are characteristic of the style and combine to create a powerful image of the presence and authority of the police department in the community.

Several Romanesque Revival police precinct station houses were designed and erected in the late 19th century throughout the City of Brooklyn, most notably the 83rd Police Precinct Station House, which is a designated New York City Landmark, of 1894-95 by William B. Tubby in the Bushwick Section. Today few of Brooklyn's 19th-century police station houses survive. Architect Emile M. Gruwe was commissioned to design not only the 68th Police Precinct Station House in Sunset Park but also the almost identical 75th Police Precinct Station House, still standing in somewhat altered form at 484 Liberty Avenue in the East New York section. Little is known of Gruwe or his career. He began his New York architectural practice in 1878, maintaining offices in Manhattan until 1891, when he changed the spelling of his name to Emile Grewey and joined in partnership with Robert W. Firth in Brooklyn. The partnership lasted until 1894, and in 1897 Grewey again established offices in Manhattan. An architects' directory of 1899 lists two of his works, the Belvedere and the Florence apartment hotels.¹

The three-story brick 68th Police Precinct Station House is dominated by a projecting corner which is surmounted by a stepped corbeled cornice set above a series of arches which rest on carved foliate impost blocks. Elegant curvilinear wrought-iron tie-washers accent this upper tower composition, while two stories below is an intricately carved limestone Byzantine style bandcourse featuring dogs' faces and foliate carvings. Arched openings with brick voussoirs are set at each level of the tower. Along the Fourth Avenue elevation is an impressive, Norman-inspired projecting main entrance portico. It is composed of a pair of arches with rusticated voussoirs and drip moldings, resting upon a truncated column of polished granite, with a corbel table above featuring whimsical figure heads. Flanking the portico to the left is an extension with a window arcade surmounted by a pressed brick cornice setting off a sloping roof. Above this extension is a projecting pavilion which contains a pair of round-arched windows unified through the use of a bezant molding and a continuous brownstone drip molding accented by a curvilinear wrought-iron tie-washer at the second floor level. To the right a paired set of arched windows with decorative carved foliate medallion above are contained within a round arch and a brownstone drip molding. At the third floor of the projecting pavilion an interlaced colonnade of Venetian inspiration is set beneath a diapered panel. This colonnade composition is replicated on the south elevation. To the right of the projecting pavilion at the third floor is a single arched window with a brownstone lintel of the Norman style. Above is a bezant molding course which sets off a corbeled cornice of molded brick which extends around the building interrupted only by the corner tower, and supports a parapet which is punctuated by bartizan towers capped by pinnacles with finials. The 43rd Street facade is simpler, with brick-enframed round-arched window openings. This facade is accented by two double-height window bay groups, one with decorative

diaperwork and a stained-glass rondelle panel and the other with a small recessed balcony, and smaller curvilinear wrought-iron tie-washers. The west and south elevations of brick are punctuated by arched window openings.

The stable building which faces Fourth Avenue is connected to the station house by a one-story brick passage. A small paved areaway is in front of the passage. This connecting section features a zig-zag molding at the cornice above small arched openings and three band courses which continue around the stable building at base level. The stable has a rectangular entrance at the first floor. The second floor, delineated by two stone bandcourses, features a pair of central hayloft doors flanked on either side by a round-arched window. These three round-arched openings are unified by a continuous brownstone molding with decorative terminating bosses. The cornice makes use of molded brick and has diminutive crenellation, punctuated at the center by a rectangular pediment. The south wall of the stable adjoins other buildings, while the north wall is pierced by round-arched openings.

The 68th Police Precinct remained in the station house until 1970. At that time a new station house was opened in Sunset Park, and the 68th joined with another precinct to form a new expanded police precinct. The building has been vacant since the mid-1970s. A fire in 1980 did some internal damage, but the building remains sound. Local community groups are seeking a solution for the reuse of the building.

The 68th Police Precinct Station House and Stable remain striking examples of late 19th-century civic architecture and rare survivors of their type in Brooklyn. Their Romanesque Revival design reveals the skill of architect Emile M. Gruwe and creates a powerful image of the role the police department in the community.

FOOTNOTE

1. Dennis M. Francis, Architects in Practice New York City, 1840-1900. New York: Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records, 1980), pp. 35, 35, 89. Gruwe may have also been responsible for the handsome neo-Grec cast-iron building at 444 and 452 Broadway, built in 1876-77. Buildings Department records list the architect as Schweitzer & Gruwe (transcribed in LPC records as "Greve".)

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FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and other features of the building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the 68th Police Precinct Station House and Stable have 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 68th Police Precinct Station House and Stable are imposing examples of civic architecture designed in the Romanesque Revival style by Emile M. Gruwe; that these are rare surviving 19th-century Brooklyn police precinct structures; that the buildings are distinguished by their handsome brickwork, skillfully crafted ornament using Venetian and Norman Romanesque prototypes, and dominating corner tower; and that the buildings are important features in the Sunset Park community and create a powerful image of the presence and authority of the police department.

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 68th Police Precinct Station House and Stable, 4302 Fourth Avenue, Borough of Brooklyn, and designates Tax Map Block 728, Lot 36, Borough of Brooklyn, as its Landmark Site.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Photo Credit:
Landmarks Preservation Commission

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