

RECEIVED

NOV 22 1991

CENTRAL INTAKE  
DEPT. OF CITY PLANNING

240  
2 of 2  
N920223HKM

Landmarks Preservation Commission  
November 12, 1991; Designation List 240  
LP-1751

(Former) HOME LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY BUILDING  
(incorporating the former Postal Telegraph Building), 256-257 and 253 Broadway, Borough  
of Manhattan. No. 256-257 built 1892-94; Napoleon LeBrun & Sons (Pierre L. LeBrun),  
architects. No. 253 built 1892-94; George Edward Harding & Gooch, architects.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 134, Lots 1001 and 1002.

On December 12th, 1989, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Home Life Insurance Company Buildings and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 15). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Seven witnesses spoke in favor of designation. One witness was opposed to designation. Three letters have been received supporting the designation, including a letter from a representative of the Department of General Services, City of New York, which owns Lot 1001 (the office stories). The owner of Lot 1002 (the retail stores) is not opposed to this designation.

## DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

### Summary

The (former) Home Life Insurance Company Building, a significant, early skyscraper richly designed in the neo-Renaissance style by Pierre L. LeBrun of the firm of Napoleon LeBrun & Sons, was constructed in 1892-94. In 1893 the initial twelve-story Home Life tower design was extended to fifteen stories, an enlargement that, at its completion in 1894, made this building higher than its southern neighbor and almost exact contemporary, the Postal Telegraph Building designed by George Edward Harding & Gooch and built in 1892-94. The firm of Napoleon LeBrun & Sons, skilled at adapting the architecture of the past to new building types, designed this fireproof, skeletal steel-frame tower with a marble front in the Renaissance idiom -- an early application of the Renaissance style to a skyscraper -- concentrating the wealth of finely realized low- and high-relief classical ornamental detail at the building's base and top. The distinguished architectural critic of the period, Montgomery Schuyler, recognized the Home Life tower as a precursor in the development of the skyscraper, stating that the clearly articulated base, shaft, and top of the Home Life Building comprised a seminal and most satisfactory expression of the tripartite formula in skyscraper design. Founded in Brooklyn in 1860, the Home Life Insurance Company moved its Manhattan branch office from Wall Street to this block in 1866. Forty years later Home Life moved its home office from Brooklyn to this tower. In 1947 Home Life purchased the Postal Telegraph Building and joined it to its headquarters, remaining there until 1985. The distinctively sharp silhouette of the Home Life Insurance tower, rising above City Hall Park, survives very much as it had been conceived. The design of the Postal Telegraph Building, also derived from the Renaissance style, is distinguished by a program of classical ornamental motifs used in alternating patterns, crowned by a loggia.

f x

### City Hall Park, the rise of a business center

The area that is now City Hall Park once was part of the common fields north of New Amsterdam, the colonial Dutch settlement. As the city grew northward, public buildings -- almshouses, jails, and barracks -- were erected there in the first half of the eighteenth century. The construction of City Hall (a designated New York City Landmark) in 1802-11 marked the area's transition to a more respectable urbanity. Meanwhile residences were making way for commercial buildings along lower Broadway and the spirit of popular commercialism advanced uptown. By mid-century A.T. Stewart's great department store, built in 1845-81 (subsequently the Sun Building, a designated New York City Landmark), marked commerce's progress past Chambers Street. Broadway had become a major commercial thoroughfare lined with four- and five-story buildings. With the addition of the Tweed Courthouse, 1861-81 (a designated New York City Landmark) on the north and the General Post Office, 1870-71 (demolished 1939), on the south, City Hall Park became a true civic center, but on the Park's west side, as on lower Broadway, banking and insurance companies dominated.

The earliest tall buildings to go up adjacent to City Hall Park were on that section of Park Row known as Printing House Square, on the Park's east side (where Pace University now stands). Richard Morris Hunt's ten-story Tribune tower was built in 1873 and George B. Post's twenty-six-story World Building followed in 1889. The four- and five-story commercial buildings along lower Broadway lingered well into this century's first decade; the earliest tall buildings, like the church towers, projected above the skyline. The first tall buildings north of Park Row and Vesey Street were the Postal Telegraph and Home Life buildings, both fronting on Broadway between Murray and Warren Streets. This was a good location for the Postal Telegraph Company because of its proximity to the Tribune; John W. Mackay, founder of the Postal Telegraph, and James Gordon Bennett, Jr., publisher of the Tribune, were partners in the venture to lay more trans-Atlantic cable. The Home Life tower was built where the company's offices formerly had been located in a five-story building at 254 Broadway. Today the Home Life Insurance Company Building, with the Postal Telegraph Building, remains a striking presence on the western skyline of City Hall Park.

### History of the Home Life Insurance Company

In the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the life insurance industry experienced unprecedented growth.<sup>1</sup> However, it wasn't until January 1, 1860, that Brooklyn, the country's third largest city at that time, became home to a life insurance company. Established by twelve of Brooklyn's most prosperous citizens,<sup>2</sup> the charter of the Home Life Insurance Company was approved in late February and on May 1, 1860, Home Life opened for business at Court and Joralemon Streets. Arrangements for a branch office at 16 Wall Street across the river in New York were made the same year.

In Home Life's first years the company president, Walter Scott Griffith (d.1872), traveled to key cities throughout the country establishing a network of agents and then, through a series of manuals, exhorted these men not only to sell life insurance but, in the face of general public skepticism grounded in the fundamental tradition of divine providence, to promote the validity of the concept of life insurance. If the contemporary perception was that the insurance industry was a highly speculative one, Griffith's approach, although rigorous, was essentially conservative. In these manuals not only were insurance tables computed but particular groups of society were pinpointed. As its name suggests the company's primary target was the home owner; its trademark was a comfortable Gothic Revival cottage in a pleasant rural setting. But another important target group was the clergy; their example would do much to engender the practical aspects of owning life insurance within the large segment of the population to whom traditional values were sacred.<sup>3</sup> The company's agency network and the agents' aggressive exposition within society's institutions, a strategy identified in a company history one hundred years later as "dynamic conservatism," has successfully carried the Home Life Insurance Company through to the present day.

In 1866 the Home Life Insurance Company moved its New York branch office from Wall Street to 258 Broadway, between Murray and Warren Streets, the Broadway blockfront that would witness a century of its growth. Three years later Home Life purchased the building two doors south at 254 Broadway, a five-story walk-up in which it occupied the first floor and leased the other floors.<sup>4</sup> As Home Life's agency organization multiplied in the two-and-one-half

decades that followed, the company filled the other floors and by 1890 had outgrown No. 254. Several other insurance companies located nearby had already commissioned new buildings and thereby established palpable corporate identities: Equitable at Broadway and Cedar Street; New York Life at Broadway and Leonard Street; and Metropolitan Life at Park Place and Church Street (a major renovation by the LeBrun firm). On March 16, 1892, Home Life acquired the adjacent, northerly property at 256 Broadway from Trinity Church.<sup>5</sup> An architectural competition for a new office building followed and the design of the LeBrun firm was judged the winner.<sup>6</sup>

Construction of the new tower commenced on November 2, 1892, and Home Life moved to temporary quarters in the World Building across City Hall Park. The excavation for the Home Life tower so weakened the foundations of the neighboring Merchants' Exchange National Bank at 257 Broadway that the bank building developed a list of eighteen inches off plumb. Contemporary news reports intimated that Home Life had already wanted to expand its site; negotiations for purchasing the bank property were initiated immediately. By February, 1893, the two neighbors had reached an agreement; in part payment for the bank building Home Life would provide the Merchants' Exchange National Bank with a first-class banking facility on the ground and basement levels of Home Life's new tower and an extended lease at a favorable rate with the option to renew. On April 22, the acquisition of the Merchants' Exchange National Bank building was completed.<sup>7</sup> As a consequence of the enlarged lot -- comprising fifty-five feet of Broadway frontage -- the facade design was broadened and the tower made three stories taller.<sup>8</sup>

#### History of the Postal Telegraph Building

On March 23, 1892, just one week after Home Life had purchased 254 Broadway, the Postal Telegraph Company secured ("farm-let") its new site from Trinity Church with a ninety-nine year lease.<sup>9</sup> The New Building Docket Books indicate that the Postal Telegraph and the Home Life Buildings were constructed almost simultaneously: the Postal Telegraph Building permit was applied for on May 5, 1892, and that for Home Life on August 12th; the Postal Telegraph was begun on June 14th, Home Life in early November; and the building inspector signed off on the completion of both buildings the same day, August 31, 1894.<sup>10</sup>

Fifty-five years later, they would be physically joined.

Irish-born John W. Mackay (1831-1902), founder and first president of both the Postal Telegraph Company and the Commercial Cable Company, had made a considerable fortune mining for silver in Nevada. In 1851 he sailed to California where he prospected about the Yuba River in the Sierra foothills. After crossing the Sierras to Virginia City in 1860, he worked the Comstock Lode in the decade that followed with considerable success, eventually not only mining, but smelting and transporting the ore to the Pacific coast. In 1883 he joined James Gordon Bennett, Jr., publisher of the *New York Herald*, in organizing the Commercial Cable Company to lay and operate trans-Atlantic cable in competition with Jay Gould's Western Union system. When Gould refused to relay Commercial's messages to points across this continent, Mackay bought the Postal Telegraph Company and began to consolidate other smaller telegraph companies around it. This system, comparable in size to Western Union's, was completed in 1886; its administrative offices were located in the Washington Building at 1 Broadway and its operations department at 183 Broadway. By 1890 more space was needed for both the administrative and the operations departments; the new Postal Telegraph Company headquarters at 253 Broadway was constructed to unite them under one roof.

#### The Architects

Two architectural firms are responsible for the original appearance of the two buildings that after 1947 constituted the Home Life Insurance Company home office complex on Broadway: Napoleon LeBrun & Sons for the Home Life Building and George Edward Harding & Gooch for the Postal Telegraph Company Building.

*Napoleon LeBrun & Sons.* In 1892 the Home Life Insurance Company held a competition for the new building it proposed to erect on its Broadway site. In his capacity as sole judge, William Robert Ware, Columbia University's first professor of architecture, chose the designs of the LeBrun firm.<sup>11</sup> Napoleon Eugene Charles LeBrun (1821-1901) was born to French emigrant parents in Philadelphia. At fifteen years of age he was placed in the office of classicist Thomas Ustick Walter (1804-1887), where he remained for six years. LeBrun began his own practice in 1841 in Philadelphia but moved to New York in 1864

where the choice in 1870 of his Second Empire Masonic Temple competition submission did much to establish his reputation. In the same year his son Pierre joined him and the firm became Napoleon LeBrun & Son. In 1892 the firm became Napoleon LeBrun & Sons in recognition of his youngest son, Michel. Father and sons were active members of the new American Institute of Architects.

Pierre Lassus LeBrun (1846-1924) has not received the attention that he is due, perhaps in part, because the name of the firm made him, and later his brother Michel, all but anonymous. Little is known of Pierre's formal architectural education. Apparently he was imbued with his father's classical preferences. Like his father, Pierre LeBrun adhered to a stylistic consistency at a time of stylistic transition and flux. With but few exceptions this preference was demonstrated in the work of both generations. Best known today for the many fire houses they designed for the New York City Fire Department between 1881 and 1895, the LeBrunns were ecclesiastical architects as well, responsible for the Church of the Epiphany (1870, demolished), Saint John-the-Baptist (1872), and Saint Mary-the-Virgin (1895, a designated New York City Landmark). The LeBrun firm had served as architects to the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company since 1876 and would continue to do so until 1909. Indeed, Metropolitan Life's acclaimed home office building at No. 1 Madison Avenue (1890-92, demolished) had been recently completed at the time of the Home Life commission.

While little is known of Pierre LeBrun's architectural training, his three trips abroad in the service of the Willard Architectural Commission are documented. Levi Hale Willard, a wealthy businessman, died in 1883 leaving to the newly founded Metropolitan Museum of Art \$100,000 toward the creation of a collection of models and casts illustrative of the art and science of architecture, to be made under the direction of a commission chosen by the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects. In his will Willard nominated Napoleon LeBrun as president of the Commission; Willard, a friend, had often discussed with LeBrun the need to cultivate a popular taste for architecture. Pierre LeBrun was appointed the Commission's purchasing agent. The younger LeBrun visited the significant sites and met with the suppliers of casts in Paris, Munich, and Rome. The historical accuracy characterizing the ornament of the LeBrunns' later

work appears to have been inspired by the Willard Collection.<sup>12</sup> Pierre LeBrun, as an architect of his generation, readily understood the requirements of the new tall building type; the historical knowledge he gained in acquiring the Willard bequest gave him the aesthetic sensibility to appropriately integrate historic detail with a tall building design.

*George Edward Harding & Gooch.* George Edward Harding (1843-1907), who with his associate William Tyson Gooch designed the Postal Telegraph Building at 253 Broadway, seems to have come to the architecture profession in midlife. He was born in Bath, Maine, and after Columbia College began his architectural career in 1881. It appears that he practiced alone for five years and then entered a short-lived partnership with Frederick P. Dinkelberg (1886-87). William T. Gooch joined him in 1889 and two years later Gooch's last name was added to that of the firm, George Edward Harding & Gooch, Architects and Engineers.<sup>13</sup> The firm is best known for its commercial buildings and, aside from the Postal Telegraph Building -- to which it moved its offices upon the building's completion -- the firm's other significant commissions were: the Holland House Hotel (1891) at West 30th Street and Fifth Avenue; the double-domed, twenty-one story Commercial Cable Building (1895-97) at 20 Broad Street (also for John W. Mackay, now demolished); the Gerken Building (1895) at 90 Chambers Street (West Broadway); the R. G. Dun Building (1897) at 292 Broadway (Reade Street, now demolished); and the Queens Insurance Company Building (c.1896). Both Gooch and Harding were Fellows of the American Institute of Architects.

#### The Design of the Home Life Insurance Company Building

The design judged best by Professor Ware in the 1892 competition for the new Home Life Insurance Company Building consisted of a twelve-story tower, faced in marble and realized in the neo-Renaissance style (Plate 2). Projected to extend 208 feet from the sidewalk to the top of its terminating roof finial, the facade was designed to be three bays wide at the three-story base and five bays wide in its eight-story shaft. A two-tiered dormer, fronting the steep peaked roof, contained three windows at the twelfth story and one under a semi-circular pediment above. By March of 1893, when construction had already reached the seventh tier of girders, this facade design was

adjusted to accord to the widened fifty-five foot site and was made three stories higher -- 256 feet from sidewalk to top (Plate 3).<sup>14</sup> The new width was accommodated through a process of well-considered insertion and addition. In the final design for the building's base, superimposed tripartite arcades were inserted where, in the narrower, first design there had been superimposed triumphal arch motifs. The central arch of the ground-story arcade became the entrance to the new banking hall of the Merchants' Exchange National Bank and Home Life's public counting room was proclaimed by the lavishly embellished arcade above. In this novel solution the flanking doorways and the smaller arched windows and blind rondels were retained on the ground and second stories. In the redesigned eleven-story shaft two longitudinal bays of individual windows bracket the central core of the five window bays. The capping dormer, raised to the fifteenth story, was widened by three bays and flanked by two individual dormers; the fenestration of the dormer's upper tier was doubled. The base remained three stories high and the dormer two. The dimensions of the strikingly steep, pyramidal roof appear not to have been changed.

In 1892 skyscrapers were an innovative building type and the subject of broad controversy -- concerning safety, their structural systems, and how they should look. Twenty-two years after his initial design for the Home Life tower, Pierre LeBrun wrote that the resolution of a skyscraper style depended upon the utilization and reshaping of the elements of past styles. Size, he pointed out, was the only departure from precedent.<sup>15</sup> LeBrun was not alone in his belief that ornament should be historically appropriate to a building type and applied in an historically correct manner, a formula applicable to all questions of architectural style. Whereas the Gothic style was appropriate for ecclesiastical commissions, the urbane style of the northern Renaissance best expressed the commercial and entrepreneurial nature of the relatively new life insurance industry. In the case of the new tall office building type, it was a matter of vertically extending and otherwise adapting an historic prototype -- perhaps the counting house/branch office of a Florentine bank in Bruges or Antwerp. While the attenuated center section is left relatively unadorned to express the building's function, it is at the base and the top of the Home Life tower's marble facade that the richly concentrated display of classically-derived ornament, integrated from the Willard

study collection of Renaissance motifs, establishes the building's neo-Renaissance character.

In 1910 the distinguished architectural critic Montgomery Schuyler wrote an appreciation of the LeBrun firm in the *Architectural Record* in which he discussed the Home Life tower. He recalled the architectural experimentation current at its conception and how much the LeBrun's use of the Aristotelian analogy -- a beginning, middle and an end, or in architectural terms, the tripartite division of a tall building's exterior into base, shaft, and capital -- did to resolve the issue of vertical articulation in tall buildings. He conceded that the Home Life tower was so "skillfully and tastefully expressed as to make it hard to realize that the building is a pioneer."<sup>16</sup> In the span of his writing, Schuyler's attribution of "pioneer" to the Home Life Building appeared fairly late. The Home Life Building facade can be considered a significant step in the evolution of the Aristotelian maxim.

#### The Design of the Postal Telegraph Company Building

While the plans for the Home Life tower were being adjusted to take advantage of the site's greater width, contemporary reports document that the thirteen-story Postal Telegraph Building had already become a visible presence at the corner of Broadway and Murray Street. Although contemporary and subject to similar aesthetic and practical influences, these two buildings are quite different in appearance (Plate 4). The classically-derived terra-cotta detailing of the Postal Telegraph Building provides the clue to the building's neo-Renaissance style, although this ornament was employed more generally and with less attention to historic prototypes than that of the Home Life Building. Harding & Gooch emphasized the horizontal component of the building's steel frame rather than the vertical as the LeBrun's were doing at Home Life. The intermediate cornices at the fourth, eleventh, and twelfth stories, the distinct sill courses defining each story of the building's shaft, and the building's broad, copper-bronze major cornice all contribute to this horizontality, and the twelfth-story loggia on the Broadway facade recalls Renaissance architecture of more southern origin than that which inspired the Home Life Building's design.

There are two unusual elements in the design of the Postal Telegraph Building -- the recessed, three-story, main entrance on Broadway and the

greater height of the twelfth story -- that were necessitated by the functions of the building's proprietor. The building's thirty foot wide main entrance, semi-circular in plan, contained doors flanking the main lobby entrance: the one on the left led into the company messenger's office and shipping rooms, the one on the right to the bank on the second story (Plate 5). The greater part of the building's ground floor was planned as the company's shipping, delivery, and warehouse facility. The second story was designed to contain a bank; rental offices occupied the third through the ninth stories. The tenth and eleventh stories housed the executive and administrative offices of the Postal Telegraph Company, while on the twelfth story, with its nineteen-foot ceilings, the company's great switchboards and its transmitting and receiving apparatus were installed. Like the Gerken Building, the Postal Telegraph Building displays the preference the designers at George Edward Harding & Gooch had for terra-cotta ornament.

#### Subsequent History

On Sunday night, December 4, 1898, a fire broke out in the Rogers Peet clothing store, next to the Home Life Building, at the southwest corner of Broadway and Warren Street.<sup>17</sup> Fanned by a stormy east wind, the spectacular, ten-alarm blaze spread to the Home Life tower and the top of the Postal Telegraph Building. Front page material, the sensational aspect of this fire gave way to controversy and finally vindication of the buildings' fireproof construction. It was conjectured that had these two massive, fireproof bulwarks not been there, the rest of the block and neighboring blocks would have been devastated. Home Life's structure was unhurt, although the front of the building from the eighth story to the top was rebuilt as it had been, under the supervision of Pierre LeBrun. Only the Postal Telegraph's thirteenth floor was damaged.

In 1906 the Home Life Insurance Company's charter was changed and the company's home office was moved from 38 Court Street in Brooklyn to several floors of 256 Broadway in Manhattan. Documentation indicates that only five stories -- two through six -- were being utilized by the company at the time of its mutualization in 1916 (with the remainder rented); three decades later all fifteen had been taken over by the company. More space to house the company's wartime and post-war programs was needed. On January 3, 1947,

Home Life bought the thirteen-story Postal Telegraph Building from Trinity Church; corridors with flights of steps to connect the buildings' disparate floor levels were cut through the party walls. This expansion more than doubled the home office complex. In 1963 Home Life moved its main entrance to 253 Broadway and renovated the tower's ground story -- the former Merchants' Exchange National Bank space -- as retail rental space.<sup>18</sup> The firm of Raymond Loewy-William Snaith removed the original window and doorway configurations, substituting plate glass. The former entrance to the building was glazed as a show window. Lanterns were placed on either side of the entrance. Apart from these changes, the ground story of No. 256-257 survives intact.

The Postal Telegraph Building has undergone two major alterations. The first, carried out by Ely Jacques Kahn, began in 1936 when Longchamps, the restaurant chain, leased the basement. Kahn's firm worked elsewhere in the building until 1942; he was responsible for interior work on the upper floors as well as the building's renovated base.<sup>19</sup> The second major campaign occurred between 1963 and 1969 when Sapolsky & Slobodien were commissioned to plan a more comprehensive union of the buildings, to introduce air conditioning, and to change the windows. The entrance was given its present day appearance by Ira Greenburg in 1984; Greenburg tore away the accretions of the rental shops, parged the surfaces with Thoro-Seal, and covered the central spandrel with oxidized bronze bearing the building's number, 253. In October, 1985, the Home Life Insurance Company sold its home office complex to 253 Broadway Associates. The buildings became two condominiums in 1989, one owned by 253 Broadway Associates (Lot 1002), the other by the City of New York (Lot 1001).<sup>20</sup>

#### Description

*Home Life Insurance Company Building.* The plan of the Home Life Insurance Company Building is a rectangle, cut by light court indentations on both of the long sides (Plate 1). The deeper section fronts on Broadway; the shallower section fills the rear of the lot. The facade of this fifteen-story, steel-framed commercial building, faced with a self-supporting wall of white Tuckahoe marble (which extends through the full thickness of the wall from the base to the top-most cornice), is expressed as a three-story base, a transitional fourth story, an eight-

story shaft, a transitional thirteenth story, and a two-story top with a terminal double-light dormer. The skeletal steel frame was encased in brick and terra cotta. The building's northern and western elevations are of brick. A steep pyramidal roof, sheathed in copper-bronze, caps the forward section of the building and the skillfully expressed facade (Plate 6).

A great deal of the precisely-cut, classically-derived detail is concentrated at the building's base in an intricate three-story order, a variation of a triumphal arch motif (Plate 7). What was once the building's main entrance on the north side of the ground story -- now filled by a plate glass show window -- and the freight entrance on the south are nearly identical (Plate 8). Columns on bases support entablatures; above the doorways are eared mezzanine windows (now ventilators and partially louvered) flanked by volutes. The lintel tablet and imbricated transom grille of the metal freight entrance doorway are noteworthy. The center bay of the ground story arcade projects. The non-historic infill includes glass doors at the center and show windows at the sides; their spandrels are louvered ventilators. Ribbed, quarter-spherical awnings obscure the light boxes that now span the arches at the springline. Every projection, reveal, and molding return of the rusticated ground-story arcade accords with the complex trabeation fronting the second-story arcade as well as the segmentally-pedimented, double-window aedicule at the third story.

The tripartite arcade on the second story is flanked by two smaller arched windows in aedicules. Each is framed by columns and a carved entablature which is carried across the arcade, doubling as the arcade's imposts and springline spandrels. Volutes support the arcade's entablature. The voussoirs of the blind rondels above the aedicules are keyed into the rustication. Oak and laurel foliage, carved in low relief, wreath the rondels. At their extreme ends the aedicules support candelabra; flambeaux rest above the extreme ends of the arcade entablature. Two columnar mullions articulate each of the second-story arcade windows; the windows, like those above, have one-over-one wood sash. Their tympana, once plate glass, are filled with plywood. A balustrade fronts the arcade's central bay. The entablature frieze bears traces of an inscription -- "The Home Life Insurance Company." In the center bay of the third story is a double-windowed aedicule, composed of coupled pilasters supporting a segmental pediment. Colonettes carry the

double arches. The top of the pediment breaks the running-dog sill course between the third and fourth stories, supporting an ornate marble finial. There are two arched windows on each side of the central aedicule; the two inner openings have decorative architraves. At the transitional fourth story the disposition of the seven arched windows with keystones and a common spring course introduce the bay pattern -- a group of five windows flanked by single windows -- which characterizes the smooth, marble ashlar of the building's shaft. The transition from base to shaft is completed on the fifth story where the windows become flat-headed and the architraves of the extreme windows are keyed into the wall surface. The fifth story, like the thirteenth, is fronted by marble balconies on brackets; their exterior surfaces are articulated with classical motifs in low relief. Band courses and bracketed sills further articulate the shaft stories. On the twelfth story ornamental shells fill the square heads of the center five windows.

Many of the motifs and architectural elements that appear at the building's base reoccur at its crown. The window openings on the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth stories are arched. As on the ground and second stories, the architects created a two-story order for the fourteenth and fifteenth stories, but these are colonnades rather than the arcades below. The fourteenth-story colonnade fronts a deep loggia the width of the building's five-window center bay. Each of the extreme windows, framed with pilasters, has an individual balcony. These columns and pilasters support the facade's major cornice. The building's great, two-tiered dormer begins at the fifteenth story; its colonnade is superimposed on the story's five-window arcade. The mansard roofs flanking the two-tiered dormer are pierced with smaller, round-pedimented dormers. The aedicule on the great dormer's second tier is similar to that on the third story. It is flanked by volutes, its round pediment contains a deeply carved shell, and it carries an ornamental finial. The pyramidal roof, constructed of tie and angle iron secured to the building's steel frame, rises behind it. (Originally the roof was topped by cresting.) Dormers, sheathed in copper, project from the northern and southern sides of the roof, three single dormers on the northern side and one single and one double dormer on the southern side. These have round pediments containing molded shells.

*Postal Telegraph Building.* The thirteen-story Postal Telegraph Building, like the Home Life

tower to which it is now connected, is of fireproof, skeletal construction. Its beams and girders are of steel, but unlike the Home Life Building, the structural columns are of cast iron. To the sixth story the walls are loadbearing; above the sixth story the walls are carried on the steel girders. Its four-story base is faced with Indiana limestone;<sup>21</sup> the seven-story shaft and crowning two stories are of light grey brick with classically-inspired terra-cotta detail. Taken as a whole, the building is articulated as three, square, tower-like, corner bays containing the building's mass. On the Broadway facade the "towers" flank but one bay; between the corner towers on the Murray Street facade there are three bays separated by ribs. Each of these slightly-recessed bays is three windows in width.

At the building's base, the Broadway facade and the corner bay on Murray Street underwent a major renovation undertaken by Ely Jacques Kahn's office in 1937-38.<sup>22</sup> The doorways within the recessed, three-story Broadway entrance and the small shops flanking this entrance's slightly projecting architrave were removed and the entrance loggia was widened by paring down the fabric to the building's major structural steel posts along the building line (Plate 9). Re-using the limestone, Kahn created a screen, finishing these posts as thick, square, three-story piers; the second-story horizontal bracing was finished in the same manner. The entrance, flanked by deeper shops and show windows, was given a "moderne" architrave. The second and third stories within this recessed loggia are fronted by a wall of glass brick which remains. Subsequently the surfaces of this renovated screen of the building were parged with Thoro-Seal. In 1990-91 the corner storefront was extended forward to the Broadway building line. The base of the Murray Street facade (except for the corner bay and adjacent extended show window) retains its original fabric and appearance, although the infill has been changed.

The facades are ornamented with classical motifs used in alternating patterns. The terra-cotta sill courses defining the stories of the building's shaft are alternately expressed as either a pattern of repetitive floral forms (sixth, eighth, and tenth stories) or one of a rinceaux-like frieze (seventh, ninth, and eleventh stories). Two terra-cotta keystone designs -- a palmette and an acanthus -- alternate above the windows of each story as well as from story to story. This alternation of motifs is also evident in the Doric and Ionic terra-cotta capitals of the pilasters within the reveals of the window openings.

At the twelfth-story loggia, the square columns in antis carry Ionic capitals while the antae carry the Doric order. The three bays on the Murray Street facade's twelfth story also reflect this alternation. The corner "tower" bay elevations on this story offer a compressed variation of the window and rondel motif that once flanked the entrance architrave on the building's second and third stories before 1937.<sup>23</sup> (Only one of these "tower" bays -- the westernmost on Murray Street - - remains intact from base to top.) The twelfth story carries a secondary copper-bronze cornice. The thirteenth, attic story has a vaulted cornice above the balcony between the "tower" bays. The windows in these bays have eared architraves. The building's major cornice is of copper-bronze. All of the building's windows appear to have been changed between 1964 and 1969. The current configuration is of two vertical steel muntins and two horizontal steel muntins, set between glass block infill, carrying a single, central casement.

*Report prepared by Charles Savage  
Research Department*

*Report edited by Elisa Urbanelli  
Research Department Editor*

## NOTES

1. Whereas before 1840 there were four companies issuing life insurance policies in the United States -- two in Philadelphia, one in Boston, and one in New York -- between 1843 and 1859 eighteen new companies were chartered. These were located in cities representing other centers of population, as well as Philadelphia, Boston, and New York: Augusta, Maine; Hartford and New Haven, Connecticut; Montpelier, Vermont; Newark, New Jersey; and Pittsfield and Worcester, Massachusetts. Seven of these new companies were in New York City alone. For a chronology of American insurance companies through 1860 see: *Agents' Manual: A Handbook of Life Insurance*, (New York: Home Life Insurance Co., 1862). For a discussion of the phenomenal growth of the insurance industry in the nineteenth century, see Viviana A. Rotman Zeliser, *Morals and Markets: The Development of Life Insurance in the United States*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 150.



2. The initial twelve were: A.C. Capwell, W.H. Cary, John D. Cocks, Peter C. Cornell, Issac H. Frothingham, Walter S. Griffith, James How, Edward A. Lambert, A.A. Low, John T. Martin, Lewis Roberts, and J.S.T. Stranahan, Brooklyn's former mayor. These were joined by Caleb Barstow, A.B. Bayliss, John Berger, Thomas Carlton, S.B. Chittenden, A.B. Claflin, Harold Dollner, Czar Dunning, John Halsey, George T. Hope, Samuel E. Howard, George A. Jarvis, Nehemiah Knight, Thomas H. Messenger, Moses F. O'Dell, Samuel Perry, Henry E. Pierrepont, Theodore Polhemus, Jr., J. Milton Smith, Samuel Smith, John Sneden, J. E. Southworth, C.I. Sprague, and Charles A. Townsend, to become the company's incorporators. *Home Life Insurance Company, A Record of Fifty Years: 1860-1910*, (Cambridge, MA.: The Riverside Press, 1910), 3-5.
3. In special circulars, *Address to Ministers of the Gospel*, 1860, and *Address to Christian Pastors and Churches on Life Assurance*, 1862 -- both published in Brooklyn by the Home Life Insurance Co. -- the religious issue of life insurance's compatibility with Christian benevolence was discussed; insurance was not sold against death but against the unhappy circumstances of death. Clergymen, or their congregations for them, were offered a ten percent discount the first year and five percent thereafter; testimonials from well-known clerics followed.
4. New York County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances, Liber 1101, p.39, Jan. 30, 1869. This was formerly lot 318 in the chart of the lands of Trinity Church once part of The Church Farm.
5. New York County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances, Sec. 1, Liber 9, p. 362. At the same time Home Life sold the southerly twenty feet of No. 254's lot to Trinity Church, property the church would lease subsequently to John Mackay of the Postal Telegraph Company.
6. The competition for the Home Life Insurance Company building is recorded in two sources -- Moses King, *King's Handbook of New York City* (Boston: Moses King, 1892), p.626 and "The Home's New Habitation," *New York Times*, Oct. 22, 1893, p.20. In neither source are the competition's other participants identified or dates given. Limited perusal of the "Minutes of the Board, 1860-1896" at the Home Life Insurance Company revealed no mention of a competition nor record of awarding the commission to the LeBrun or any other firm.
7. New York County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances, Sec. 1, Liber 18, p. 109. The agreement was dated Feb. 7, 1893 but was not recorded until two days after the deed, p. 142.
8. "Minutes of the Board, 1860-1896," Home Life Insurance Company, Nov. 14, 1893. The tower's new height and width necessitated the negotiation of new contracts with all of the masons, plumbers, manufacturers, and suppliers already committed to the first design.
9. New York County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances, Sec. 1, Liber 8, page 168. As part of this lease Postal Telegraph Co. president John Mackay was required to demolish existing structures and to erect an office building of not less than ten stories at his own expense. While the lease permitted the operation of telegraph machinery, it forbade liquor, wines, ale or beer "below the third story above the sidewalk." It is interesting to note that on May 21, 1868, Home Life's board had moved to purchase 253 Broadway but acquired No. 254 instead. "Minutes of the Board, 1860-1896," Home Life Insurance Company.
10. NYC, Department of Buildings, Manhattan. Plans, Permits and Dockets, Block 134: Lot 27, NB 800-1892; Lot 29, NB 349-1892. The New Building Docket for the Postal Telegraph Building (NB 800-1892) indicates that the building was to have twelve stories; as built it has the inauspicious thirteen, subsequently described as the fourteenth.
11. See note 6.

12. The spare Gothic details across the facade of St. Mary-the-Virgin and its flanking auxiliary buildings suggest the collection's French Gothic casts. The terra-cotta ornament on the facade of Engine Company No. 14, at 14 East 18th Street, might have been taken from one the cast Italian Renaissance friezes. The multiplicity of of Italian Renaissance motifs, like the shell tympana and candelabra, seen on the Metropolitan Life building, speak of a familiarity with the ornament of Gian Galeazzo Visconti's Tomb (1494-1562) in the Certosa, Pavia, cast details of which were part of the collection. Montgomery Schuyler praised the manner in which these historic motifs were integrated into the design of a tall office building. Schuyler, "The Work of Napoleon LeBrun & Sons," *Architectural Record* 27, no. 5 (May, 1910), 378.
13. To date not a great deal is known about William Tyson Gooch. He may have been the firm's designer; certain recurring motifs characterize the firm's work within the time he was associated with Harding, 1889-c.1906.
14. The architects allowed that all of the marble ordered and cut could still be used. "Their Plans Enlarged," *New York Times*, Mar. 4, 1893, p.9.
15. [Pierre LeBrun], *Metropolitan Life Insurance Company* (New York: Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, 1914), 46-47.
16. Schuyler, "The Work of Napoleon LeBrun & Sons," 377-78.
17. "Destructive Fire in Skyscrapers," *New York Times*, Dec. 5, 1898, p.1; "Skyscrapers Fire Test," *New York Times*, Dec. 6, 1898, pp.1 and 8 (Editorial); "The Big Fire in Broadway," *New York Times*, Dec. 7, 1898, p.3; "Damage to the Home Life Building," *New York Times*, Jan. 12, 1899, p.9.
18. NYC, Department of Buildings, Manhattan. Plans, Permits and Dockets, Block 134, Lot 29. Alt. 1640-1963.
19. The Longchamps entrance at the loggia's north side received particular attention. The spandrels between the isolated piers were covered with blue mirrored glass in front of which the restaurant's name glowed in neon script. The transoms were cherry colored glass. The piers were faced with black glass delineated with vertical metal strips. A glass display case "floated" between the corner pier at Murray Street and the left-center pier.
20. Lot 1002 comprises the buildings' rental units on the first and second stories. There are areas common to both owners on the third story. Lot 1001 comprises all of the stories above. Further alterations to the corner storefront on the Postal Telegraph Building's Broadway facade occurred in 1990-91; the storefront was extended forward at that time.
21. In 1936, when the recessed, three-story Broadway entrance was expanded, it appears that some of the limestone was reused on the new "pilotis." The scored surface is similar to the limestone on the Murray Street elevation. However, the limestone on the Broadway facade has since been parged.
22. NYC, Department of Buildings, Manhattan. Plans, Permits and Dockets, Block 134, Lot 27. Misc. 2325-1937.
23. NYC, Department of Buildings, Manhattan. Plans, Permits and Dockets, Block 134, Lot 27. Misc. 2045-1936.

## OTHER SOURCES CONSULTED

- Birkmire, William H. *Skeletal Construction in Buildings*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1894.
- Dolkart, Andrew. *Forging a Metropolis*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1990.
- Freitag, Joseph Kendall. *Architectural Engineering*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1909.
- Gorham, John. *My Daily Dollars*. New York: Home life Insurance Company, 1935.
- "Home Life Insurance Building." *American Architect and Building News*. 55, no. 1108 (Mar. 20, 1897).
- Landmarks Preservation Commission. *Metropolitan Life Insurance Company Tower Designation Report* (LP-1530). Report prepared by Charles Savage. New York: City of New York, 1989.
- [LeBrun, Napoleon. Obituary]. *New York Times*. July 10, 1901, p.7.
- Lewis, Oscar. *Silver Kings: The Lives and Times of Mackay, Fair, Flood and O'Brien, Lords of the Nevada Comstock Lode*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947.
- [Mackay, John W. Obituary]. *New York Times*. July 21, 1902, p.1.
- Manter, Ethel H. *Rocket of the Comstock*. Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1950.
- New York Times*. "Their Plans Enlarged." March 4, 1893, 9; "Another Big Office Building." Oct. 29, 1893, 21; "The Postal in New Quarters." April 16, 1894, 5; "To Erect a Big Office Building." Aug. 22, 1895, 8; "Commercial Cable Building." Nov. 21, 1897, pp. 12 and 16.
- The Story of the Home Life Insurance Company, 1860-1960*. New York, 1960.
- Weisman, Winston. "A New View of Skyscraper History." *The Rise of an American Architecture*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970.

## FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the (former) Home Life Insurance Company Building (incorporating the former Postal Telegraph Building) 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 (former) Home Life Insurance Company Building is a significant, early skyscraper constructed in 1892-94 and richly designed in the neo-Renaissance style by Pierre LeBrun of the firm of Napoleon LeBrun & Sons; that the original twelve-story design was enlarged to fifteen stories in 1893, so that the height of the building, at its completion, exceeded that of the adjacent twelve-story Postal Telegraph Building; that the firm of Napoleon LeBrun & Sons, skilled at adapting the architecture of the past to new building types like the skyscraper, concentrated the wealth of finely realized low- and high-relief classical ornamental motifs at the Home Life Building's base and top; that the Home Life tower facade represents an early application of the Renaissance style to a skyscraper and was recognized as a seminal and most satisfactory expression for skyscraper design, a "pioneer" example of the tripartite columnar formula considered appropriate for tall office buildings; that the Postal Telegraph Building was designed by George Edward Harding & Gooch and built simultaneously with the Home Life Building; that the design of the Postal Telegraph Building, also derived from the Renaissance style, is distinguished by a program of classical ornamental motifs used in alternating patterns, crowned by a loggia; that the Home Life Insurance Company purchased the Postal Telegraph Building and connected it to its headquarters in 1947; that the Home Life Insurance Company, founded in Brooklyn in 1860, occupied this Broadway blockfront for almost 120 years; that the distinctively sharp silhouette of the (former) Home Life Insurance Building complex, rising above City Hall Park, survives very much as it had been conceived.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 (formerly Section 534 of Chapter 21) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the (former) Home Life Insurance Company Building (incorporating the former Postal Telegraph Building), 256-257 and 253 Broadway, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 134, Lots 1001 and 1002, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

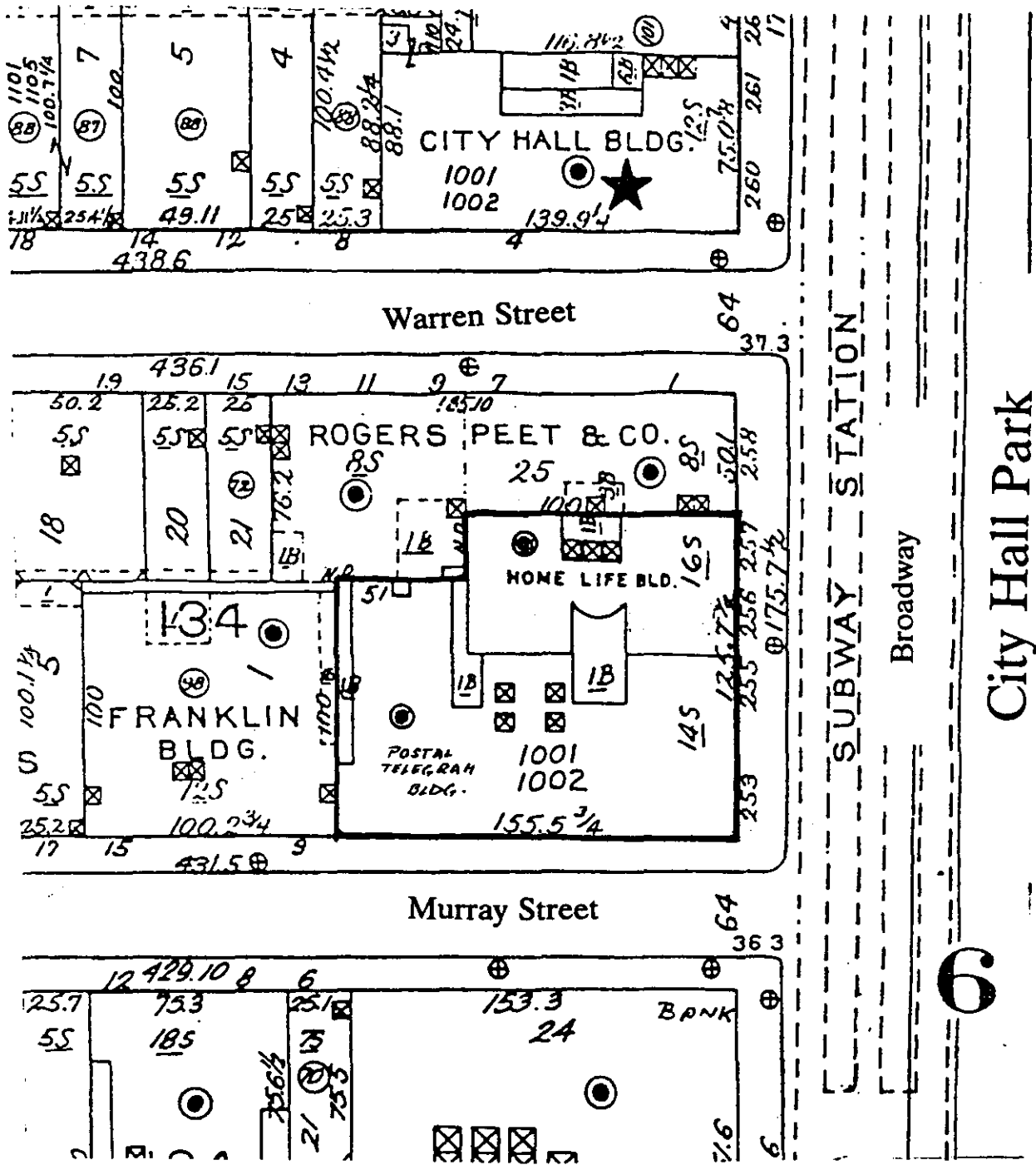


Plate 1. (Former) Home Life Insurance Company Building (incorporating the former Postal Telegraph Building), 256-57 and 253 Broadway. Site plan. Sanborn, *Manhattan Land Book* (1990-91), pl. 5.

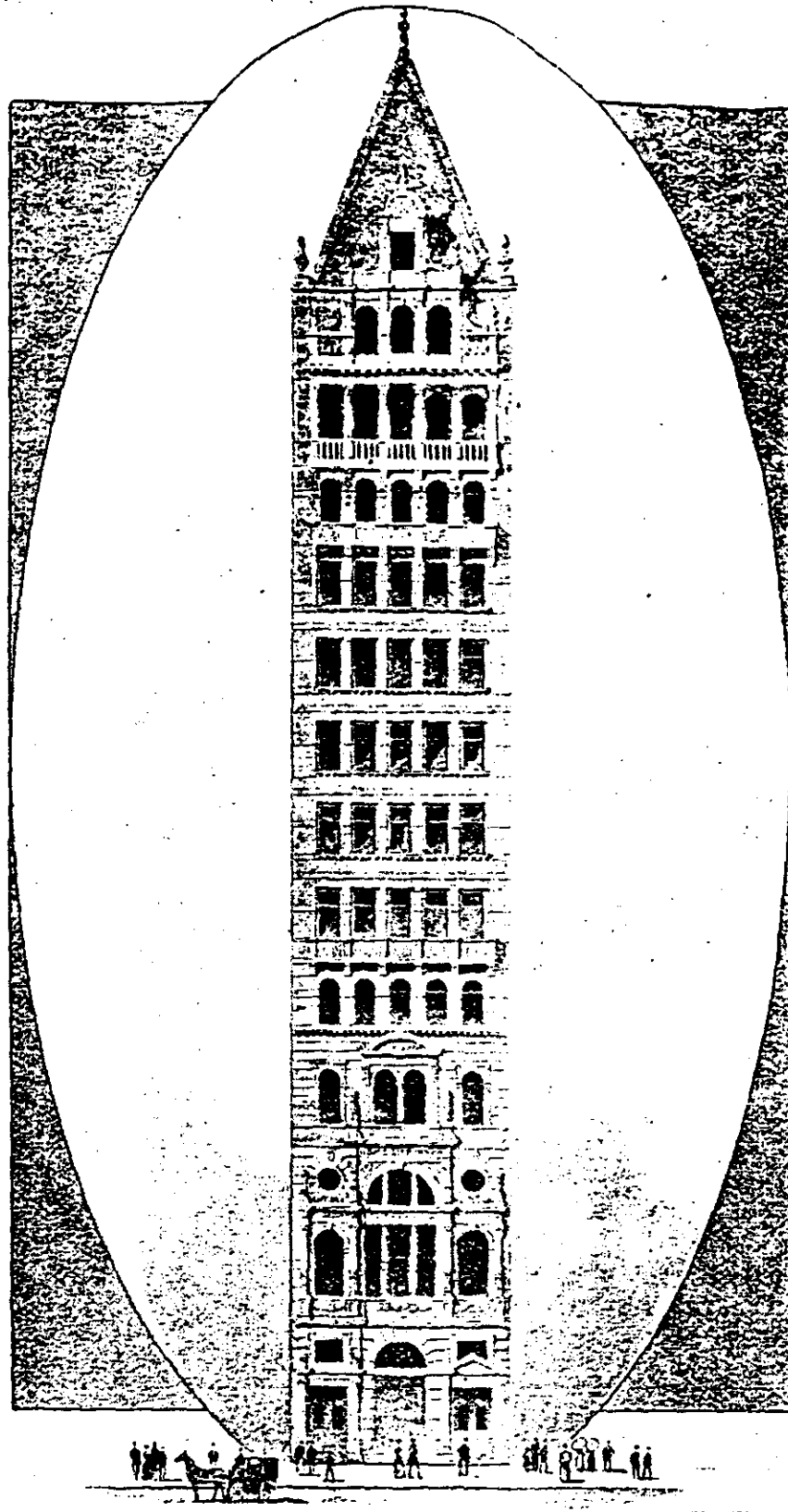


Plate 2. Competition Design, Home Life Insurance Company Building, c. 1890. Napoleon LeBrun & Sons. *King's Handbook of New York*. 1892, p.627.

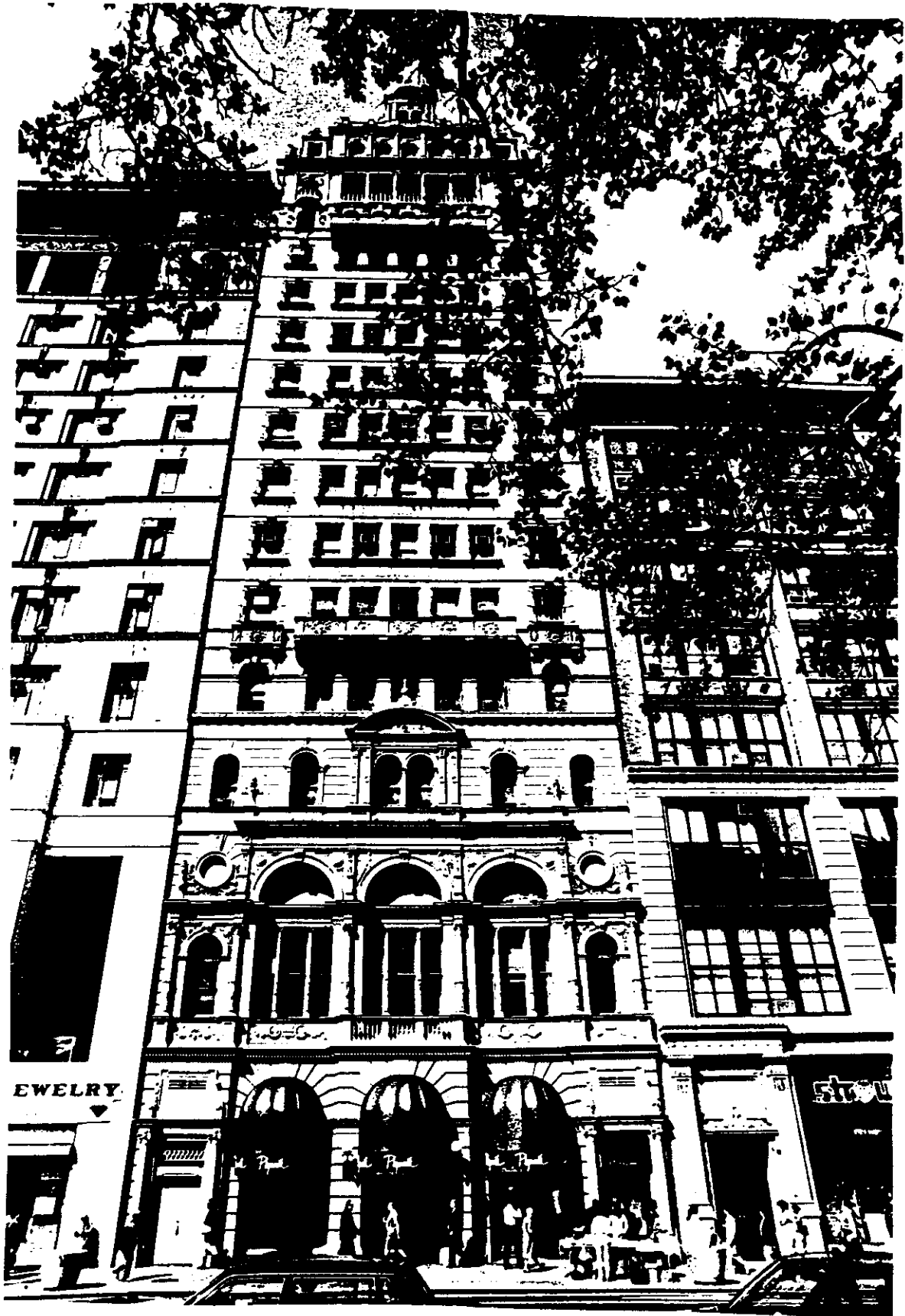


Plate 3. Home Life Insurance Company Building, 1892-94. 256-257 Broadway. Napoleon LeBrun & Sons. (Carl Forster)



Plate 4. Postal Telegraph Building, 1892-94. 253 Broadway. George Edward Harding & Gooch. To the right, the Home Life Insurance Company Building. (Carl Forster)





Plate 5. Architects' Rendering. Postal Telegraph Building, c. 1891. *King's Handbook of New York*, 1892, p.191.



Plate 6. Detail, upper stories and steep roof. Home Life Insurance Company Building. (Carl Forster)

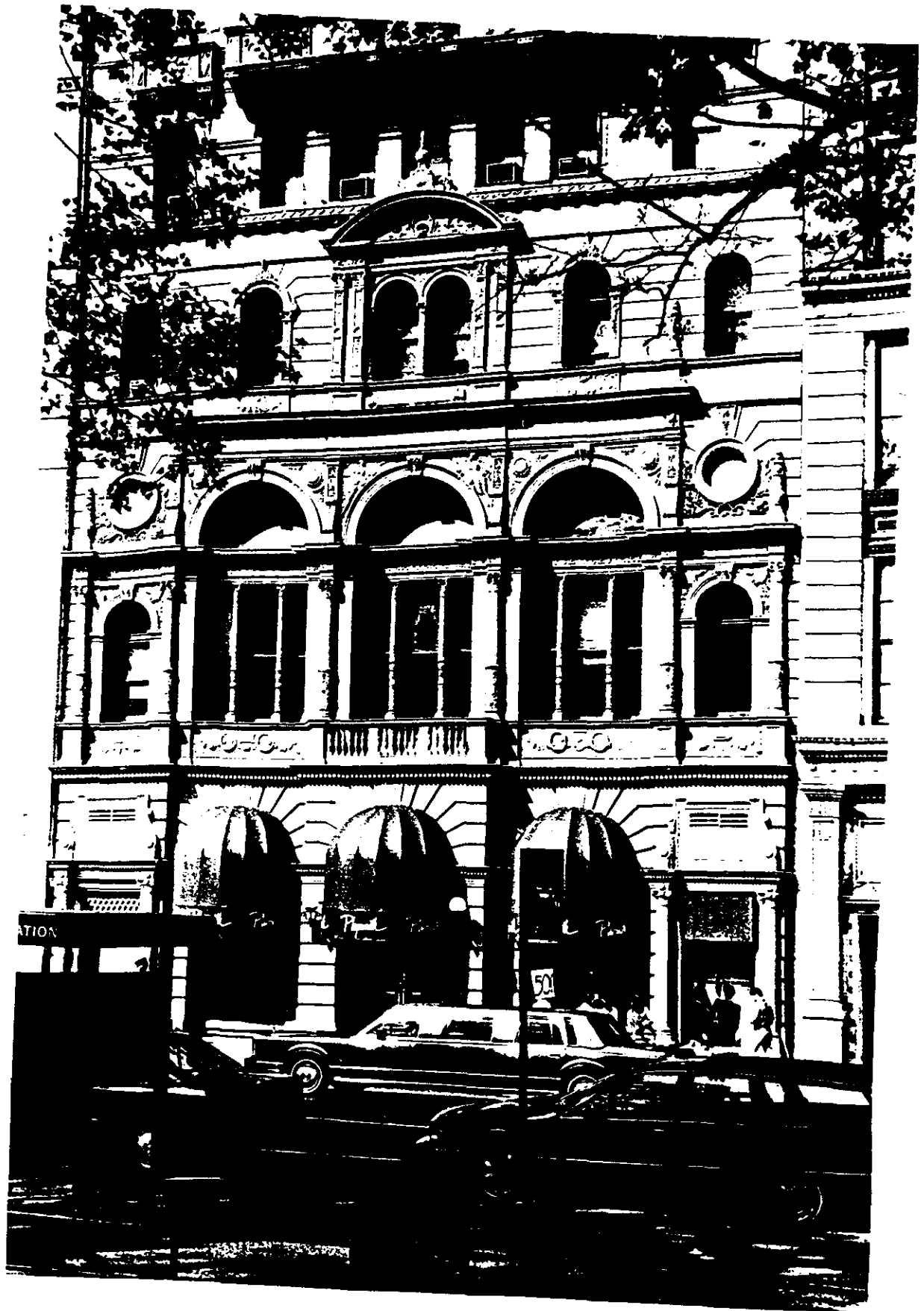


Plate 7. Detail, lower four stories. Home Life Insurance Company Building. (Carl Forster)



Plate 8. Detail, doorway. Home Life Insurance Company Building. (Carl Forster)



Plate 9. Detail, lower three stories. Postal Telegraph Building. (Carl Forster)

