

**Fire House, Hook and Ladder 17 (also now Engine Company 60)** 341 East 143rd Street,  
The Bronx.  
Built 1906-07; Michael J. Garvin, architect.

Landmark Site: Borough of the Bronx Tax Map Block 2306, Lot 52

On December 14, 1999, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Fire House, Hook and Ladder 17 (also now Engine Company 60) 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. There were three speakers in favor of designation: representatives of the Fire Department of the City of New York, the Bronx Landmarks Task Force and the Historic Districts Council. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

#### Summary

This firehouse was constructed in 1906-07 to accommodate Hook and Ladder Company 17, which was organized in 1874 to serve the Mott Haven section of the Bronx. One of the first paid firefighting companies in this neighborhood, Ladder 17 replaced an earlier volunteer force, the J. & L. Mott Ladder 2 Company. This brick and stone building, designed by Michael J. Garvin, provided a larger facility for this densely-populated section of the Bronx. Garvin served as Bronx County's first Commissioner of Buildings and also designed the Bronx County Courthouse (a designated New York City Landmark). Incorporating design elements from the prevailing classical style, Garvin created a solid, three-bay structure with rusticated end piers, carved stone ornament, and a strong cornice, all of which served to anchor the building to the street, as well as to provide an important sense of civic monumentality for the Bronx. In 1948, Engine Company 60, which had been organized in 1895 at 352 East 137<sup>th</sup> Street, was reassigned to this location and has continued to share the facility with Ladder 17.



## DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

### Firefighting in New York<sup>1</sup>

Even in the colonial period, the government of New York took the possibility of fire very seriously. Under Dutch rule all men were expected to participate in firefighting activities. After the English took over, the Common Council organized a force of thirty volunteer firefighters in 1737. They operated two Newsham hand pumpers that had recently been imported from London. By 1798, the Fire Department of the City of New York (FDNY), under the supervision of a chief engineer and six subordinates, was officially established by an act of the state legislature.

As the city grew, this force was augmented by new volunteer companies. In spite of growing numbers of firefighters and improvements in hoses and water supplies, fire was a significant threat in an increasingly densely built up city. Of particular significance was the "Great Fire" of December 16-17, 1835, which caused more damage to property than any other event in New York City. The damages resulting from several major fires which occurred between 1800 and 1850 led to the establishment of a building code, and an increase in the number of firemen from 600 in 1800 to more than 4,000 in 1865. Despite rapid growth, the department was often criticized for poor performance.<sup>2</sup> Intense competition between companies began to hinder firefighting with frequent brawls and acts of sabotage, often at the scenes of fires. During the Civil War, when fire personnel became harder to retain, public support grew for the creation of a professional firefighting force, similar to that which had been established in other cities and to the professional police force that had been created in New York in 1845.

In May 1865, the New York State Legislature established the Metropolitan Fire District, comprising the cities of New York (south of 86<sup>th</sup> Street) and Brooklyn. The act abolished the volunteer system and created the Metropolitan Fire Department, a paid professional force under the jurisdiction of the state government. By the end of the year, the city's 124 volunteer companies with more than 4,000 men had retired or disbanded, to be replaced by thirty-three engine companies and twelve ladder companies operated by a force of 500 men. Immediate improvements included the use of more steam engines, horses and a somewhat reliable telegraph system. A military model was adopted for the firefighters, which involved the use of specialization, discipline, and merit. By 1870, regular service was extended to the "suburban districts" north of 86<sup>th</sup> Street and expanded still farther north after the annexation of parts of the

Bronx in 1874. New techniques and equipment, including taller ladders and stronger steam engines, increased the department's efficiency, as did the establishment, in 1883, of a training academy for personnel. The growth of the city during this period placed severe demands on the fire department to provide services, and in response the department undertook an ambitious building campaign. The area served by the FDNY nearly doubled after consolidation in 1898, when the departments in Brooklyn and numerous communities in Queens and Staten Island were incorporated into the city. After the turn of the century, the Fire Department acquired more modern apparatus and motorized vehicles, reflecting the need for faster response to fires in taller buildings. Throughout the twentieth century, the department has endeavored to keep up with the evolving city and its firefighting needs.

### Firehouse Design<sup>3</sup>

By the early twentieth century, the firehouse as a building type had evolved from the wooden storage shed used during the seventeenth century to an imposing architectural expression of civic character. As early as 1853, Marriott Field had argued in his *City Architecture: Designs for Dwelling Houses, Stores, Hotels, etc.* for symbolic architectural expression in municipal buildings, including firehouses. The 1854 Fireman's Hall,<sup>4</sup> with its highly symbolic ornamentation reflected this approach, using flambeaux, hooks, ladders, and trumpets for its ornament.<sup>5</sup>

Between 1880 and 1895, Napoleon LeBrun & Son served as the official architectural firm for the fire department, designing forty-two firehouses in a massive effort to modernize the facilities and to accommodate the growing population of the city. Although the firm's earliest designs were relatively simple, later buildings were more distinguished and more clearly identifiable as firehouses.

While the basic function and requirements of the firehouse were established early in its history, LeBrun is credited with standardizing the program, and introducing some minor, but important, innovations in the plan. Placing the horse stalls in the main part of the ground floor to reduce the time needed for hitching horses to the apparatus was one such innovation.<sup>6</sup> Firehouses were usually located on mid-block sites because these were less expensive than more prominent corner sites. Since the sites were narrow, firehouses tended to be three stories tall, with the apparatus on the

ground story and rooms for the company, including dormitory, kitchen and captain's office, above.

After 1895, the department commissioned a number of well-known architects to design firehouses. Influenced by the classical revival which was highly popular throughout the country, New York firms such as Hoppin & Koen, Flagg & Chambers, and Horgan & Slatterly created facades with bold, classical style designs.

### Growth of The Bronx<sup>7</sup>

The site of Hook and Ladder 17 was originally part of the land purchased by two English brothers, Richard and Lewis Morris in 1670. Their extensive holdings in the area became known as Morrisania, and formed part of Westchester County during the late eighteenth and most of the nineteenth centuries. In 1828, Jordan L. Mott, inventor of the coal-burning stove, bought a large tract of land in the southwestern part of Morrisania and established the Mott Haven Iron Works on the Harlem River at Third Avenue and 134<sup>th</sup> Street. The area around the business was developed with houses for Mott and his workers and became known as Mott Haven. Even though the larger area of Morrisania continued as a quiet, rural district, the section of Mott Haven developed more rapidly because of the expansion of the iron works and the advent of other industrial enterprises attracted by the Mott Haven Canal, which led from the Harlem River north to 138<sup>th</sup> Street. The New York & Harlem Railroad, incorporated in 1831, expanded over the Harlem River in 1840, bringing goods and people to the industrial community of Mott Haven. As the railroads and streetcars crossed the area, beginning in the 1860s, streets were laid out and land speculation began in earnest.

In 1874, the townships of Morrisania, West Farms and Kingsbridge split from Westchester County and became the 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> wards of the City of New York. This area of the Bronx became known as the Annexed District. Beginning in the early 1880s, booster organizations such as the North Side Association advocated for infrastructure improvements; streets were paved, sewers dug, and mass transit lines brought the elevated trains to the Bronx. The el spurred tenement construction.

By 1897, just a decade after the el began operation, the once vacant blocks east of Third Avenue were almost completely built over with solid brick buildings. This area held a mixture of building types: single-family town houses built in the late 1880s; multi-story apartment houses, built with increasing

frequency in the 1890s; and to complete the picture, various industrial and manufacturing establishments along the neighborhood's southern fringe.<sup>8</sup>

The population of the Bronx grew rapidly. In 1890, there were 89,000 people living in the area of the Bronx known as the North Side; ten years later it had more than doubled to over 200,000. By 1915, the number had increased threefold, to 616,000.<sup>9</sup> As the population and number of new buildings increased, protection from the ever present danger of fire became increasingly important. The firefighters of Hook and Ladder 17 had an vital role in the Mott Haven community.

### Hook and Ladder Company 17

In the mid-nineteenth century, as the Mott Haven Iron Works and the associated residential development expanded, fire protection in Mott Haven became more important. A volunteer company, J. & L. Mott Ladder 2, was established in a three-story wooden building at 2608 Third Avenue. With the annexation of this section of the Bronx to New York in 1874, the volunteer squad was disbanded and replaced with Hook and Ladder 17, at the same location.<sup>10</sup> In 1877, Hook and Ladder 17 moved into a rented, four-story, brick stable three blocks away, at 589 East 143<sup>rd</sup> Street, near Third Avenue.<sup>11</sup> By 1891, Ladder 17 had twelve men and officers stationed at this site, with two horses, and one roller-frame hook-and-ladder truck with a fifty-foot extension ladder. That year they fought 60 fires, out of the total 158 fires that occurred in the entire lower Bronx.<sup>12</sup> The company has remained on the same site in the Bronx for more than 120 years, moving out only from April 1906 to September 1907, while the current firehouse was under construction. During that period the company worked out of 358 Alexander Avenue.<sup>13</sup>

In 1907, Hook and Ladder 17 moved into a new, two-bay firehouse, designed by Michael J. Garvin. The two bays allowed sufficient room for a second section of the ladder company, Ladder 17-2, which was organized on March 1, 1907.<sup>14</sup> Ladder Company 17-2 was disbanded in 1915, and later reorganized from 1970 until 1974, during a period of a large number of fires in the South Bronx. Rescue Company 3 occupied the second bay from its initial organization in June 1, 1931 until it moved to a different location in 1948.

At that time, Engine Company 60 relocated to 341-343 East 143<sup>rd</sup> Street, joining Ladder Company 17.<sup>15</sup> Engine Company 60 has remained at this site on 143<sup>rd</sup> Street since 1948 and joined with the members of Ladder Company 17 in 1970 to form "the Green

16. Information in this section comes primarily from: "Bronx Upbuilder Dies," *The New York Times* (Sept. 2, 1918), and Denis Steadman Francis, *Architects in Practice, New York City, 1840-1900* (NY: Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records, 1979).
17. Although Garvin received the commission for this building, the actual design work was carried out by Oscar Bleumner, who had receive his architectural training in Europe and is best known as a pioneer of modern American painting. See LPC, *Bronx Borough Courthouse Designation Report* (LP-1076) (NY: City of New York, 1981).
18. These include: Francis J. Lantry, Fire Commissioner; Hugh Bonner and Charles C. Wise, Deputy Fire Commissioners; Edward F. Crocker, Chief of Department; Alexander Stephens, Superintendent of Buildings; Alfred M. Downes, Secretary; Michael J. Garvin Architect; and Alfred Nugent's Son, Contractor.

## FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

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 Fire House, Hook and Ladder 17 (now also Engine Company 60) has a special character, and a 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 Fire House, Hook and Ladder 17 (now also Engine Company 60) was constructed in 1906-07 on the site of an earlier station, to house one of the oldest professional firefighting companies in the Bronx, Hook and Ladder 17; that this company was organized in 1874, the year that New York City annexed the Bronx and paid companies replaced the earlier volunteer groups; that, in addition to Ladder 17, this two-bay firehouse also housed (for a period of time) a second ladder company (Ladder 17-2), and a rescue unit (Rescue 3), and was joined permanently in 1948 by Engine Company 60, which had been organized in 1895 and previously located in a smaller station on Third Avenue; that the classically-ornamented fire house was designed by architect Michael J. Garvin, the Bronx's first Commissioner of Buildings and designer of the Bronx County Courthouse; that its brick and stone facade is enlivened by stone bandcourses, carved stone shields, foliate swags, and brick-trimmed arches over the windows marked by carved disks and swags; that the rusticated end piers and substantial stone cornice frame the facade and anchor the building firmly to its site; that this firehouse was constructed in response to a growing population in this area of the Bronx known as Mott Haven, and is a rare surviving building in this area from the early twentieth century period of Bronx history.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 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 Fire House, Hook and Ladder 17 (now also Engine Company 60), 341-343 East 143<sup>rd</sup> Street, The Bronx, and designates Borough of the Bronx Tax Map Block 2306, Lot 52 as its Landmark Site.



**Fire House, Hook and Ladder 17 (also now Engine Company 60)**

341 East 143<sup>rd</sup> Street, The Bronx

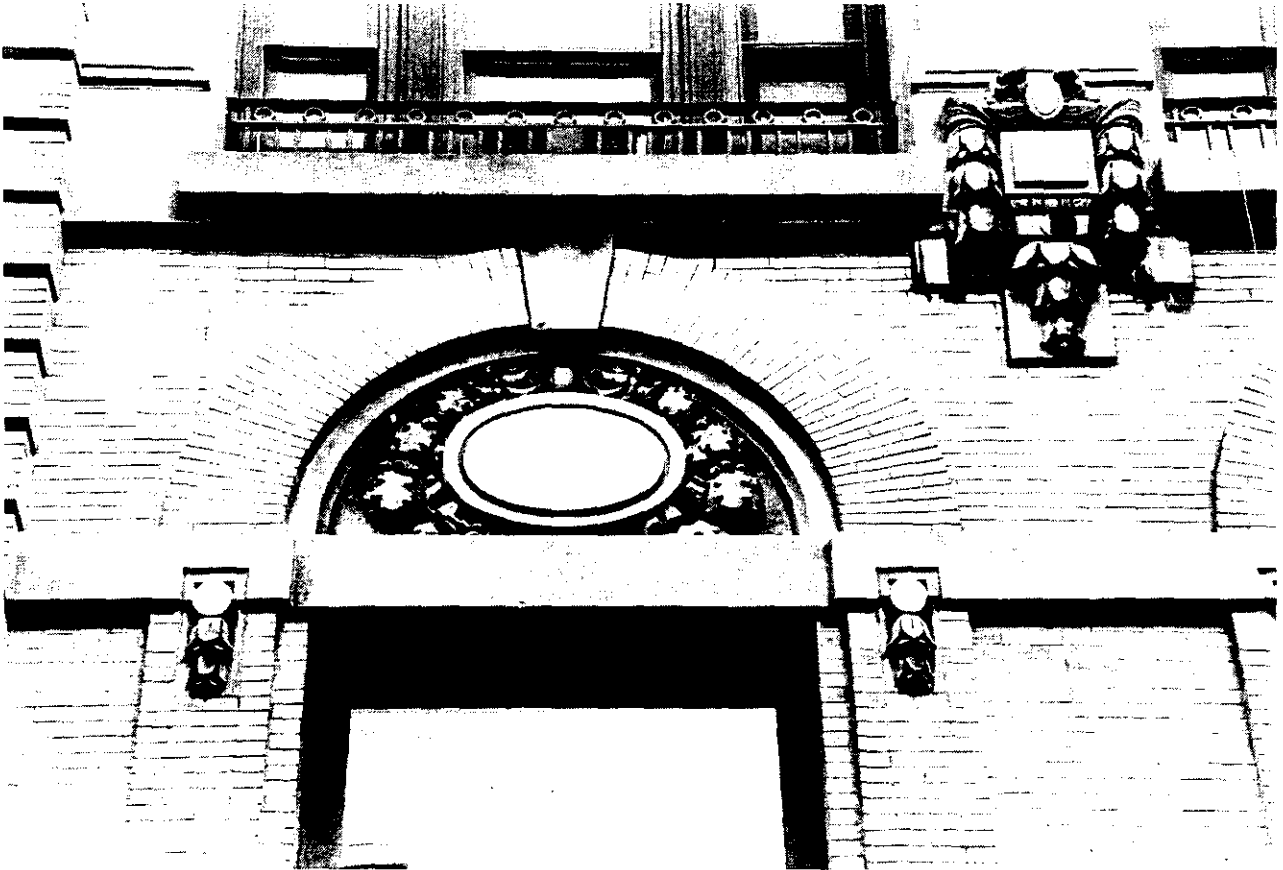
*Photo: Carl Forster*



Fire House, Hook and Ladder 17 (now also Engine Company 60)  
Details



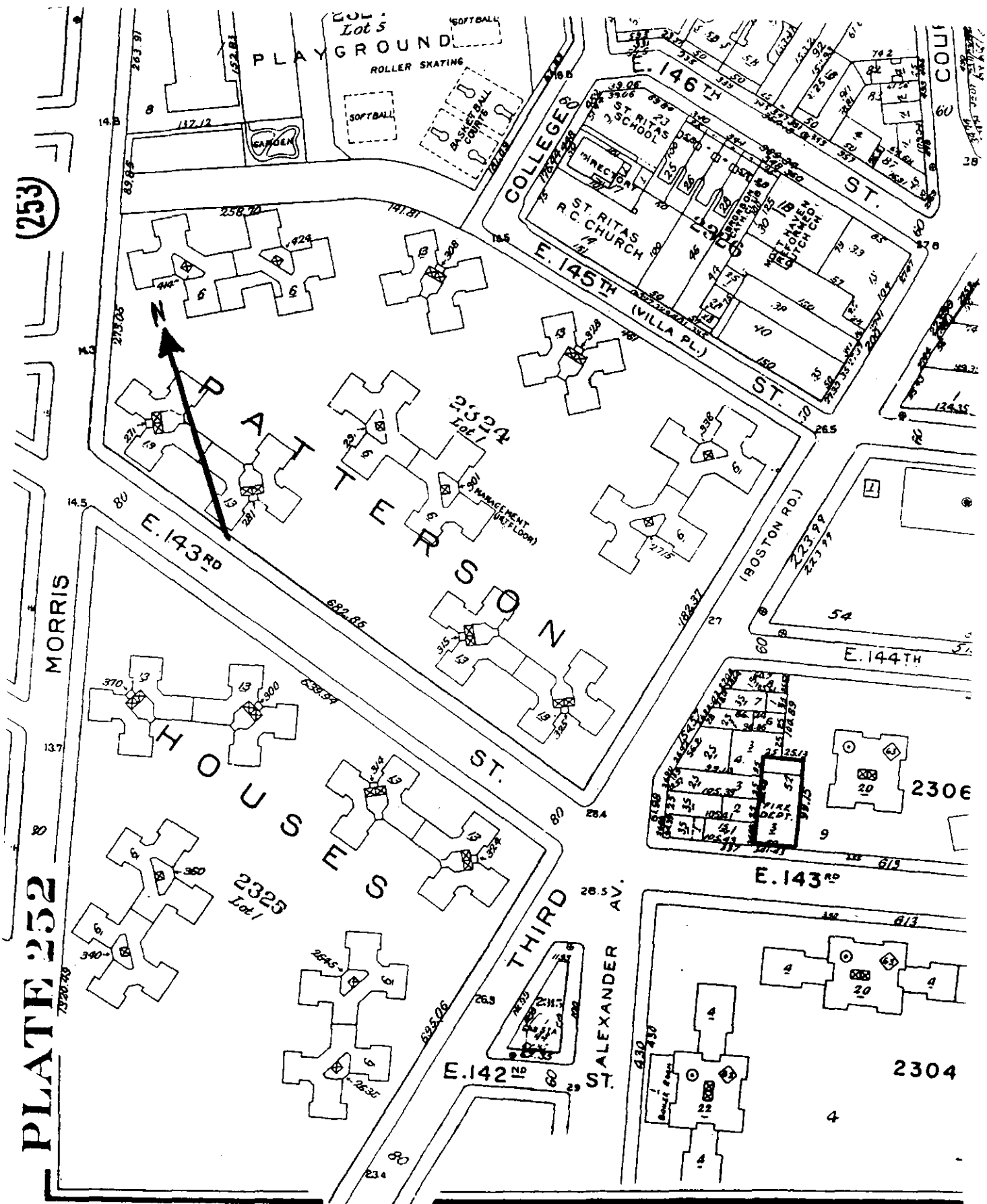
*Photos: Carl Forster*



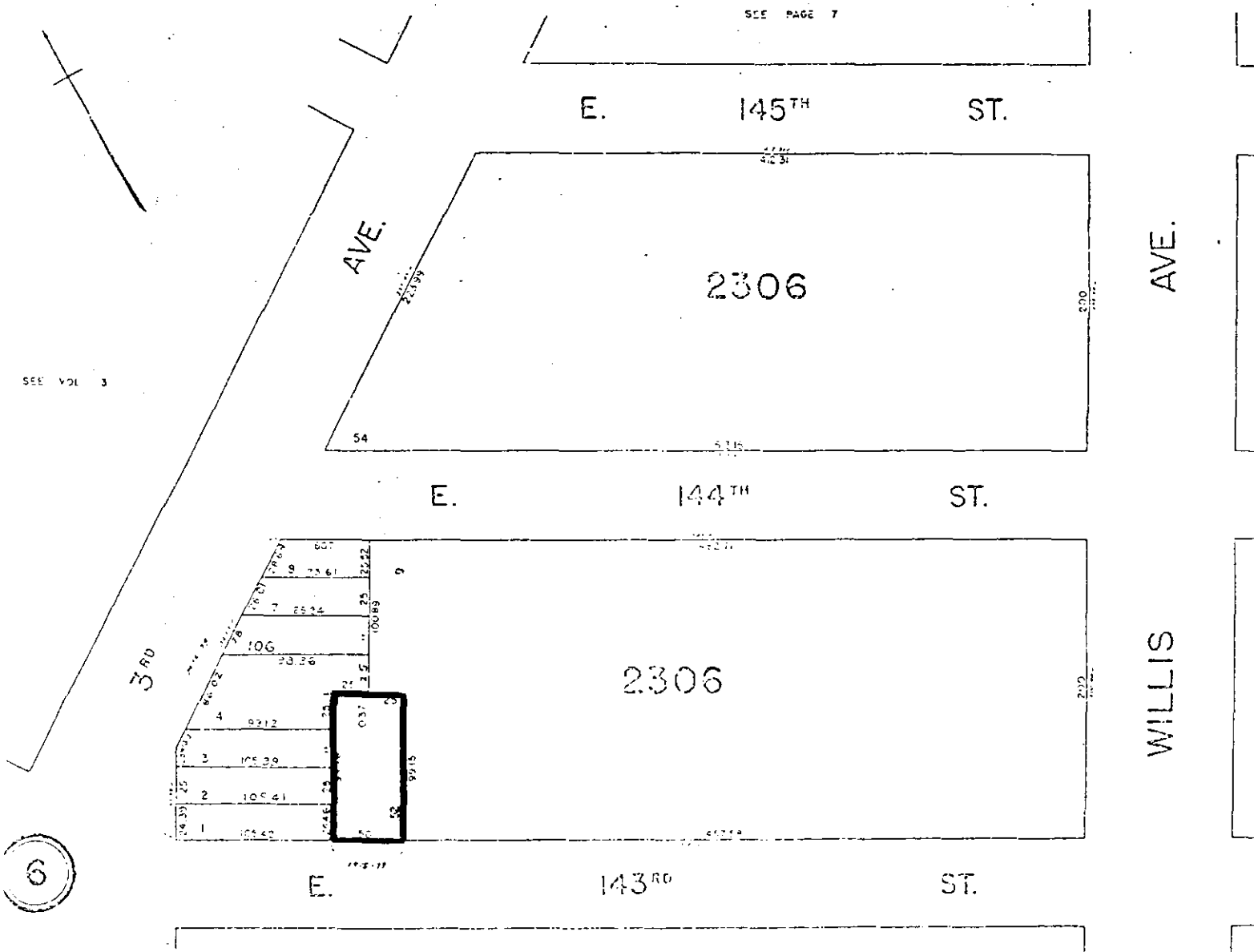
Fire House, Hook and Ladder 17 (now also Engine Company 60)  
Ornamental Detail

*Photo: Carl Forster*





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 341 East 143rd Street, The Bronx  
 Borough of the Bronx Tax Map Block 2306, Lot 52  
 Source: Sanborn Landbook, The Bronx, NY, 1999, sec. 4, plate 252



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 341 East 143<sup>rd</sup> Street, The Bronx  
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 Source: Department of Finance, City Surveyor, Tax Map