

TOWN HALL, 113-123 West 43rd Street, Borough of Manhattan.
Built 1919-21; Architect McKim, Mead & White.

Landmarks Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 996, Lot 21.

On September 12, 1978, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Town Hall and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 10). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Nineteen witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Characterized by one contemporary observer as "an idea with a roof over it" Town Hall was built in 1919-1921 as a meeting hall for the city of New York. The architectural firm of McKim, Mead & White was asked by the League for Political Education to design a structure to accommodate the organization's needs for a speaker's auditorium, a concert hall, a movie theater and clubhouse. A versatile and functional design was demanded, not an architectural conceit. Because of the versatility of its design, Town Hall, as perhaps no other hall in the city, has been able to keep pace with changing needs. Following its beginning as a forum to educate the city's men and women in political issues, Town Hall attained national importance in 1935 when radio spread "America's Town Meeting of the Air" across the country. Concurrently the auditorium became highly acclaimed for its excellent acoustics and intimate atmosphere. For these reasons Town Hall was selected for most New York musical debuts. One music critic explained:

Both to the ear and to the eye Town Hall remains unrivalled among New York's auditoriums. Artists singing or playing there start with an advantage-- heard at their best, seen at their best, and in close, easy contact with an audience predisposed to enjoyment by the pleasant ambience.¹

Begun as an outgrowth of the defeat of the women's suffrage amendment to the New York constitution in 1894, the League for Political Education was founded by six prominent New York women who had lost in their effort to obtain suffrage but who were determined to educate more women in political issues so that they might not continue to be excluded from town meetings and other forms of government. The idea of a political education program had originated with Dr. Mary Putnam Jacobi, the daughter of George Palmer Putnam, the publisher, and the first woman to be admitted to the French Ecole de Medicine. Dr. Jacobi's address before the Albany constitutional convention in 1894 was reprinted and used as a document in the successful suffrage efforts in 1915. The other founders of the League included: Lucia G. Runkle, a member of the editorial staff of the New York Tribune; Adele M. Fielde, a missionary and translator; Catherine A.B. Abbe, President of the City History Club; Eleanor B. Sanders; and Lee W. Haggin. The League which was founded in 1894 drew experts in many fields to "town meetings" where the audience was encouraged to ask questions following the lecture. The programs were successful, and by 1899 the League boasted 600 members. Contacts at Harvard University were especially helpful

in providing speakers and guidance to the program. After lecturing to the League for several years Professor of Education, Robert E. Ely, decided to leave Harvard in 1901 and become Executive Director of the program. From the beginning the League had been open to both women and men, but because of the routine of morning lectures few men had been able to attend. In 1907 Ely and J.W. Beatson founded the Economic Club of New York which was an outgrowth of the League and which offered dinner meetings. Former President of the Economic Club, Wendall L. Wilkie, described it as "the foremost non-partisan forum of men in the country."²

The early meetings of the League were held at the home of Eleanor B. Saunders but as the size of the group enlarged it became necessary to rent space in different halls around the city for the lectures. Every morning from Monday through Saturday lectures were held in various locations: the Ladies Athletic Club, Aeolian Hall, Carnegie Hall and the Berkeley-Lyceum Theater. Following one such lecture in 1912 at the Berkeley Theater, formerly on 44th Street, Anna Blakslee Bliss made the point that the League needed a permanent hall of its own. Mrs. Bliss initiated the building drive with a generous check but it was not until 1917 that a site was selected. Several members of the League formed a corporation called the Societies Realty Co., and purchased the lot on the north side of 43rd Street for \$425,000. One reporter described the location as "the fastest-growing civic and commercial centre of the city,..."³ but only as recently as the 1880s it was adjacent to the notorious district known as Hell's Kitchen. During the 1890s, however, such foresighted men as Charles Frohman and Oscar Hammerstein I had gradually built theaters in the area. By 1904 when the subway was built near Adolph Ochs' New York Times Building, the area became known as Times Square. Town Hall was built in a prime location. The hall moved onto a stretch of 43rd Street which was already distinguished by the George M. Cohan Theatre, the Henry W. Miller Theater, and the New York Elks Club.

The League's building committee, which was headed by Robert E. Simon, had selected the nationally prominent architectural firm of McKim, Mead & White to execute the design of the new headquarters and in April of 1919 the New York Times published an early rendering. In July, contractor Russell B. Smith set to work demolishing the six dwellings which occupied the site and construction was commenced on October 10, 1919. In January 1920 Colonel Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., laid the cornerstone of the building for his wife who was the grand-niece and name-sake of the original founder, Eleanor Butler Saunders who had died in 1905.

By 1919 the architectural firm of McKim, Mead & White was being run by a younger group of designers. Stanford White (1853-1906) and Charles F. McKim (1847-1909) were dead, and William R. Mead had withdrawn from active practice. Four new partners were responsible for the work of the firm: William M. Kendall, William S. Richardson, Burt L. Fenner and Teunis J. van der Bent. New York City Building Department Records indicate that Van der Bent was responsible for the design of Town Hall. Teunis J. van der Bent (1863-1936) came to the United States from the Netherlands where he had studied architecture and engineering at the University of Delft. In 1887 at the age of 24, he secured work as a draftsman with McKim, Mead & White where he worked on such New York projects as the Hotel Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania Terminal Station, Columbia

University, the Metropolitan Museum additions, the old Madison Square Garden, and the Cornell University Medical School. In 1909 Van der Bent was made a partner in the firm, and in 1928 he officially succeeded Mead as head of the Office of Business Management.

Drawings published in 1921 and Building Department Records reveal that McKim, Mead & White was contracted for \$500,000 to erect the structure of the building and to finish the lobbies and the auditorium. On January 12, 1921, the auditorium was completed and opened to the public but the remainder of the building was left incomplete for lack of funds. It was estimated that \$1,100,000 was needed to finish the remaining interiors which were to be given over to a library, lounge and restaurant. In 1923 Mrs. Bliss again came to the rescue of Town Hall and gave \$500,000 towards its completion. New York architect Louis E. Jallade was retained to complete the job even before the remainder of the money had been raised. Born in Montreal, Jallade came to New York as a child, received his training at the Metropolitan Museum Art School and graduated from the Ecole des Beaux Arts in 1902. In 1923 he was a partner in the firm of Lindsay & Warren but later formed a partnership with his son at 597 Fifth Avenue. In 1924 he was the partner in charge of building the International House, 500 Riverside Drive. Finally in 1925 with the help of many loyal subscribers, Town Hall completed its mortgage payments.

From the beginning Town Hall became a popular forum for airing many of the nation's most pressing issues. Over the years, Director Ely had attracted such international speakers as: Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Henry James, Thomas Mann, Jan Masaryk, Booker T. Washington, Winston Churchill, Jane Addams and William Butler Yeats. Prominent international figures frequented the new hall. By virtue of its open forum, the events at Town Hall sometimes caused controversy. An early incident occurred when Margaret Sanger attempted to give a lecture on birth control. The New York Police stopped the lecture, arrested Mrs. Sanger and took her to the 47th Street Police Station. Members of the League followed in pursuit and soon secured her release. In 1929 a memorial gathering for Sacco and Vanzetti brought much criticism to the hall.

In 1930 Robert E. Ely brought some new, vital blood into the organization. George V. Denny, Jr., former head of the Institute of Arts and Sciences at Columbia University, was hired as associate director. Described as "a man with a passion for education and a flair for showmanship,"⁴ Denny was the creator of "America's Town Meeting of the Air" in 1935. The idea of a nationally broadcast presentation of many sides of a particular issue had come to Denny in 1934 after hearing a man say he would "rather be shot than caught listening to Roosevelt on the radio."⁵ Denny was shocked by this narrow-minded attitude. He took his idea to the National Broadcasting Company which agreed to test out his plan. Beginning on May 30, 1935, on Thursday evening from 9:30 to 10:30, the familiar sound of a town crier and his bell reminded the people of America to tune into the "town meeting" broadcast from Town Hall in New York City. The show was not set up as a two-sided debate, but offered the listener four points of view. As radio communications grew more sophisticated, questions from all over the country were relayed back to the speakers for their

comments. For 21 years the program drew an enthusiastic audience. When Denny finally succeeded Ely as director of the organization in 1937, the name was changed from the League for Political Education to Town Hall, Inc.

In 1921 the firm of McKim, Mead & White wrote to Robert E. Ely that "The Town Hall was erected for public meetings, lectures and the like, with an educational purpose, and is designed to be rented for concerts, moving pictures exhibitions and similar entertainments."⁶ There can be no doubt that one of the purposes for which the Town Hall auditorium was designed was that of musical production. One month after the auditorium was officially opened, a young Spanish violinist, Juan Manen, was invited to give a concert and two weeks later Martin Lisan became the first pianist to use the hall.

Tradition has it that the internationally-famed acoustical engineer, Wallace C. Sabine of Harvard, was consulted in the design of the Town Hall auditorium. The League's strong connection with members of the Harvard faculty might suggest the likelihood of such an arrangement. However, at the time that the plans were being developed by McKim, Mead & White, Sabine was deeply involved with work in Europe during the war. In fact Sabine died in January of 1919 before the construction of Town Hall was commenced. However, a connection between Sabine's successful scientific analysis of acoustical and the auditorium at Town Hall undoubtedly exists. In 1900 the firm of McKim, Mead & White was the first architectural firm to follow Sabine's acoustical instructions in the design of a concert hall. Their design for Symphony Hall in Boston was thus the first based on scientifically-derived principles of acoustics, and it ranks among the three or four best auditoriums in the world for symphonic music. After years of painstaking experiments with various materials and shapes Sabine had developed a precise formula for the building of an acoustically perfect hall. Sabine himself stated that "While the problem [of securing fine acoustics] is complex and, for the best results, extremely difficult, yet it is perfectly determinate, and the solution arrived at is the exact result of the architect's plans and specifications, if these are accurately followed in the building."⁷ Sabine had subsequently worked with the firm of McKim, Mead & White on many other projects. If any firm truly understood Sabine's acoustical principles and how to implement them it was the firm which designed the auditorium at Town Hall. With this in mind it is no wonder that the New York Times critic Harold C. Schonberg, following at least one piano concert, remarked that "Town Hall still provides some of the best listening in New York: its acoustics are exemplary."⁸

Soloists have flocked to Town Hall for the unique qualities of fine acoustics and intimacy it affords. During its first concert season Richard Strauss, played a program of his songs and was accompanied by Elisabeth Schumann and Elena Gerhardt. Town Hall sponsored Sergei Rachmaninoff, Mischa Elman and Margaret Matzenauer in 1931-32. Eddie Condon's jazz concerts filled the years of World War II. The years of 1946-48 were the peak musical years at Town Hall. In October of 1947, 52 concerts were given. The "Town Hall debut" became a part of the country's vocabulary. Among the most memorable of the debuts were those of Lotte Lehmann, Elizabeth Schwarzkopf, Joan Sutherland and Marian Anderson.

Centrally located on the north side of 43rd Street, Town Hall is a four-story adaptation of a neo-Federal design. Laid up in Flemish bond brick with contrasting limestone trim the facade is divided horizontally into three sections by limestone belt courses decorated with a Greek fret. The base is punctuated by a seven bay blind arcade outlined in limestone. Double doors are set into the arches at the base while the tympana are lighted by lunettes. Theatrical canopies are suspended over the doorways and are anchored to the spandrels by tie rods. The middle section of the facade is distinguished by a large limestone plaque reading: "The Town Hall. Founded by the League for Political Education, 1894-1920. Ye Shall Know the Truth and the Truth Shall Make You Free." The plaque is flanked by two empty niches. A band of sash windows is placed above the three main features of the central section. The attic is characterized by sash windows of a larger dimension which are surmounted by limestone flat-arch lintels secured by a keystone. Recessed panels marked with a limestone lozenge separate the bays. Two oculi pierce the end panels. The building is crowned by an Adamesque frieze and a roof balustrade, both rendered in Limestone.

The neo-Federal style and related neo-Georgian style had been frequently used by McKim, Mead & White. An earlier example, the Lambs Club of 1904-05, may be seen just a block away at 128 West 44th Street. Symbolically the neo-Federal style with its associations to the early years of the Republic of the United States, may be seen as particularly appropriate to such a democratic forum as Town Hall.

In 1958, Town Hall, Inc. merged with New York University. The University managed the hall and leased the auditorium for a variety of purposes for 20 years. Town Hall was one of the five most active concert halls in the city; others being Carnegie Hall, Carnegie Recital Hall, Avery Fisher Hall and Alice Tully Hall. In the summer of 1978, the University ceased its management and sought to transfer title to the property. The hall has previously served the people of New York with its fine facilities and offers its service to generations to come. The future use of the hall has not yet been determined.

FOOTNOTES

1. Andrew Porter, "Musical Events," The New Yorker, 2 December 1974, p. 129.
2. Claire Courteol Deane, A Short Story of Town Hall (New York: Town Hall, Inc., 1946), p.5.
3. "Time Square to Have a Million-Dollar Town Hall," New York Times, 27 April 1919.
4. Deane, p. 8.
5. Ibid.
6. McKim, Mead & White to Robert Erskine Ely, 20 May 1921, New York City Building Department Records.
7. Russell Sturgis, A Dictionary of Architecture and Building (New York: Macmillan Co., 1904) 1:23.

8. Harold C. Schonberg, "Music: Masselos's Ives Pianist Plays 'Concord' Sonata at Town Hall, " New York Times, 6 October 1971

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

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 Town Hall 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 Town Hall was built in 1919-21 under the auspices of the League for Political Education as a meeting hall for the city of New York; that it was designed in a neo-Federal style by the prominent architectural firm of McKim, Mead & White to meet the varied needs of the League; that it was originally used as a forum to educate the city's men and women in political issues; that it hosted speakers of international fame; that it gained national importance for 21 years through its radio program "America's Town Meeting of the Air"; and that through the intimacy and excellent acoustics of its auditorium Town Hall has achieved international prominence as the favored concert hall of many notable soloists, jazz musicians and chamber music groups.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Town Hall, 113-123 West 43rd Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 996, Lot 21, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

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113-123 West 43rd Street
Manhattan

McKim, Mead & White, Architects.

1919-1921