

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Fire Department of the City of New York¹

The origin of New York's Fire Department dates to the city's beginning as the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam. Leather fire buckets, first imported from Holland and later manufactured by a cobbler in the colony, were required in every household. Regular chimney inspections and the "rattle watch" patrol helped protect the colony during the Dutch period. By 1731, under English rule, two "engines" were imported from London and housed in wooden sheds in lower Manhattan. The Common Council authorized a volunteer force in 1737, and the Volunteer Fire Department of the City of New York was officially established by act of the state legislature in 1798. As the city grew, this force was augmented by new volunteer companies. Between 1800 and 1850, seven major fires occurred, leading to the establishment of a building code and the formation of new volunteer fire companies on a regular basis. The number of firemen grew from 600 in 1800 to more than 4,000 by 1865.

Intense rivalries among the companies developed, stemming in large part from the Volunteer Fire Department's significant influence in political affairs. The Tammany political machine was especially adept at incorporating the fire department into its ranks. Since the 1820s it was common knowledge that "a success in the fire company was the open sesame to success in politics."²

During the peak years of Tammany's power, increasingly intense competition among companies began to hinder firefighting, creating public exasperation with the volunteer force. Brawls among firemen at the scene of fires and acts of sabotage among the companies became commonplace. In the 1860s, an alliance between the Republican controlled state legislature, which wanted to impair Tammany Hall's political control, and fire insurance companies, who wanted more efficient firefighting, played on this public sentiment to replace the volunteers with a paid force. On March 30, 1865, the New York State Legislature established the Metropolitan Fire District, a paid professional force under the jurisdiction of the state and abolished New York's Volunteer Fire Department. By the end of the year, the city's 124 volunteer companies had retired or disbanded and were replaced by thirty-three engine companies and twelve ladder companies operated by a force of 500 men.

The creation of a professional Fire Department in 1865 resulted in immediate improvements. Regular service was extended to 106th Street in Manhattan, with suburban companies farther north, and its telegraph system was upgraded. In early 1865 there were only 64 call boxes in New York, with none of them located north of 14th Street. Within the next year and a half, the number had increased to 187.³ Horse-drawn steam-powered apparatus were acquired for all companies.⁴ The firehouse crews were standardized at twelve men (as opposed to a total of up to 100 men per firehouse under the volunteer system), and the Department took on a serious and disciplined character.⁵

In 1869, "Boss" William Marcy Tweed's candidate for New York State governor was elected, and he quickly regained control of the Fire Department through the Charter of 1870 (commonly known as the "Tweed Charter"). Only three years later, this charter was revoked when Tweed was sentenced to prison for embezzling millions from the city. Permanently under city control after 1870, the Fire Department (separated into a New York Department and a Brooklyn Department) retained its professional status and proceeded to modernize rapidly. While no new buildings were constructed until 1879-80,⁶ the companies continually invested in modern apparatus and new technologies.

Fire House Function and Planning in the LeBrun Era⁷

With the creation of the Metropolitan Fire Department in 1865—and the supposed removal of Tammany control of the companies—the Common Council hoped to filter out remaining Tammany influence by banning any firehouse construction for five years. The ban lasted until 1879, when, under Fire Chief Eli Bated, the department embarked on a major campaign for new firehouse construction throughout the city, but especially in northern sections.

N. LeBrun & Sons designed all forty-two Fire Department's structures built between 1880 and 1895. It is not clear why the LeBrun firm was commissioned by the Fire Department to serve as its sole

architect during these years; however, in 1879 LeBrun was the representative of the American Institute of Architects on the Board of Examiners of the Building Bureau of the Fire Department, a position he held for eighteen years. This position may well have led to the commission, which ultimately set a standard for firehouse design in New York.

With the professionalization of the firefighting force in 1865, the spatial requirements of the firehouse were established.⁸ The ground floor functioned primarily as storage for the apparatus, and the second and third floors housed dormitory, kitchen, and captain's office. While the basic function of the house had not changed by 1880 (and is essentially the same today), LeBrun is credited with standardizing the main program components, while introducing some minor, but important, innovations in the plan. For example, when horses were first introduced into the system, they were stabled outside the firehouse, and valuable time was lost in bringing them inside to the apparatus. LeBrun's firehouses included horse stalls inside the building, at the rear of the apparatus floor, and some houses had special features related to the horses' care and feeding.⁹ The LeBrun firehouses also neatly accommodated drying the cotton hoses after each use, incorporating an interior hose drying "tower" which ran the height of the building along one wall, thus economizing valuable space in the firehouse.

Napoleon LeBrun & Sons¹⁰

Napoleon Eugene Charles LeBrun (1821-1901) was born to French immigrant parents in Philadelphia. At fifteen years of age he was placed in the office of the classicist architect Thomas Ustick Walter (1804-1887), where he remained for six years. LeBrun began his own practice in 1841 in Philadelphia where he had several major commissions—including the Cathedral of SS. Peter and Paul (1846-64) and the Academy of Music (1852-57)—before moving to New York in 1864. His Second Empire Masonic Temple competition submission of 1870 did much to establish his reputation in New York. In the same year his son Pierre joined him and the firm became Napoleon LeBrun & Son in 1880. In 1892 the firm became Napoleon LeBrun & Sons in recognition of his youngest son Michael. All three were active members of the American Institute of Architects. The firm received its first commission from the Fire Department in 1880. N. LeBrun & Sons designed more than 40 buildings for the Fire Department throughout Manhattan, including many firehouses, a warehouse, and a fire pier.

The firm's fifteen-year firehouse building campaign resulted in an average of two to three firehouses each year. In some cases, nearly identical buildings were erected; Engine Company No. 54 has a twin in Engine Company No. 15, located at 269 Henry Street (1883-84) next to the well-known Henry Street Settlement House.¹¹ Engine Company No. 47 located at 500 West 113th Street has a twin in Engine Company No. 18 at 132 West 10th Street (1891, located in the Greenwich Village Historic District). Most of the designs used classical detailing and overall symmetry (in part dictated by the large vehicular entrance on a narrow lot), but there is also a wide range of aesthetic expression, ranging from Greek revival style to the more grandiose French Chateau style.

The firm created two large, elaborate buildings for the fire department during this period: the Fire Department Headquarters at 157-59 East 67th Street (now Engine Company No. 39/Ladder Company No. 16, 1884-86), and Engine Company No. 31, 87 Lafayette Street (1896, both designated New York City Landmarks). The Headquarters building is a strong expression of Romanesque Revival style, and in the years following its completion, several smaller firehouses were designed in a subdued version of that style, with Engine Company No. 47 being an example.

While Engine Company No. 31 is the firm's best known firehouse design, it remains the least representative of their work for the Fire Department, and marks a transition between the restrained, classical elegance of the majority of their firehouses and the increasingly monumental designs of other architects which followed at the turn of the century. Engine Company No. 31 is a freestanding structure for a triple engine company modeled on sixteenth-century Loire Valley châteaux. It was a distinct departure from their usual "storefront" design, and is considered the firm's most impressive civic design. Also of note was the firm's acclaimed Hook & Ladder Company No. 15 at Old Slip (1885, demolished), which was designed in the style reminiscent of a seventeenth-century Dutch house.

The LeBrun firm also designed several churches including the Church of the Epiphany (1870, demolished), Saint John the Baptist (1872), 211 West 30th Street, and Saint Marty the Virgin (1894-95, a designated New York City Landmark), 133-145 West 46th Street. At the turn of the century, N. LeBrun & Sons achieved renown for office building design in Manhattan, most notably the home office of the Metropolitan Life Building at 1 Madison Avenue (1890-92 and the annex tower, 1909, designated New York City Landmarks)¹² and the Home Life Insurance Company Building, 256-257 Broadway (1892-94, a designated New York City Landmark).

History of Fire Engine Company No. 54¹³

The site of 304 West 47th Street location was used by the New York City Fire Department by the early 1850s. The Volunteer Fire Company Hudson Engine No. 1 used this location from 1852 to July 1865. The Metropolitan Steam Fire Engine Company No. 2 then occupied the site from 1865 until 1874.¹⁴ The site also housed Chemical Engine 5 from May 1875 until it disbanded in April 1877. In 1884 a new structure for Engine 54, which had been in service in Riverdale, was scheduled to be built on the site. Construction was delayed until another firehouse on 67th Street was completed.¹⁵ The existing engine house, designed by Napoleon LeBrun & Sons, was erected from 1887 to 1888 and in September 1888, Engine Company No. 54 moved into their new quarters. The fire company served the community of Hells Kitchen/Clinton for ninety years. In 1974 it merged with Hook and Ladder Company No. 4 and relocated to 782 Eighth Avenue.¹⁶

Engine 54 was built during an early period of the LeBrun firm's tenure with the New York City Fire Department and was among the initial group of buildings that set the standard for firehouse construction. Engine 54 is one of three virtually identical firehouses: the first to be built was Engine Company No. 15, located at 269 Henry Street (1883-84), the second was Engine Company No. 53 located at 175 East 104th Street (1884), (a designated New York City landmark) and the third was Engine Company No. 54 at 304 West 47th Street (1888). Similar to school architect C. B. J. Snyder, the LeBrun firm re-used designs for multiple locations because of the demand to rapidly produce firehouse buildings. The LeBrun designs reflected their residential surroundings in style, scale, materials, and adherence to the street wall. Engine Company No. 54 is a fine example of the firms' concept of firehouse design. Well proportioned, using the entire lot, finely crafted with attention paid to details, and designed to fit in with the surrounding architecture. While Fire Engine Company No. 54 reflects its context in scale and composition, it is also distinguished as both a civic and utilitarian structure, expressed through the richly textured materials and the arrangement of the ground floor, which identifies it as a firehouse.

Subsequent History

After nearly ninety years of use as a firehouse, the building at 304 West 47th Street was converted to a permanent 196-seat theater and offices for the award-winning Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre to serve as their permanent performance space and offices.¹⁷ Founded in 1967 as a means of bringing free theater to the streets of New York's Latino neighborhoods, the PRTT helped launch the Spanish bilingual theatre movement in the United States. In the fall of 1977 the PRTT held the company's first performance in their new home. To accommodate the increasing popularity of the PRTT, in the spring of 1981 the theater company finished renovations to a theater lounge and rehearsal studio.¹⁸ For forty years, the group – which also has a training unit in East Harlem to serve the area's Latino and African-American communities – has continued to encourage youths of economically disadvantaged backgrounds to pursue careers in the theater.

Description

Engine Company No. 54 is a 25-foot wide, four-story brick-and-stone structure with a cast-iron trabeated base. The predominant style is Romanesque Revival, expressed through rounded windows, while the decorative terra-cotta medallions and the foliate capitals incorporate elements of the Queen Anne style.

Base: A cast-iron frame original to the buildings design encases the building's large central entrance with two flanking pedestrian doorways. Each opening is flanked by smaller pilasters with Corinthian capitals. Two large pilasters are at the extreme right and left of the building, repeating the design of the smaller capital, with the exception of a sunflower above topped by inverted volute scrolls. The flanking pedestrian entrances have non-historic metal doors with glass transom that have been painted red. The apparatus bay is now the central entrance, it consists of a non-historic central four panel glass door with painted metal casing, above is a glass transom encased by metal gate with vertical bars. The central entrance is partially obscured by a single-story sidewalk bridge erected in 2006.

Upper stories: The second and third stories are red brick. Both the second and third stories have three bays; above each story a dogtooth patterned brick panel runs the width of all three bays. Each bay has the original, two-over-two windows with stone sills and lintels; the third story has slightly smaller two-over-two windows. The fourth story is the most detailed, and consists of a large central arched two-over-two window flanked by two smaller one-over-one arched windows. All of the windows appear to be original to the building. A brick archivolt caps the arches of the windows at the fourth story. The façade terminates with a terra cotta frieze ornamented with rosettes and a pressed metal cornice framed by corbelled brick brackets. These support metal plinths ornamented with strap work and pediments enriched with sunbursts. The east and west facades of the building abut structures on either side and are not visible from the street.

Report prepared by
Theresa C. Noonan
Research Department

NOTES

¹ The following sources were consulted for this section: John A. Calderone and Jack Lerch, *Wheels of the Bravest, A History of the Fire Department of New York Fire Apparatus 1865-1992* (Staten Island, New York: Fire Apparatus Journal Publications, 1984); Augustine E. Costello, *Our firemen, A history of the New York Fire Departments, Volunteer and Paid* (New York: A. E. Costello, 1887); Kenneth Holcomb Dunshee, *As You Pass By* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1940); "A Festival of Firehouses," *Architectural Record* 176 (March 1988), 110-125; Fire Department of the City of New York, "Fiftieth Anniversary of the Organization of the Fire Department of the City of New York, review and presentation of medals for 1914," (June 15, 1915); Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Engine Company No. 7/Ladder Company No. 1* (LP-1719), (New York: City of New York, 1993) report prepared by Charles Savage; Lowell M. Limpus *History of the New York Fire Department* (New York: Dutton, 1940); Daniel Pisark, "Old New York and Brooklyn Fire Houses: Their Evolution, Architecture, and Preservation" (unpublished typescript, New York Landmark Scholar report, 1976).

² "Fiftieth Anniversary..., 34. The most famous political career to have begun in – and benefited greatly from—the Volunteer Fire Department was William M. "Boss" Tweed. He served in four companies before forming his own, the Americus Co. 6 in 1848. Ten years later, the infamous "Tweed Ring" (included Tweed and three city officials) controlled Tammany, and effectively, New York.

³ The first telegraph fire alarm system, for police and fire, was installed in 1851. The city was divided into eight districts, each with a strategically located watch tower. The Fire Alarm Telegraph System was upgraded in 1884 to serve all of Manhattan; its Central Office was located in the new Headquarters Building at East 67th Street. Telephones were installed in the firehouses in the 1890s.

⁴ There was wide spread resistance to horses and steam engines by the volunteer companies. The firefighters felt the new apparatus diminished their status and strength, which was proudly displayed by racing hand pulled apparatus through the streets to a fire.

⁵ A significant reminder of that period is the military personnel terminology, which is still in use today. The department was organized into divisions and battalions; titles of rank changed from engineer to colonel, from foreman to captain, from engineer of steamer to sergeant, etc.

⁶ The last one built prior to this was the Fireman's Hall in 1854. This building, located at 153-157 Mercer Street, within the SoHo-Cast Iron Historic District, no longer functions as a firehouse.

⁷ The following sources were consulted for this section: Christina Huemer, "Visible City," *Metropolis* (May 1986), 47-48; Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Fire Hook & Ladder Company No. 14* (LP-1838), (New York: City of New York, 1997) prepared by Laura Hansen; Amy C. Martin, "Facades and Reality: Firehouses of N. LeBrun & Sons" (M.A. thesis, Columbia University, 1993); Office of Metropolitan History, U. S. Department of Interior, Heritage, Conservation, and Recreation Services, National Register of Historic Places Inventory Nomination Form, "New York City Firehouses: National Register Thematic Group" (form prepared by Christopher Gray for the New York City Landmarks Conservancy, 1980); Pisaek; Donald Martin Reynolds, *The Architecture of New York City* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1984); John Tauranac, *Elegant New York, the Builders and the Buildings 1885-1915* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985); Rebecca Zurier, *The American Firehouse, An Architectural and Social History* (New York Abbeville Press, 1982).

⁸ Boss Tweed was responsible for the introducing living quarters in the firehouse. Tweed recognized the firehouse's potential as an ideal place for political gatherings, and constructed the Henry Street firehouse for his Americus Co. 6 to include meeting space as well as a dormitory, library, kitchen, and other comforts. The firehouse as a place to store equipment gave way to the firehouse as a social center; this transition cemented the Fire Department's influence in New York City politics.

⁹ The time it took for a company to respond to a four alarm was critical to firehouse success. During the late nineteenth century, numerous innovations (many invented by firemen) helped decrease the response time. These included the brass sliding pole (which quickly became a standard feature that is still in use today); a "quick hitch" handing harness for the horse team; and steam pipe systems which would automatically disconnect from a departing engine, among others. Reynolds, 292-293; Zurier, 102-107.

¹⁰ Portions of this section are adapted from: Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Fire Engine Company No. 47* (LP-1962), (New York: City of New York, 1997) report prepared by Laura Hansen, consultant; Constance M. Greif, "Napoleon LeBrun," *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects*, Adolph K. Placzek, ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1982); Landmarks Preservation Commission, *(Former) Home Life Insurance Company Building* (LP-1751), (New York: City of New York, 1990) report prepared by Charles Savage; Montgomery Schuyler, "The Work of N. LeBrun & Sons," *Architectural Record* 27 (May 1910), 365-381.

¹¹ Huemer, 5, 48.

¹² The firm served as architects to the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company from 1876 until at least 1909.

¹³ The following sources were consulted for this section: Office for Metropolitan History "New York City Firehouses: National Register Thematic Group"; "A New Fire Department Building," *New York Times*, July 24, 1884, <http://nyfd.com/history/cityhist.pdf>; Mike Boucher, "A History of the Volunteer Fire Companies of Manhattan (1731-1865)," <http://www.nyc.gov/html/fdny/html/history/index.shtml>.

¹⁴ It was also utilized as Fuel Depot No. 5.

¹⁵ The building would house an engine, hook and ladder house, a school for instruction, the Life-Saving Corps, and the Telegraph Bureau. The building would later become Fire Department Headquarters at 157-59 East 67th Street (now Engine Company No. 39/Ladder Company No. 16, 1884-86, a designated New York City Landmark).

¹⁶ Jack Lerch and Dan Maye, librarians at the George F. Mand Library, New York City Fire Department Library, provided assistance for this report.

¹⁷ Gerald Fraser, "From Fire House to Theatre," *New York Times*, March 31, 1978; Carol Lawson, "For Puerto Rican Theatre, Old Firehouse Is New Home," *New York Times*, February 19, 1981; New York City Department of Buildings, Borough of Manhattan, Certificate of Occupancy Application, (C. O. 7789-77).

¹⁸ New York City Department of Buildings, Borough of Manhattan, Certificate of Occupancy Application, (C. O. 81113-81).

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 Fire Engine Company No. 54, 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, Fire Engine Company No. 54, built in 1888, is a distinguished representation of a mid-block firehouse designed by the architectural firm of N. LeBrun & Sons; that Engine 54 was built during a later period in the LeBrun firm's tenure with the New York City Fire Department; that, stylistically, it combines elements of Queen Anne and Romanesque Revival styles; that Fire Engine Company No. 54 reflects the firm's attention to materials, stylistic details, plan, and setting; that between the years of 1880 and 1895, N. LeBrun & Sons helped to define the Fire Department's expression of civic architecture, both functionally and symbolically in more than 40 buildings; that Engine No. 54 adopts the designs of numerous mid-block firehouses as an economical and rapid means of creating public buildings that clearly identified their civic function; that Engine 54's most significant features are the cast-iron trabeated base, the central entrance, enlivened by foliate capitals incorporating sunflowers and torches, and its ornate brickwork; that it was built in the early period of intensive growth in Hells Kitchen/Clinton, Manhattan; that this firehouse also represents the city's commitment to the civic character of essential municipal services; that in the late 1970s, after nearly ninety years of use as a fire engine house, the building was converted to a permanent 196-seat theater and offices for the award-winning Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre.

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 Fire Engine Company No. 54, 304 West 47th Street, Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1037, Lot 37 as its Landmark Site.

Robert B. Tierney, Chair

Pablo E. Vengoechea, Vice-Chair

Frederick Bland, Stephen Byrns, Diana Chapin, Roberta Brandes Gratz,

Christopher Moore, Margery Perlmutter, and Elizabeth Ryan, Commissioners



Fire Engine Company No. 54 304 West 47th Street,
Photo Theresa C. Noonan



Fire Engine Company No. 54 304 West 47th Street
Photo courtesy: Fire Department City of New York
Mand Library and Learning Center



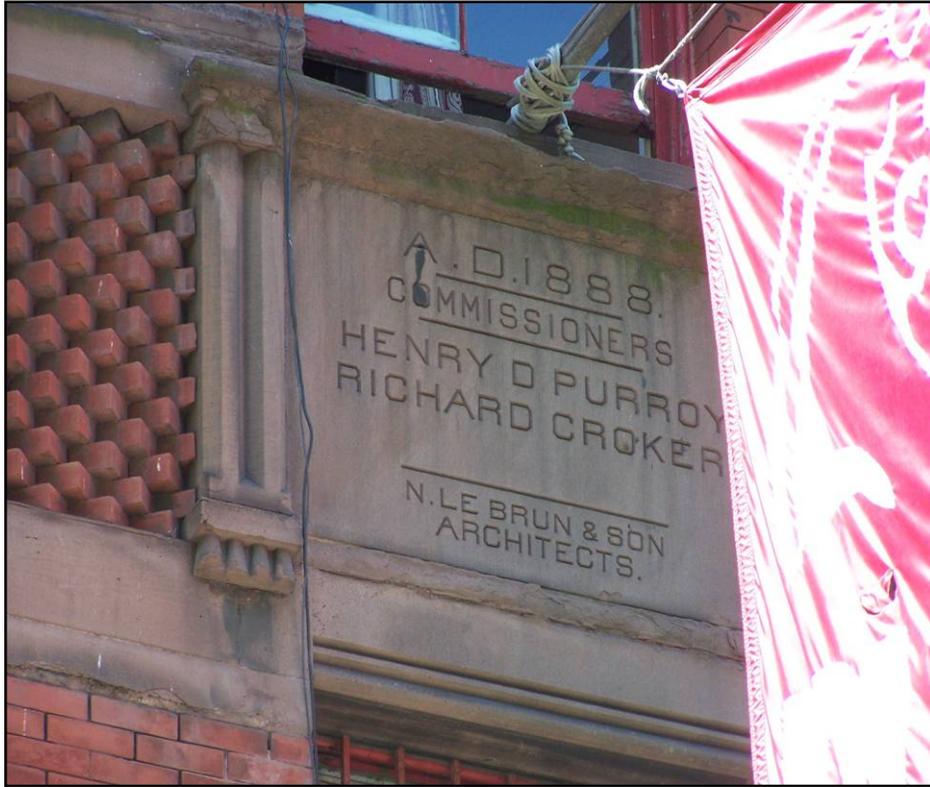
Fire Engine Company No. 54 304 West 47th Street
Photo courtesy: Fire Department City of New York
Mand Library and Learning Center



Fire Engine Company No. 54 304 West 47th Street
Photo courtesy: Fire Department City of New York
Mand Library and Learning Center



Fire Engine Company No. 54 304 West 47th Street,
Detail of Roof line
Photo by Amanda B. Davis



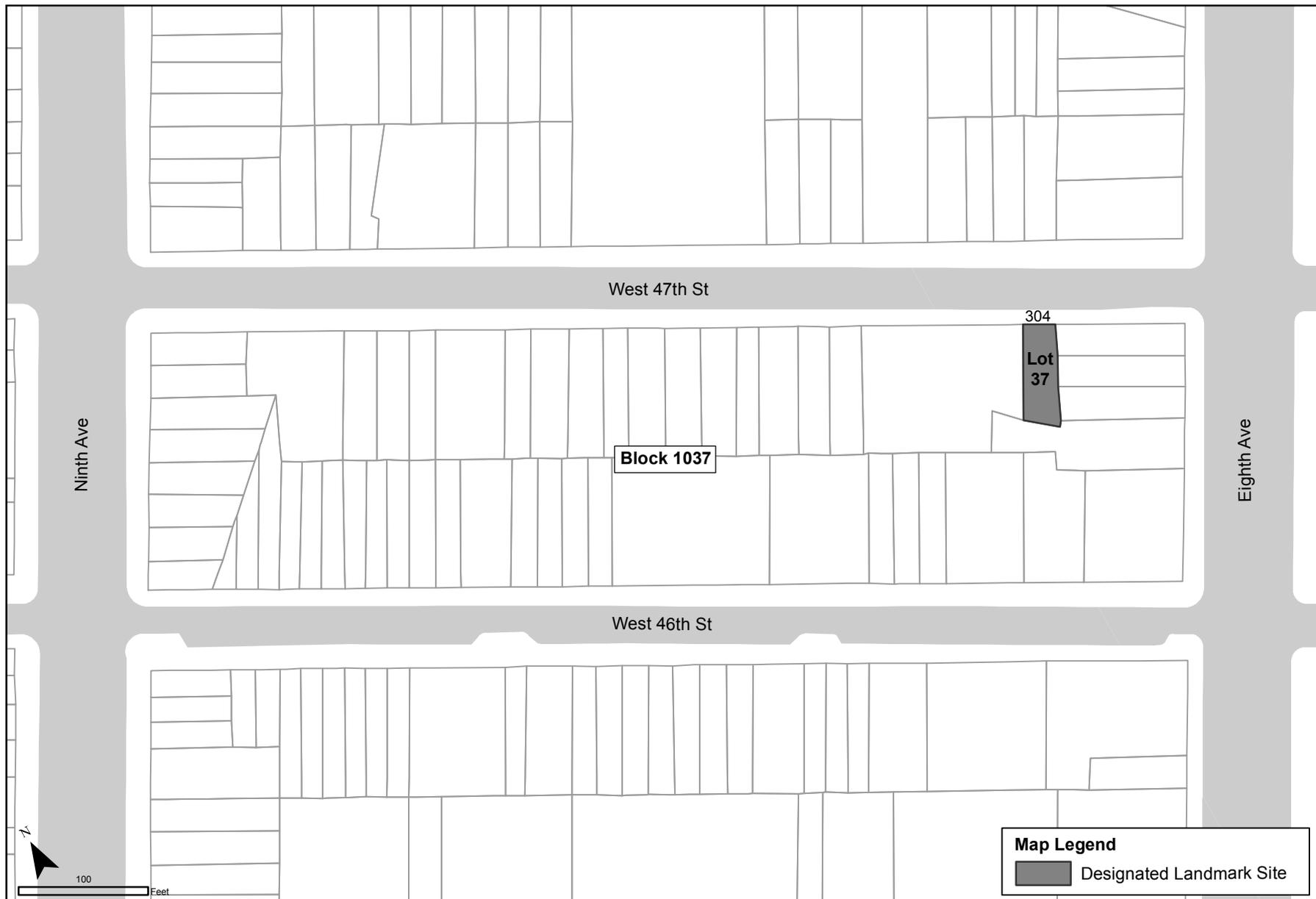
Fire Engine Company No. 54 304 West 47th Street
Photo by Amanda B. Davis



Fire Engine Company No. 54 304 West 47th Street
Photo by Theresa C. Noonan



Fire Engine Company No. 54 304 West 47th Street
Photo by Amanda B. Davis



LeBRUN FIRE HOUSE (FORMERLY FIRE ENGINE COMPANY NO. 54) (LP-2299), 304 West 47th Street.
 Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 1037, Lot 37.

Designated: November 18, 2008

Graphic Source: New York City Department of City Planning, MapPLUTO, Edition 06C, December 2006.
 Author: New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, JM.