

# Trying to Save a Bit Of Brooklyn's Past



Post Photo by Richard Gummere

**In DANGER: Flatbush Town Hall.**



Post Photo by Arthur Pomerantz

**SAVED: The Jefferson Market, in Greenwich Village.**

By ROBERTA B. GRATZ

*Third of a series*

The Flatbush Town Hall was built in 1875. It's played a part in Brooklyn life ever since.

Now it is scheduled to be torn down and replaced by an 80-car parking lot, victim of what the hall's admirers describe as a sort of "Manhattan arrangement" for landmarks.

The handsome Victorian hall was the center of civic and cultural life for the Town of Flatbush until 1894, when Flatbush was absorbed by the City of Brooklyn and the hall became a police station. It remained a police station until recently when the 67th Precinct moved to a new facility three blocks away.

In July, 1969, the Board of Estimate Site Selection Board approved the site for a parking facility.

For almost two years a group of community residents, the Committee to Preserve Flatbush Town Hall, has been appealing to all levels of city government to let the community retain the building for a multi-use community center. They have met with nothing but "laxity and disinterest," says committee president Irving Choban, a lawyer who has lived in the area for 50 years.

#### **'Manhattan-Oriented'**

Their greatest "disenchantment," Choban says, has been with the Landmarks Preservation Commission which, he argues, is "too Manhattan-oriented. They've told me they don't want to interfere because another city department has ruled to demolish it. But you have to have courage in these things. You can't just say we don't want to interfere when you're here to preserve landmarks. You have to be willing to do battle."

But by law the commission

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# The Battle Over a Piece of Brooklyn's Past

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But, for those to consider designation of the town hall before June, 1972, is a key remaining wrinkle in the 1965 preservation law, the commission is limited to considering new designations for six months but of every three and a half years. That means there is a three-year interim period in which the commission is without power.

"The law itself... the commission's power to make designations that is limited to three months pursuant to a review published in a six-month period following a 30-month period."

"The commission may designate only sites that have been subject to public hearings. It may hold public hearings only during the six-month six-month period. The commission has never before considered the town hall as it is the one with more after threatened landmarks—and therefore has no power to designate it a land-

mark before the six is heard. The past six months hearing period comes in June, 1972. The last was in January, 1970.

This three-year period in which the commission is powerless to act on new designations is the gross target of critics of the law. "This is very clearly a formal barrier to protecting those buildings not previously designated," says Kim Warwick, director of Hamilton Arts Society and a leading advocate for several threatened landmarks to the law. "This means the commission has to predict the endangered buildings three years in advance that's difficult in New York, and the commission already has a limited calendar for each six months."

"This preservation committee with the landmarks law was recently highlighted by Newark notes, in the destruction of one of the first rows of 15-story mansions on Fifth Av., across from the Metropolitan Museum, in

1965. For a history of that case you may refer to a history of that case.

Because of the three-year interim period, Warwick notes, "it is impossible for the commission to even consider landmarks preservation for those buildings."

Eliminating the three-year restriction in the landmarks law is a key provision in the before the City Council. Currently, the Landmarks Commission appears to be the only interested party not actively lobbying for its passage.

Before introduction of that legislation to the City Council by Carter Burden (D-Manh.), the Municipal Art Society had proposed similar reforms to enable the Commission to hold hearings on its own schedule. The society, long in the forefront of preservation, recommended further changes after an 18-month study of the law requested by the Landmarks Commission, extension of jurisdiction to holding hearings and scenic landmarks before enforcement proceedings and a revitalization of the law's application to city-owned property.

Asked if the commission would seek for work stations, Commission Chairman Martin Goldstone says there has not yet been any official move to do so. The commission has not taken any policy stand on the matter. "There is no indication however that previous pressure by having its effect and Goldstone seems to be more interested in development of those reforms."

Commission Burden says: "I very definitely get the feeling that the commission is not anxious to have that

power. Any landmarks issue is a sort of viper because you're dealing with very powerful real estate interests." Goldstone has said specifically that he doesn't feel it because he would have more people wanting designations.

The Flatbush Town Hall is a building of considerable historic interest. It is of the same architectural vintage as the Jefferson Market Courthouse in Greenwich Village, according to Giorgio Casagrande, the noted restoration architect who designed the conversion of that Village landmark into a library. (That was accomplished through well-organized community pressure before passage of the 1965 preservation law.)

In April of last year, Casagrande surveyed the town hall and found it "structurally sound" and "perfectly suitable for development of a cultural center which would probably be quite attractive for various community facilities to several city agencies."

Prime Future Architects, of 107 St. Nicholas Place, noted: "This distinguished 1925 building by John V. Cooney was preserved, without doubt, in this Brooklyn locality, the Victorian Gothic Revival architecture of which the most distinguished example in New York is the Jefferson Market Courthouse."

But Flatbush Area architects all were pointing out its deteriorated state and the traffic grid, agreeing there is a crowded parking lot adjacent to the hall, but northwinds say it is inadequate. The reason for that, Chokos argues, is that

teachers at nearby Erasmus High are allowed to nominate buildings for study.

The Flatbush Town Hall is not only significant as an architectural landmark, it is part of a string of history retained one one square block, which is bounded by Flatbush Avenue and the East River. All the series of Flatbush and Church is the 175-year-old Flatbush Dutch Reformed Church, which was dedicated in 1807 by Peter B. Roosevelt, New York's first Dutch Governor, and which also occupied its present site.

Next to that is the one-story of Erasmus High, the 1910-1912 Erasmus Hall and another a water school house built as a private academy for the Dutch church that remains one of the oldest schools in the borough, the school, the Hall have been named national landmarks by the Federal Historic Dept., making them eligible for matching state and federal restoration and conservation funds. But at the first set of public hearings following passage of the 1965 landmarks law, the commission heard and have designated only two buildings in this Flatbush neighborhood—the school and the church.

Commission's Answer

Asked why the commission, in that time, did not save the church structure as an isolated landmark, the commission's executive director, Fred J. Gilbert, said specifically that he was not sure why present but that "the town hall is already not in all and the other two are better known."

One of the contradictions of commission philosophy is demonstrated by the landmarks "how could be protected," says Gilbert and Chairman Goldstone have pointed out, in that there must be a reasonable proposal for the ongoing use.

"The Flatbush Town Hall is a good and Victorian building," Goldstone says. "We had not had a hearing on it. It's the old political situation where you have a city-owned property and another agency has already made a decision on it. The first thing that comes to mind with a building like this is what can you do with it. You must find a viable use for it. The Flatbush Town Hall is not Manhattan (V.A. a restored national museum) here) on 5th St. All the buildings are part of the economy."

The next question is:

given of the 1965 law, which is the 1970 Author Law, an additional structure at 63 Lafayette St. that now houses Joseph Papp's theater. "That building would be a landmark. In fact, a commission spokesman reacted recently, 'if I've had my name along.'"

Chokos argues that there are unmet justifications for using the town hall. "The commission keeps saying to me," Chokos adds bitterly, "that it will be the first building." The city should find a use for it, not me. We have lots of opportunities. One of us is serving in the city because the building uses as we and we'll do the rest. We're not even asking the city to spend money."

At 8:30 a.m. on Jan. 18, another city agency came up with a concept prepared for selling the town hall. The Urban Renewal Agency wanted to use it as a youth service and government center. Chokos's commission saw this as an acceptable use to save the building; in a city-owned property it would have been given. The Board of Estimate denied the URA request because the hall was already scheduled for a parking lot. But the agency then agreed to rent the building as a Flatbush Art Center, at an annual rent of \$1,000. And the Town Hall is valued to make sure by a parking lot.

However... The Sixth of Broadway—the Avenue.