

Landmarks Preservation Commission
July 15, 1986; Designation List 185
LP-1389

FORMER 30th POLICE PRECINCT STATION HOUSE, (originally 32nd Police Precinct Station House). 1854 Amsterdam Avenue (southwest corner of 152nd Street), Borough of Manhattan. Built 1871-72; architect Nathaniel D. Bush.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 2083, Lot 33.

On September 14, 1982, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Former 30th Police Precinct Station House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 6). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Four witnesses spoke in favor of designation. No witnesses spoke in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Constructed in 1871-72 and designed by Nathaniel Bush, who acted as the official architect of the New York City Police Department, this handsome French Second Empire style brick building was located at the center of the village of Carmansville, then an affluent suburb of New York. Typical of Bush's work, the station house is also an important reminder of the history of this section of Manhattan.

History

The 32nd Police Precinct Station House was built as part of a city-wide reconstruction and renovation campaign to modernize police facilities, and was often cited in its own day as one of the finest of the new station houses. New York had first been divided into precincts by a law of 1844 which also required that each precinct be furnished with a station house. Some stations were set up in buildings originally intended for other uses, while others, hastily erected "without much, if any, regard for the comfort of the men, or the sanitary or architectural advantage of the houses,"¹ were quickly judged obsolete. By the early 1860s the Police Department had retained an official full-time architect, Nathaniel D. Bush, with offices at Police Headquarters on Mulberry Street. Bush "went to work with characteristic energy and in a few years [the] station houses began to put on a very different appearance."²

Over the course of two decades Bush was to design more than twenty new or renovated station houses. These larger and more architecturally commanding buildings reflected not only the growth and prosperity of the city, but also the increased professionalism of its police force. Before the act of 1844, the majority of the city's law enforcers--nicknamed "Old Leatherheads" for their fireman-like varnished hats, or "Coppers" for their star-shaped badges--had daytime jobs and only served alternate nights on watch duty. The first attempt, in the early 1840s, to introduce full

uniform met with hostile opposition. (The uniform, patterned after that of London's renowned Metropolitan Police, was likened to livery, and was thus deemed "undemocratic," while the many Irishmen on the force resented its English connotations.) The reorganized, and now uniformed, police force was larger, more selective in its hiring policy and better trained, but was frequently criticized, as had been its predecessor, as a tool of political partisanship. Ostensibly to correct this condition, but in reality to shift control from the city Democrats to the state Republicans, the New York Police were by a state legislative act of 1857 placed under the jurisdiction of the state-run Metropolitan Police District. This District included Westchester County, and beginning in 1866 the 32nd Precinct had substations in Yonkers and West Farms, which were retained until 1871, the year after the Tweed Charter returned control of the Police Department to the city. These political machinations apparently had no effect on the architectural improvement campaign, and architect Bush, who had been appointed by the Metropolitan Police Commissioners, retained his position in the ensuing Democratically-controlled years. In 1876 he was even appointed sergeant.³

The Precinct and its Neighborhood

The 32nd Precinct erected its first documented station house on land acquired in 1864. A modest three-story brick structure with an adjacent stable, the building was of little architectural interest, although Bush may well have prepared the plans.⁴ The building did not contain a jail, a reflection of the suburban serenity of the area. Indeed, there was so little crime that a contemporary description of this section of Manhattan makes the surprising criticism that all may seem "peaceful and rural enough...but in the shadow of mossy hillocks the eye may occasionally detect the intrusive uniform of the Metropolitan Police."⁵ Nevertheless, by 1869 plans were laid for a "new and more commodious building to meet the requirements of the 32nd Precinct".⁵ Although the precinct was still relatively sparsely populated, and was to remain so throughout the nineteenth century, it was a geographically large one.⁶ By the 1880s more than seventy men were assigned to it, and from the beginning it was patrolled in part by mounted police. The new station had a handsome stable building and also included an annex with a jail and lodging space for vagrants--the nineteenth century solution to sheltering New York's homeless. Despite the semi-rural character of the neighborhood, Bush's new design followed what an 1871 newspaper account approvingly described as "The policy of providing substantial houses for the accommodation of the police...[using] the best materials and workmanship...[with] no little pretence to elegance."⁷

By the early 1870s 'elegance' might equally have described the neighborhood immediately surrounding the 32nd Precinct's new headquarters. The station house stood at the center of the Village of Carmansville which had been founded in about 1840 by its namesake, Richard F. Carman. Carman had begun life "as a poor boy making packing boxes for merchants" but had moved up through the ranks from carpenter to builder, and, capitalizing on the reconstruction in lower Manhattan after the Fire of 1835, to contractor and real estate speculator.⁸ Carman was buying land in upper Manhattan as early as 1836, a few years before the naturalist and artist John James Audubon (1785-1851) purchased a fairly large tract along the Hudson River

surrounding 156th Street, where he build a Greek Revival style country house. In the same year Carman purchased roughly twenty-three acres of land between Amsterdam and Twelfth Avenues, and 153rd and 155th Streets which he soon sold to Trinity Church for a new cemetery. By the mid-1860s Audubon's widow had subdivided her property into a development of "country seats, all sharing in common the rural pleasures of a broad woodland stretch along the river marge."⁹ Known as Audubon Park, it was a wealthy middle-class enclave of substantial freestanding houses in a picturesquely landscaped setting. Some of the houses were used as summer retreats, but the majority were the homes of commuters who travelled to the city proper by means of the Hudson River Railway, which had its Carmansville Station at the foot of 152nd Street. The town also included a hotel, and several churches clustered around the cemetery, which was landscaped in the tradition of Brooklyn's Greenwood Cemetery. Beginning in 1871 the well-known architect Calvert Vaux, who had collaborated with Frederick Law Olmsted in the design of Central Park, was engaged in making improvements to Trinity Cemetery. Farther afield were isolated institutions; the Juvenile Asylum, a school for the blind, and another for the deaf and dumb. There were also a few factories, including a sugar refinery and an iron-works. The High Bridge, built in 1848 in the form of a Romand aqueduct to carry water from the Croton Reservoir, was at the upper boundary of the Precinct.¹⁰

In the nineteenth century the fundamental duty of each precinct was a round-the-clock patrol of its district. Patrolmen were assigned to a 'beat,' so-called roundsmen acted as supervisors checking with the men in the field, and sergeants and the captain manned the station house. The men often slept overnight in the stations. A telegraph system linked the station houses and in the case of the 32nd Precinct "even the horsemen were aided by boxes from which they could send necessary signals back to the station house."¹¹

The Design

The author of "Police Palaces" noted that "the new station houses adhere closely to a general plan" which Bush seems to have followed in the 32nd Precinct:

The first story contains the office, the captain and sergeants' sleeping apartments [each with full bathrooms] and the men's sitting room, while the second and third floors are occupied with two large sleeping rooms, fully furnished with closets for the different sections of the platoons and two small dormitories for the roundsmen. The fourth floor is an immense drill room, and the rear of the lot in each case is covered by a smaller building, the upper floors of which are divided into two compartments for the reception of male and female lodgers, and the lower portion into cells for the prisoners.¹²

In the 1860s and 1870s Bush favored the French Second Empire style, then at the height of its popularity in this country. The 32nd Precinct building is a very fine and highly representative example of the style as it was applied to urban public buildings of moderate scale; it is boldly massed in a compact block with strictly symmetrical tripartite elevations

subsumed beneath an assertive mansard roof with central tower pavilions. Constructed in brick which was originally painted an off-white in imitation of stone, the classical detail was executed in a contrasting brownstone. The mansard roof, covered in scalloped slate shingles with delicate metal roof cresting, is typical of the Second Empire style. Originally the building must have harmonized with the surrounding houses, many of which were also designed in the Second Empire style. Of the many other station houses designed by Bush the surviving example which bears the closest resemblance to the 32nd Precinct building is the station house on Mulberry Street formerly occupied by the 14th Precinct; however, the corner siting of the 32nd Precinct station house which allows for a side elevation makes it the more impressive of the two.

Description

The facade on Amsterdam Avenue and the longer side elevation are treated very similarly. Both have central slightly projecting bays three windows wide flanked by narrow bays with a single window at each story. There is a full basement and areaway surmounted by a simple, but handsome wrought-iron fence which surrounds the building. The entrance has a heavy brownstone round-arched pediment, ornamented with dentils and supported on console brackets. (The original doors and lanterns are no longer in place.) The central first-story window on the side elevation (which was originally an entranceway) displays a similar pediment. The side windows of the central bays have brownstone lintels at each story. Round-arched pediments appear in the flanking bays at the first-story level, triangular pediments at the second, and lintels at the third. A round-arched pediment with dentils surmounts the central window of the second story on both elevations, echoing in smaller scale those below. The quoins, which articulate the bays and corners of the building are composed of alternating smooth and vermiculated brownstone. The cornice, cast in galvanized iron, is bracketed with console brackets atop the quoining. (These were originally surmounted by decorative urns.) The tall mansard roof contains metal pedimented dormers with segmentally arched windows, two flanking the central tower pavilions on each elevation and larger central ones within the pavilions themselves. (The central dormer on the facade was damaged by fire and a large portion of it has been removed.) Metal cresting (a segment of which is no longer extant) with corner finials surmounts the roof. The jail annex to the building is executed in the same brick, is two stories in height and has had a garage door added at street level. The south elevation of the station is a party wall. The building has been sealed.

Conclusion

The northward progress of urban development in Manhattan had little effect on the Carmansville area throughout the nineteenth century. A few more institutions, such as the Home School for Sailors Children, were constructed, as were a few factories. The Joseph Loth & Co. building, which still stands just to the south of the station house, originally manufactured silk ribbon and had some six hundred employees by the early 1890s. But by and large the area remained "a district of villa residences," and the 32nd Precinct "one of the most delightful [of] commands."¹⁴ Only in the early 1900s with the construction of Riverside Drive and a subway line

along Broadway were developers attracted to the area, which then rapidly evolved into an urban neighborhood of five and six story apartment buildings and row houses. The houses of Audubon Park gave way to these newer buildings and to the great cultural center known as Audubon Terrace which was begun in 1904.¹⁵ Trinity Cemetery has retained its park-like character, and is now dominated by the neo-Gothic Church of the Intercession of 1911-14.¹⁶ The smaller nineteenth-century churches which border on the cemetery survive along with the Police Station as reminders of the area's earlier character. At the same time these buildings are all compatible in materials, scale and style with the later development.

Although French Second Empire buildings such as the 32nd Police Precinct Station house were once quite common in this country, they have become rare in New York City, particularly in Manhattan.¹⁵ Now owned by the St. Luke A.M.E. congregation, whose church building is located one block to the north, the station house is not only an important architectural reminder of the history of New York's police department, but could readily be adapted to again serve a useful community purpose.

Report prepared by
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Research Department

Notes

1. Augustine Costello. Our Police Protectors (New York, 1885), p.452.
2. Costello, p.452.
3. The building was on the same site as the present one. For an illustration, see the FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, December, 1976, p.22.
4. I.N. Phelps Stokes, The Iconography of Manhattan Island. vol. 5, p.1898. From a description of a "circumnavigation of Manhattan Island" in Harper's New Monthly Magazine, July 1861.
5. Costello, p. 249.
6. The boundaries were described by Costello, p. 387 as follows "...between One Hundred and Forty-fifth Street, the Harlem River, Sherman's Creek, Dyckman's, Norwood Street and the North River."
7. "Police Palaces." New York Times, March 24, 1871, p.2:7.
8. [Moses Beach] Wealth and Biography of the Wealthy Citizens of New York City. (New York, 1845) p.5.
9. Stokes, vol.5, p.1898.
10. For nineteenth-century illustrations of the 32nd Precinct area, see Nathan Silver, Lost New York (New York, 1967) p. 119; William H. Wheelock house, c. 1860, in Audubon Park: John A. Kouwenhoven, The Columbia Historical Portrait of New York (New York, 1953); J.J. Audubon house: Mary Black, Old New York in Early Photographs 1853-1901 (New York, 1973); plates 183, 184 (Carmansville), plate 187 (High Bridge).
11. Costello, p.388.
12. "Palaces," p.2:7. Costello, p.389, illustrates the first floor plan of the 32nd Precinct Station House. For a further description of the layout and activities of later nineteenth century New York station houses, see James D. McCabe, New York By Gaslight, (New York, 1882, reprint 1984) p.387-392.
13. See illustrations in Costello, p.389, and Kings Handbook of New York (Boston, 1893) p. 527.
14. The 32nd Precinct was renumbered as the 30th in 1929, when the police of all the boroughs were merged into one force. The modern station was erected at 455 West 151 Street in the early 1970s.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

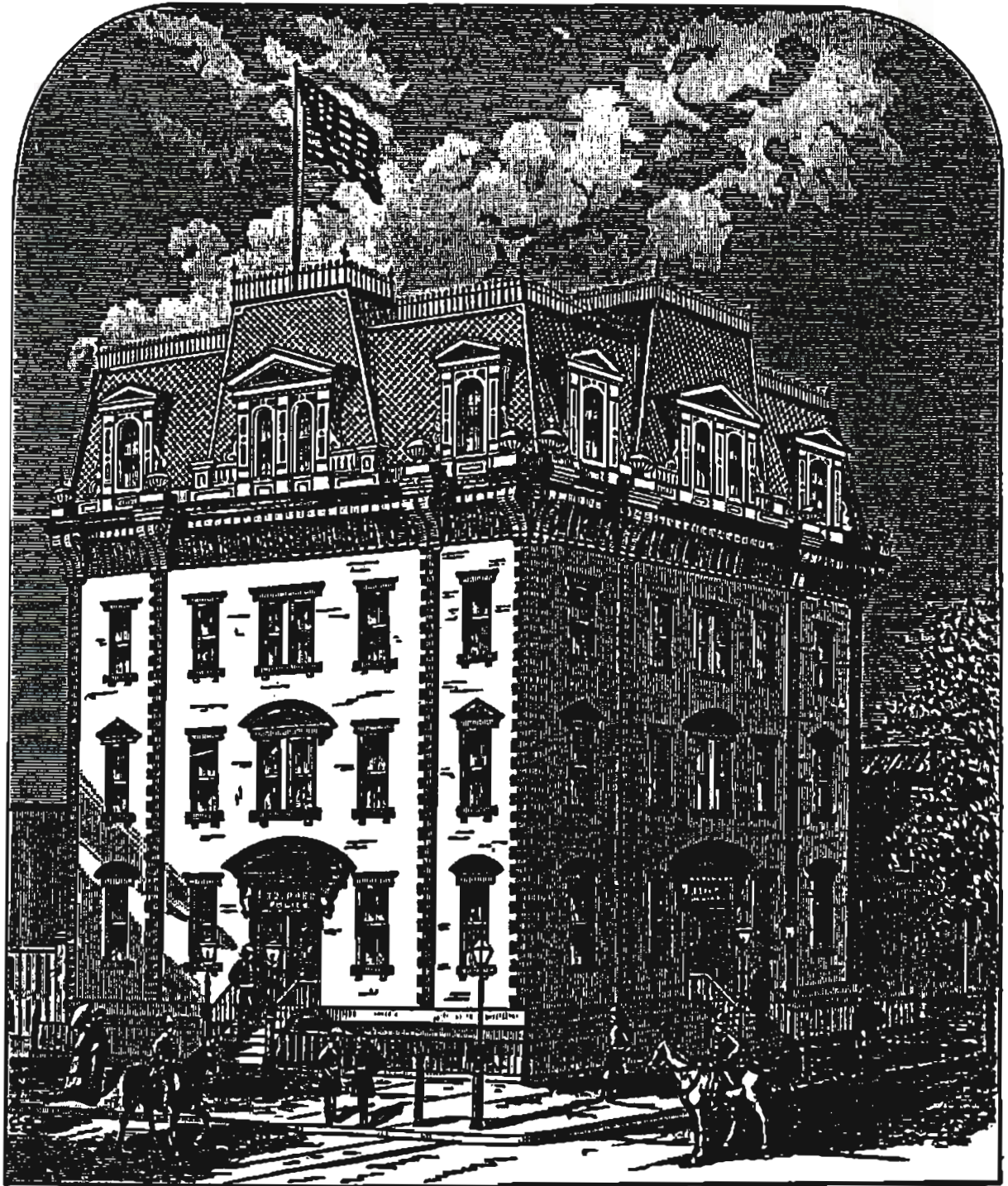
On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Former 30th Police Precinct Station House has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Former 30th Police Precinct Station House is a highly representative and fine example of the French Second Empire Style as it was applied to urban public buildings in the nineteenth century; that it was built as part of a renovation campaign to modernize New York's police facilities; that both in style and plan it is typical of New York's nineteenth-century police stations; that it was designed by the Police Department's official architect Nathaniel D. Bush; that it is a rare survivor from the time when this section of Manhattan, known as Carmansville, was a semi-rural neighborhood of suburban villas; that it is compatible with its present surroundings in style, scale and materials; and that, although no longer in its original use, it could readily be adapted to new and productive community service.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534, 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 Former 30th Police Precinct Station House, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 2083 Lot 33 Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

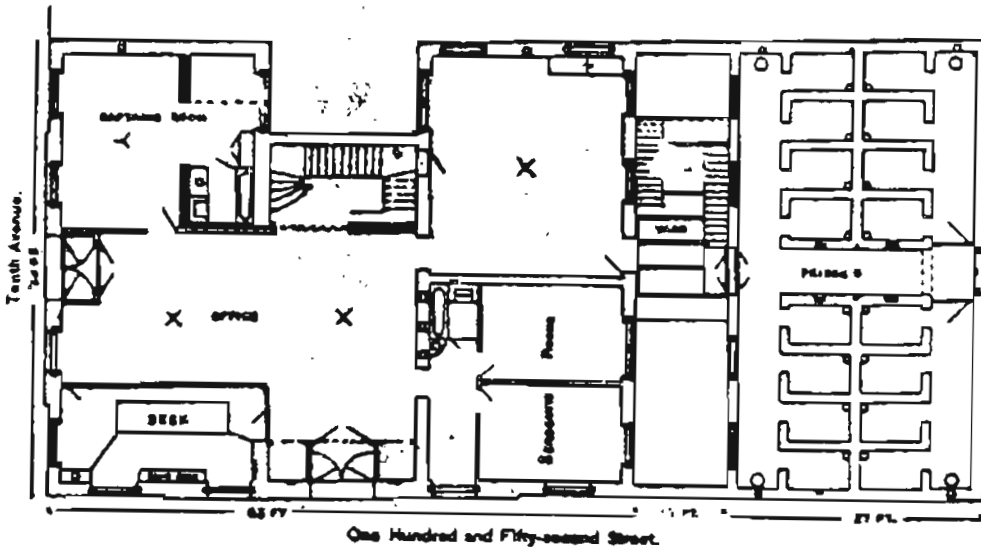
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Former 30th Police Precinct Station House
(Originally 32nd Police Precinct Station)

From: Gillon



Thirty-second Precinct Police Station—Floor Plans.

Former 30th Police Precinct Station House

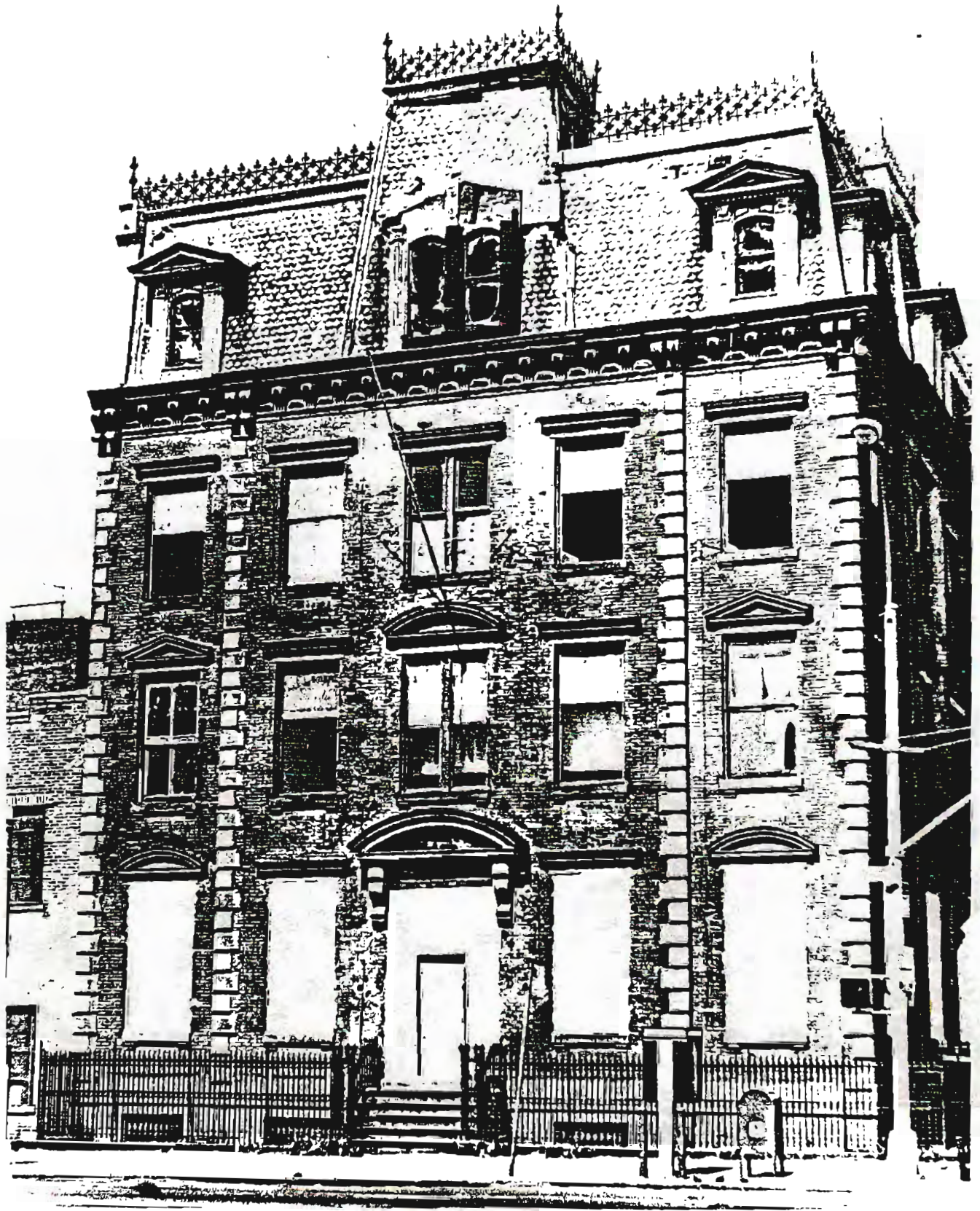
From: Costello



Former 30th Police Precinct Station House

Photo: Ed Mohylowski

Nathaniel Bush
1871-72



Former 30th Police Precinct Station House

Nathaniel Bush
1871-72