



A GUIDE TO HISTORIC NEW YORK CITY NEIGHBORHOODS

MOTT HAVEN BRONX





The Historic Districts Council is New York's citywide advocate for historic buildings and neighborhoods. The Six to Celebrate program annually identifies six historic New York City neighborhoods that merit preservation as priorities for HDC's advocacy and consultation over a yearlong period.

The six, chosen from applications submitted by community organizations, are selected on the basis of the architectural and historic merit of the area, the level of threat to the neighborhood, the strength and willingness of the local advocates, and the potential for HDC's preservation support to be meaningful. HDC works with these neighborhood partners to set and reach preservation goals through strategic planning, advocacy, outreach, programs and publicity.

The core belief of the Historic Districts Council is that preservation and enhancement of New York City's historic resources—its neighborhoods, buildings, parks and public spaces—are central to the continued success of the city. The Historic Districts Council works to ensure the preservation of these resources and uphold the New York City Landmarks Law and to further the preservation ethic. This mission is accomplished through ongoing programs of assistance to more than 500 community and neighborhood groups and through public-policy initiatives, publications, educational outreach and sponsorship of community events.



**Council on
the Arts**



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MOTT HAVEN

The Bronx is named after Jonas Bronck, a Nordic European settler who arrived in the colony of New Netherlands in 1639. Bronck and his Dutch wife, Teuntje Joriaens, established their farmstead in what is now Mott Haven at the confluence of the Harlem River and Bronx Kill overlooking Randall's Island. In 1670 much of the area was acquired by the Morris family, who established a large manor called Morissania. The family retained ownership—and the area remained sparsely populated—through the early 19th century. It was the arrival of the New York and Harlem Railroad line, announced in 1840, that finally persuaded the Morrises to embrace suburban development on their estate.

Jordan L. Mott, the neighborhood's namesake, purchased sizable tracts from the Morris family in 1841 and 1848. Hoping to create a "downtown of Westchester County" (of which this area was then still a part), he laid out streets and building lots and began marketing the new hamlet called Mott Haven. According to Mott's plan, the southern portion was devoted to industrial uses, including his own iron works, all served by a purpose-built, 3,000-foot canal. The northern section was reserved for tidy residential buildings, protected by restrictive covenants from anything "pernicious to health or noxious or offensive to the neighborhood." Other developers soon followed Mott to the South Bronx, purchasing large tracts from the Morris family and laying out their own suburbs such as Wilton (subdivided 1857) and North New York (1860)—now both part of the neighborhood of Mott Haven. The Morris family itself entered the development business, planning the industrial neighborhood of Port Morris.

Development of these tracts was steady, if not as rapid as their promoters may have wanted. Mott Haven proper—which consisted of the area between Third Avenue and the Harlem River—was the most populous, containing a concentration of modest, mostly wood-framed, houses built for local factory workers. By the 1860s the area even boasted a few brick rowhouses, some of which still survive. Much of the area, however, remained in the hands of real estate investors waiting for the area to gain in value. The Panic of 1873 delayed this by several years, although around the same time, in 1874, the South Bronx was annexed into New York City, likely ensuring its eventual development as an urban neighborhood. The arrival of mass transit (the 1887 opening of the Suburban Rapid Transit Company's 138th Street Station, later part of the IRT Third Avenue Elevated) provided the ultimate spark for the area's growth. Within a decade or two, most of Mott Haven's streets were completely built up with a diverse range of buildings, from comfortable single-family rowhouses, to larger multi-family tenements and apartment buildings. Industry also blossomed. Mott's iron works, now controlled by his descendants, continued to expand. Other manufacturers moved into the area including a remarkable number of piano manufacturers. In fact, by the early 20th century the Bronx had (by one count) 63 piano factories—43 of them in Mott Haven—producing more than 100,000 instruments a year.

Mott Haven's dense industrial base meant the neighborhood was particularly hard hit by the deindustrialization of New York City in the mid 20th century. Though the South Bronx became a symbol of urban decay and disinvestment by the 1970s, it also remained a vibrant immigrant neighborhood with new institutions, such as the Teatro de Puerto Rico (site 11b), moving into the many surviving historic buildings. The rich history and architectural distinction of Mott Haven has been recognized by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission through the designation of three historic districts (including the first in the Bronx) and several individual landmarks.



I

J. L. MOTT IRON WORKS

2403 Third Avenue

(sections c. 1860s;

main building: Babcock & McAvoy,
1882; expanded c. 1890s)

Jordan L. Mott, inventor of the first coal-fired cooking stove, established his first iron works in Lower Manhattan in 1828. After he purchased a large tract in the Bronx in 1841 to create the hamlet of Mott Haven, he moved his manufacturing operation to a choice location on the Harlem River between the Third Avenue bridge and the newly opened New York and Harlem Railroad line.

The earliest buildings were of wood frame

construction and burned down at least twice. Mott kept rebuilding and the oldest surviving parts of the complex, the twin gabled-ended sheds in the northwest corner, likely date to the 1860s. The much larger five-story brick buildings were built a couple decades later, at the beginning of the neighborhood's transit-sparked boom. The long and narrow structure has a narrow decorative façade on Third Avenue and patterned brickwork spelling out "The J. L. Mott Iron Works" on the facade facing the river. As it grew, the company expanded its product line, producing a whole range of household goods such as tubs and sinks, as well as decorative work like fountains and fences. Many drain and manhole covers in the neighborhood still bear the foundry stamp of the J. L. Mott Iron Works. In 1902 the company announced it was moving to Trenton, NJ. Mott Haven, now the dense neighborhood originally envisioned by Jordan Mott, apparently no longer had open space for the works to expand. Today the buildings house a variety of commercial tenants.

LEGEND OF DESIGNATIONS

National Historic Landmark:

NHL

National Register of Historic Places

NR

New York City Historic District:

NYC HD

New York City Individual Landmark:

NYC IL

New York City Interior Landmark:

NYC INL

2a

ESTEY PIANO COMPANY FACTORY

112-128 Lincoln Avenue

(A. B. Ogden & Sons, 1885-86,
with later expansions)

NYC-IL

2b

HAINES BROTHERS PIANO FACTORY

26 Bruckner Boulevard

(Kreidler & Hebbard, 1888)



By the early 20th century the Bronx had 60 piano factories, many located in Mott Haven. The original section of the Estey plant—comprising the corner section with the prominent clock tower—is the oldest known piano factory still standing in the borough. The company established a reputation for its “superior construction and workmanship” and as business boomed, the complex was extended to the east along Bruckner Boulevard in 1890 (closely matching the original building) and to the north along Lincoln Avenue (in several phases from 1895 to 1919). The opening of the Estey factory in 1886 provided “an unusual stimulus” to Mott Haven and soon other piano manufacturers were moving to the neighborhood. The Haines company set up shop just down the street on an L-shaped lot with a relatively small, mid-block façade on Bruckner Boulevard and a much longer façade at Alexander Avenue and East 132nd Street facing the Harlem River. Both sections are nicely detailed, with fine brickwork, ornamental terra-cotta blocks, and decorative window lintels. Also on this block is the former Ruppert Brewery Ice Factory (1899, Julius Kastner), long under scaffolding but still intact.



3

NORTH SIDE BOARD OF TRADE BUILDING
270 East 137th Street
(*Albert E. Davis, 1911-12*)

The North Side was a common term for the portion of the Bronx annexed by

New York City in 1874. Its Board of Trade was founded in 1894 to advocate for the borough and was cited as one of the leading civic organizations of its time. The building resembles many contemporary public institutions, its Neoclassical design characterized by Ionic columns and pilasters, round-arched windows with keystones and a rusticated base. The upper stories, which were occupied by the Board's offices, are clad in matte white terra cotta, while the ground floor contained commercial space for a bank and is clad in granite. Davis, the building's architect, was also the Board's founder, first president and primary advocate for building its new headquarters. He selected this site feeling it was the "gateway to the borough." The plaza it faces contains a memorial to the Spanish-American War, dedicated in 1919 and also designed by Davis, with a bas-relief plaque by sculptor Charles Keck.

4

MOTT HAVEN HISTORIC DISTRICT
Alexander Avenue between East 138th and East 141st Streets
NYC-HD, NR

This was the first designated historic district in the Bronx, and the 13th designated historic district in New York City. The area comprises several blocks of intact residential buildings, which the LPC calls "the finest 19th century row houses in the Bronx," as well as several religious and institutional buildings. The group of ten houses on the east side of Alexander Avenue, at nos. 276-294, was built in 1863-65, making them among the oldest rowhouses in the borough. The architecturally distinguished group of twelve houses across the street, at nos. 277-299, was designed by Charles Romeyn and completed in 1881.



5

SAINT JEROME'S ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH
230 Alexander Avenue
(*Debli & Howard, 1898*)
NYC-HD, NR



St. Jerome's Roman Catholic church complex occupies the whole eastern blockfront of Alexander Avenue between East 137th Street and East 138th Street, and is dominated by the church's corner tower with its colonnaded belfry and octagonal dome. The mostly Irish-American congregation of St. Jerome formed in 1869, and built the red-brick Victorian Gothic style school building at the southern end of the block first, in 1871, followed by the neo-Grec style rectory next door. The church itself was the last in the complex to be erected, and was completed in 1898 in the Renaissance Revival style to the designs of the Manhattan-based firm Dehli & Howard. The church is an outstanding example of its style, with finely articulated facades of rusticated buff brick ornamented with robust Italian Renaissance-inspired architectural forms such as broken pediments, Ionic and Tuscan columns and elaborate cornices and entablatures. A statue of Jerome, the 4th-century scholar saint, sits at the corner of the church.



The Mott Haven Historic District also includes two notable civic buildings. Separated by two blocks and nearly two decades, both employ the stately Neoclassical architecture popularized by the City Beautiful movement of the early 20th century. More specifically, the buildings were meant to resemble Italian palazzi such as those found in Florence. They use a similar materials palette, with red brick façades and limestone trim, and Renaissance details such as molded window surrounds, round-arched openings, and quoins at the corners. The station house was designed by Thomas O'Brien, a Bronx resident and a lieutenant with the police department. He designed numerous similar stations throughout the city and was eventually named NYPD Superintendent of Buildings in 1929. The library was one of 67 branches funded by Andrew Carnegie's gift of \$5.2 million to New York City in 1901. It was the first Carnegie library to open in the Bronx, which received nine in total. Of these, eight are still standing.

6a

**40TH POLICE PRECINCT
STATION HOUSE**

257 Alexander Avenue
(Thomas E. O'Brien, 1924)
NYC-HD, NR

6b

**NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY,
MOTT HAVEN BRANCH**

321 East 140th Street
(Babb, Cook & Willard, 1905)
NYC-HD; NR

7

**FIREHOUSE HOOK & LADDER
COMPANY 17,
NOW ENGINE COMPANY 60**
341 East 143rd Street
(Michael J. Garvin, 1906-07)
NYC-IL



The merger of the five boroughs into Greater New York in 1898 caused a wave of public building projects as the new municipal government consolidated and upgraded its services. Like the police station (site 6a) and library (site 6b), this firehouse is designed in the formal Neoclassical style typical of the era. Its architect was Michael Garvin, a Bronx native who served as the borough's first Commissioner of Buildings. This particular company traces its history to the private fire squad associated with the J. L. Mott Iron Works, established in the mid-19th century and merged into the public service when portions of the Bronx were annexed by Manhattan in 1874. Another individually designated firehouse is located on the opposite side of the neighborhood at 618 East 138th Street. Firehouse Engine Company 83 and Hook & Ladder 29 (Robert D. Kohn, 1904-05) was established during this period of municipal improvements. It was one of the earliest firehouses in the city with two vehicle entrances.

8

**WILLIS AVENUE METHODIST
EPISCOPAL CHURCH, NOW
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

330 Willis Avenue
(George W. Kramer,
1897-1900)



The congregation was originally founded in 1865—early in Mott Haven's residential development—as the First Methodist Episcopal Church of North New-York. This building replaced an earlier frame church on the same site. Its bulky, multi-story appearance is evocative of a flourishing neighborhood and congregation. The main sanctuary had seating for 1,000, there was a 500-seat lecture hall in the basement, and the upper stories contained Sunday school rooms for another 1,000 children. The façade, called English Gothic by the press, is notable for its buff brick with Indiana limestone trim and the expanse of delicate, pointed-arch windows. The corner bell tower was once topped with an upper tier and pyramidal roof.

9

**WILLIAM O'GORMAN RESIDENCE/
MOTT HAVEN EAST HISTORIC DISTRICT**
427 East 140th Street
(William Hornum, 1897-1900)
NYC-HD; NR



The William O'Gorman Residence at 427 East 140th Street has one of the more elaborate façades among the small group of late-19th century residential blocks comprising the Mott Haven East Historic District. O'Gorman partnered with architect William Hornum to develop the north side of East 140th Street with this row of 10 Romanesque Revival and Renaissance Revival style single-family dwellings between 1897 and 1900, and chose no. 427 for his own residence.

The house bookends the row, presenting a façade of orange Roman brick trimmed with chunky limestone and topped by a Flemish-inspired scrolled gable and clay-tile roof. The O'Gorman house and its surviving neighbors are an excellent example of the type of speculative residential development that began to shape the South Bronx with the opening of commuter rail lines in the 1880s. Very few residential blocks of this age and level of architectural integrity remain in the Bronx.

10

**ST. PETER'S LUTHERAN CHURCH
AND PARSONAGE**
435 East 140th Street
(Louis Allmendinger, 1911)
NYC-HD; NR



St. Peter's Lutheran Church was built in 1911 and designed by Louis Allmendinger, a prolific architect of "new-law" tenements in Ridgewood, Queens. The attached church and parsonage became the second home of St. Peter's congregation, which formed in 1890 and was first located at Alexander Avenue and East 142nd Street. The neo-Gothic style façade features white terra cotta trim and a pale face brick, possibly the same "Kreischerville" brick from Staten Island that was favored by Allmendinger for his Ridgewood developments.



IIa

**WILLIS THEATRE, LATER
CASINO THEATRE**
250 Willis Avenue
(Eugene De Rosa, 1922-23)

IIb

**FORUM THEATRE/TEATRO DE
PUERTO RICO**
490 East 138th Street
(Eugene De Rosa, 1921-23)



Both buildings were designed by theater specialist Eugene De Rosa and conceived by impresarios Haring & Blumenthal, who operated a circuit of venues featuring both vaudeville and cinema. The

Willis originally contained a 2,166-seat auditorium enveloped within a block-long apartment building with commercial storefronts on the ground floor. It was renamed the Casino Theater in the 1930s. The Forum was built as a 2,700-seat vaudeville and movie house. Look around the block from the white terra cotta Neoclassical style entrance lobby and you'll find the windowless brick auditorium block still with its covered fire stair. After World War II, the struggling theater found new life as the Teatro de Puerto Rico, catering to The Bronx's growing Latin-American population. The theater featured acts such as Mexico's Cantinflas, Cuba's Tres Patines, romantic duos like the pianist Agustín Lara and the singer Libertad la Marque from Argentina, and Puerto Rican star Iris Chacon. Following a closure in the 1980s, the theatre re-opened as a performing arts venue and has been most recently used by a church congregation.



12

**EDWARD BERTINE
RESIDENCE**
416 East 136th Street
(George Keister, 1891)
NYC-HD

416 East 136th Street is one of the 31 residential buildings comprising the Bertine Block Historic District, which was developed between 1877 and 1899 by Bronx builder Edward Bertine. With four groups of rowhouses and two groups of tenement buildings, the historic district is a catalog of popular late-19th century architectural styles, starting with the earliest row of three neo-Grec style houses at nos. 408, 410, and 412, and continuing eastward down the street with the eponymous “Bertine Block” row of ten narrow Queen Anne style houses at nos. 414-432, constructed in 1891,

followed by the row of four Renaissance Revival style two-family houses built slightly later, in 1895. On the north side of the street is a row of six single-family rowhouses built in 1892-93 and distinguished by the striking geometry of their corbelled brick cornices, one of the hallmarks of the Romanesque Revival style. The last buildings to be developed as part of the district are the four large Renaissance Revival style tenements, which were completed in 1898 and housed eleven families each. Built of light-colored brick with ornate stone and terra-cotta ornament, these tenement façades were meant to project an image of respectability. All but the group of three 1877 houses were developed following the 1887 completion of the Suburban Rapid Transit Company elevated line, which ran north between Alexander and Willis Avenues and then along Third Avenue.



13

**U.S. POST OFFICE,
MOTT HAVEN STATION**
517 East 139th Street
(Lorimer Rich and Louis
A. Simon, 1935-36)

This post office, like many throughout the city, was built under the New Deal Public Works Administration

(PWA). Louis A. Simon was the Supervising Architect for the Treasury Department who oversaw the designs for many public works projects; as such, his name adorns similar buildings across the country. The primary architect of this station was Lorimer Rich, a New York State native most famous for the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery. The architecture can be described as “Modern Classical,” also known as PWA Moderne for its close association to the New Deal building program. This style employed traditional architectural elements such as columns and pediments, but in a greatly simplified, almost abstract form. The defining feature is a geometric portico of ten square pilasters, surmounted by a shallow pediment and a cornice with wreath motifs and an inscription of the station name.

14

**SAINT ANN’S CHURCH
AND GRAVEYARD**
295 St. Ann’s Avenue
(1840-41)
NYC-IL; NR



St. Ann’s Church was erected in 1841 by Gouverneur Morris, Jr., as a memorial to his mother Ann Cary Randolph, of Roanoke, VA. The fieldstone church with Gothic arched windows and a tower and cupola sits at an angle to the existing street grid, a vestige of the Morris family’s rural estate that occupied this area and gave rise to the name Morrisania. In the churchyard are buried several members of the Morris family, including Judge Lewis Morris (first Governor of New Jersey), and Major General Lewis Morris III, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence.



15

BRONX GRIT CHAMBER
158 Bruckner Boulevard
(McKim, Mead & White,
1936-37)
NYC-IL

This facility (along with the contemporaneous Manhattan Grit Chamber) was built as part of the Ward's Island Sewage Treatment Works, New York City's first major attempt to control pollution entering its rivers and waterways. At the time of its completion, the treatment system was hailed as the world's largest and most modern, capable of purifying one fifth of the city's sewage. While the construction of the system was primarily an engineering project, rather than an architectural one, the city hired the respected firm of McKim, Mead & White to design the exterior of the Bronx Grit Chamber. The Neoclassical façade—distinguished by two-toned columns, round-arched center bay, and deeply recessed window bays—provides a monumental street presence that ennobles the humble inner workings of the building.



16

SITE OF JONAS BRONCK'S HOUSE
Willis Avenue
and East 132nd Street

The approximate location was likely south of East 132nd Street and the train tracks, near the main building of the Harlem River Yards. Records indicate that Bronck's farm—called Emaus after a biblical passage and settled in 1639—encompassed nearly 700 acres and included a stone house, barn, a tobacco house and two barracks for farm workers. One source referred to it as “a miniature fort.” Bronck's tenure was short-lived; he died in 1643 and his wife soon remarried and moved up to the Albany area. In spite of this, his name became irrevocably associated with the Bronx River and, eventually, with the borough (1898) and county (1914).

