

**NATIONAL TITLE GUARANTY COMPANY BUILDING**, 185 Montague Street, Brooklyn.  
Built 1929-30, Corbett, Harrison & MacMurray, architects; Rene Chambellan, sculptor.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 244, Lot 13

On November 29, 2016, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the National Title Guaranty Company Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 2). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Seven people spoke in favor of designation including representatives of Councilmember Stephen T. Levin, the Historic Districts Council, Municipal Art Society, New York Landmarks Conservancy, and Brooklyn Heights Association, and two individuals. The owner spoke in opposition to designation. The Commission received a letter from Brooklyn Community Board 2 in support of designation.

### Summary

The limestone and brick National Title Guaranty Company Building is notable for its strong massing and unusual details. The 16-story Art Deco style building was designed in 1929-30 by Corbett, Harrison & MacMurray, led by senior partner Harvey Wiley Corbett, a major proponent of the skyscraper as a modern urban form. The building's strong vertical massing is emphasized by projecting piers that rise from the stepped limestone and brick buttresses at the building's base, and is further reinforced by the vertical brickwork patterns employed in the spandrels of the upper stories. Interspersed among the buttresses is a pierced limestone screen designed by the noted sculptor Rene Chambellan, which features stylized eagles, helmeted warriors and other elements. The building is a notable example of Art Deco commercial architecture, particularly with its strong vertical expression and unusual details.

The National Title Guaranty Company was founded to meet the needs arising from the growth of residential development in Brooklyn in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first new title insurance firm in Brooklyn in 18 years, it opened for business in 1924 on Montague Street, home to many of Brooklyn's banks and insurance firms since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. As a reflection of its success, the firm commissioned the building at 185 Montague Street in 1929 as its headquarters and occupied it until the company was liquidated in 1935. Remarkably intact, the National Title Guaranty Company Building is an important example of an early-20<sup>th</sup>-century skyscraper and a significant reminder of the period when Montague Street was the hub of Brooklyn's financial services industry.



## DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Executed in limestone and buff brick, the National Title Guaranty Company building at 185 Montague Street is a slender, seven-bay wide, 16-story office building in the Art Deco style. Incorporating the requirements of the 1916 zoning law, the building rises 13 stories before terminating in a fully articulated tower created by a series of stepped setbacks. The façade consists of brick piers rising from stepped buttresses of brick and limestone, and brick spandrel panels creating the appearance of crenellation at the series of setback rooflines. The base is decorated with a pierced limestone screen created by a series of seven panels featuring stylized eagles, helmeted warriors, eight-pointed stars, hammers and rosettes set in mirrored pairs with a single panel acting as a “keystone” above the larger of two asymmetrically placed, recessed openings which once framed a picture window. Each panel of the screen is capped with stepped blocks which originally screened floodlights used to illuminate the façade. Abutting the main screen are two shorter panels that mirror each other. In the two easternmost bays, the original recessed building entrance featured a large spandrel etched with the company name. Prior to the 1970s, the entrance was modified and a non-historic marble surround was installed flush with the limestone buttresses. At the same time, the ground-floor window was converted into an entrance with transom separated by a marquee, and the two adjoining screen panels were altered. Except as noted below, the original three-over-three windows have been replaced with one-over-one windows typical in Art Deco style buildings. Two large marble and bronze torchieres which once graced the site have been removed.

**Main (South) Façade:** Limestone base with decorative pierced screen and limestone and brick buttresses; buff brick upper stories; spandrel panels with checkerboard and stack bond patterned brick; panels above windows at setbacks with extended center stack bond pattern offset by pattern of raised brick bands; historic three-over-three sash at 12<sup>th</sup> floor; possibly historic railings at second story. *Alterations:* Main entrance brought flush with the buttresses, new enframing and door, large building number; commercial entrance with marquee; lower sections of two screen panels removed, one replaced with metal door, the other infilled with stone or cast stone; flag pole above main entrance; set of pipes attached to easternmost screen panel; some brick replacement at setbacks and corners; windows replaced except as noted.

**East Façade** (partially visible): Set back at front and rear corners; tower similar to main facade; two bays of windows at the front, one bay at rear with projecting piers and brickwork spandrels; unfenestrated center section with projecting piers and brickwork panels; rooftop bulkhead; historic three-over-three windows at first setback and tower, also at rear; possibly historic railings at setbacks. *Alterations:* Brick patched; windows replaced (one with vent) except as noted.<sup>1</sup>

**West Façade** (partially visible): U-shaped with articulated asymmetrical front and rear sections around a light court; buff brick; decorative brickwork similar to main façade, spandrel panels with checkerboard and stack bond patterned brick throughout, extended center stack bond offset by raised brick bands at second and third setbacks of front section only; historic three-over-three sash in light court, bulkhead and tower; possibly historic railings at setback. *Alterations:* Brick patched; windows replaced except as noted, three windows partially infilled with narrow vents; dish antennas; bulkhead on roof.

**North Façade** (partially visible): Tower with similar brick spandrels and crenellation; historic three-over-three windows in tower; unarticulated stepped facade; possibly historic railing at tower and setbacks. *Alterations*: Brick patched; windows replaced, some with louvered vents, except as noted; pipes on roof; large metal chimney attached to wall following contours of the setbacks; conduits.

## SITE HISTORY

### Early History

Brooklyn Heights was part of the Dutch settlement of Breuckelen, one of six settlements “purchased” from the native Lenape in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and granted in vast tracts to various patentees by the Dutch West India Company.<sup>2</sup> Beginning in 1802, the wealthy Connecticut-born merchant Hezekiah Beers Pierpont,<sup>3</sup> later one of Brooklyn’s wealthiest and most influential citizens, pieced together a 60-acre estate from the farms of Joris Remsen and his son-in-law Jacobus De Bevoise and purchased the adjacent Livingston gin distillery at the foot of Joralemon Street which he operated from 1802-1819.<sup>4</sup>

### Transportation Improvements and Early Brooklyn Heights

Pierpont, and his neighbors the Hickses and Middaghs, recognized the potential for urban development on Brooklyn Heights. To achieve his vision, Pierpont became a prominent investor in, and subsequently a director of, Robert Fulton’s New York and Brooklyn Steam Ferry Boat Company which traversed the East River connecting Brooklyn and Lower Manhattan.<sup>5</sup> In 1816, Pierpont and a committee of Brooklyn residents obtained a charter from the state legislature creating the Village of Brooklyn and a survey was commissioned. Pierpont disagreed with the vision of small streets and lots occupied by wood houses for artisans and tradesmen and commissioned a second village map (adopted in 1819) that laid out wider streets and larger blocks in his holdings south of Clark Street. By 1830 Brooklyn Heights, as Pierpont had envisioned, had become a commuter suburb for the well-to-do.<sup>6</sup>

### Brooklyn Civic Center and Montague Street<sup>7</sup>

Following the incorporation of the City of Brooklyn in 1834, a site was purchased at the edge of Brooklyn Heights at the intersection of Fulton, Joralemon and Court Streets for a grand city hall moving the center of Brooklyn civic and commercial life away from the existing town center at the Fulton Ferry landing.<sup>8</sup> The cornerstone of city hall was laid in 1836 but construction was halted by the Panic of 1837 and the building, with a revised design by Gamaliel King, was not completed until 1848.<sup>9</sup> The City of Brooklyn annexed neighboring Williamsburg and Bushwick in 1855<sup>10</sup> and new civic, institutional and commercial buildings appeared on the streets adjacent to City Hall.

The Mechanics Bank was constructed in 1857 at the northwest corner of Montague and Court Streets, anticipating the commercial development in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that transformed Court Street from a minor shopping street into Brooklyn’s downtown office district. Beginning in the 1870s other financial services companies arrived in the area lining Court Street. The five-story, cast-iron Continental Insurance Company of New York building (George L. Morse, 1873-74) anchored the southwest corner of Court and Montague Streets and within six years the Phenix [sic] Fire Insurance Company of Brooklyn (Ebenezer L. Roberts, 1879-80) was

completed to the south of it.<sup>11</sup> Brooklyn grew rapidly throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, expanding residential development to Fort Greene, Bedford, Park Slope and beyond as other towns and villages of the county were incorporated within Brooklyn's municipal borders. At the same time public transportation and infrastructure improvements like the Brooklyn Bridge (1883),<sup>12</sup> Fulton Street el (1888, expanded to East New York by 1900) and a growing network of street cars improved access to downtown and Manhattan further contributing to the growth of Brooklyn's commercial center in which Montague Street played a vital part.

Opened from the East River to Court Street during the 1840s, the four-block long Montague Street became in the 1850s the nexus joining the steam ferry service to Wall Street at its foot to the horse cars on Court Street.<sup>13</sup> While it remained residential on the western end, in the 1860s Montague Street between Court and Clinton Streets became the location of Brooklyn's cultural institutions including the Brooklyn Academy of Music (Leopold Eidlitz, 1861), Mercantile Library Association of the City of Brooklyn (Peter B. Wright, 1865-68) and the Brooklyn Art Association (J. C. Cady, 1869-72).<sup>14</sup>

Anchored at Court Street by the Mechanics Bank and Continental Insurance Company of New York Buildings, in the 1870s Montague Street west of Court Street began its transformation into a commercial hub as existing residential and cultural buildings were converted and new purpose-built office buildings were constructed to house the financial services businesses supporting Brooklyn's burgeoning real estate development. In 1873 the Brooklyn Trust Company purchased the Taylor Mansion at the northeast corner of Montague and Clinton Streets.<sup>15</sup> In the 1890s the nine-story, through-block Real Estate Exchange Building at 189 Montague Street (George E. Edbrooke, 1890) was constructed, followed by the Franklin Trust Company Building (George L. Morse, 1891) at the southwest corner of Montague and Clinton Streets, and the 10-story Mechanics Bank Building and annex (George L. Morse, 1896, 1904) that replaced the bank's earlier building at the northwest corner of Montague and Court Streets.<sup>16</sup> In 1891, the Art Association leased part of its building at 174 Montague Street to the Peoples Trust Company.<sup>17</sup> Following a disastrous fire in 1903 that leveled the Brooklyn Academy of Music, the trustees determined that Montague Street had become too commercial and built its new facility in Fort Greene (Herts & Tallant, 1907-08, a designated New York City Landmark). The following year the Peoples Trust Company opened their neo-Classical style bank at 181-183 Montague Street (Mowbray & Uffinger, 1904) adjacent to the Brooklyn Trust Company, and the Brooklyn Academy site was redeveloped with the 10-story Beaux-Arts style Lawyers Title Insurance Company building, flanked on the west by a 150-foot, nine-bay-wide, two-story neo-Classical style commercial building (Helmle, Huberty & Hudswell, 1904-06, 1904, respectively) and on the east by the neo-Classical style Title Guaranty and Trust Company building at 192 Montague Street (Frank Freeman, 1905) and another similar bank at 196 Montague Street.<sup>18</sup> The last of the classically-inspired banks to be constructed along Montague Street was York & Sawyer's neo-Renaissance palazzo for the Brooklyn Trust Company completed in 1916.

Tall skyscrapers began to replace earlier commercial buildings in the years following World War I. The Continental Insurance Company and an adjacent building were replaced by the 35-story neo-Romanesque style Montague-Court Building (H. Craig Severance, 1925-27) followed in 1929 by the National Title Guaranty Company Building.<sup>19</sup> Built after passage of the 1916 zoning ordinance not only do the two buildings reflect different interpretations of the setback requirements of the law; but, the design of the National Title Guaranty Company Building represents the growing trend in commercial architecture away from the historicist to more streamlined design.

### National Title Guaranty Company and Its Building

In the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, real estate development and home buying in Brooklyn was expanding exponentially. The founders of the National Title Guaranty Company, a group of real estate men and lawyers led by Manasseh Miller and Michael Furst, established the new firm in 1924 to meet the needs arising from this growth. It was the first new title insurance company to be opened in Brooklyn in 18 years and was immediately successful. Opened for business on April 29, 1924 in the old Brooklyn Art Association building at 174 Montague Street with Miller as president and Furst as chairman, National Title Guaranty primarily focused on insuring titles and making loans on “improved well-located city property” but also offered to investors first mortgages and first mortgage certificates paying 5½ percent interest secured by these same real estate loans which had been “personally inspected and approved by our officers.”<sup>20</sup>

In the course of its first three years, the company expanded into Queens and Suffolk Counties and opened a branch in temporary quarters in downtown Jamaica. In 1927 plans were announced for a \$1,000,000, 10-story building designed by the firm of Shampan & Shampan to be built at 160-16 Jamaica Avenue near the Bank of Manhattan, Jamaica Savings Bank, and Title Guarantee and Trust Company.<sup>21</sup> The year 1929 was significant for the National Title Guaranty Company. It expanded its business into Manhattan through the purchase of Guaranteed Mortgage Company at 345 Madison Avenue in March, and two months later established the National Exchange Bank and Trust Company of New York. At the same time, construction was underway on their new headquarters on Montague Street.<sup>22</sup>

A few days before the official opening of the new building on April 3, 1930, the *New York Herald Tribune* wrote that the building by Corbett, Harrison & MacMurray “is said to be one of the most advanced examples of modern architecture erected in this country.” *The New York Times* reported that the “the building is modern, but not, according to the architects, modernistic.”<sup>23</sup> Both papers noted that lights were to be an “integral part” of the architecture with flood lights at the second floor and each setback illuminating the upper façade while others provided backlighting for Rene Chambellan’s stone screen.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the stock market crash of October 1929, the officers of the National Title Guaranty Company were still offering the same investment products in January 1930. By March 1931, the dividends on the company stock were cut to \$4.00 per year although President Manasseh Miller was still optimistic for the real estate business. However, by 1933 National Title Guaranty’s liabilities exceeded their assets by a ratio of 5 to 1 and the firm and five others were put under the control of the New York State Insurance Commissioner for reorganization in August of that year. On January 23, 1935 with liabilities, though considerably reduced, still exceeding assets, the liquidation of the company was formally approved.<sup>25</sup>

Shortly after the liquidation was announced, a federal grand jury indicted the company’s officers for conspiracy and mail fraud for misrepresenting the safety of their investment products. In December 1936, four of the officers including former president Manessah Miller and his successor Matthew McNamara, were found guilty of conspiracy and sentenced although they were freed on bail pending an appeal. In 1937 the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals reversed the convictions.<sup>26</sup>

### Art Deco Skyscrapers<sup>27</sup>

By the mid-1920s, as the economy rebounded from World War I and the recession that followed, there was an increased demand for new and larger commercial buildings. Construction lasted into the early 1930s despite the stock market crash in 1929, as those that had been previously planned and financed went forward. According to architectural historian and critic Paul Goldberger, the 1920s were “the richest era in skyscraper design since the early years in Chicago.” This “rich array of towers” merged “Chicago’s instinct toward structural expression and New York’s instinct toward theatricality.”<sup>28</sup>

In response to the increasing height of buildings, in 1916 New York City implemented the nation’s first zoning regulations. Under the law, building height was determined in relation to the width of the adjacent streets in an attempt to allow more light and air to reach the street level. However, it was not until the mid-1920s that the zoning restrictions began to influence the shape of new buildings with mandated setbacks. In 1922, architect and critic Harvey Wiley Corbett (1873-1954) and architectural artist Hugh Ferriss (1889-1962) first published a group of dramatic renderings that explored zoning’s impact on the shape of tall buildings.<sup>29</sup> Presented as a series of illustrations progressing from the abstract, pyramidal shape of the zoning envelope to a stepped-back practicable building form, these drawings and ideas on which they were based significantly influenced the architects of the period, directing the architects’ attention to the building as a whole rather than to a single façade of the structure, thus altering the whole design process. The zoning law provided architects with a sound, rational basis for the form and appearance of the skyscraper as well as a new source of creativity.

Another important influence on 1920s skyscraper design was Eliel Saarinen’s second-place entry in the 1922 competition for the *Chicago Tribune’s* new tower. With its straightforward shape, vertical emphasis, and limited ornament, Saarinen’s design was widely influential in American skyscraper design for the next few decades as architects chose to design buildings that were taller and simpler, with less historicist ornament and more focus on shape and massing.

As part of the search for a new style that could express the societal changes brought about by new technology and manufacturing processes, there was much debate about what constituted “Modern” design. As noted by architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable, a dichotomy existed between “Modern” represented by the “radical, reductive, and reformist” designs being developed in Europe by Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius – the fathers of the International Style – and “modernistic,” as reflected in the designs of the new skyscrapers of New York, which was “richly decorative and attached to conservative and hedonistic values.”<sup>30</sup>

Many New York City buildings dating from the mid-1920s through the 1930s were designed in this Modernistic style, also called Art Deco (after the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes* held in Paris in 1925).<sup>31</sup> Many of the architects working in this style had received traditional Beaux-Arts training in which the plan and the design of elevations were the first and most important efforts in creating a building. To these initial influences the architects added other design and ornamental ideas that evolved from the Paris exhibition, the well-publicized designs of the Vienna Secessionists and the Wiener Werkstatte, the German Expressionists, American architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis H. Sullivan, contemporary theatrical set designs, and Mayan and other Native American forms.

In addition to their concern for lush ornament, architects working in this style accepted that the facades of buildings were merely a covering for the structural framework and they began to look at the surfaces of these new building differently, treating them as a skin around the

framework. This led to the idea of wall surfaces being treated like woven fabric, a technique used on several buildings in New York during this period.<sup>32</sup> New materials such as metal alloys were used during this time, but brick and terra cotta were favorites because of their wide range of color and textural possibilities. Ornament, usually in low relief, often took the form of angular, geometric shapes such as zigzags and zigzags, or simplified and stylized floral patterns, parts of circles, or faceted crystalline shapes.

Reaching its height of popularity between 1928 and 1931 in New York City, this new architectural style was most noticeably applied to commercial skyscrapers such as the Chanin Building (Irwin Chanin with Sloan & Roberts, 1927-29), the Chrysler Building (William Van Alen, 1928-30), the Empire State Building (Shreve, Lamb & Harmon, 1929-31) and the General Electric Building (Cross & Cross, 1929-31), all designated New York City Landmarks. As the interests of the business world were perceived to be paramount in the 1920s, the use of the Art Deco style was seen to reflect the integration of commercialism, industry, science and invention, and machinery.

The National Title Guaranty Company Building, designed by Corbett,<sup>33</sup> a master of the building type, is a fine example of the Art Deco style commercial skyscraper of the period. While not as tall as its contemporaries such as the Chrysler Building in Manhattan, the National Title Guaranty Company Building reflects a high level of design and creativity. The building's vertical massing is articulated by piers extending from a row of buttresses at the base and topped by a carefully sculpted, fully articulated three-story tower. The geometrically-patterned brickwork spandrels are artfully manipulated at the setbacks to create the appearance of crenellation, while the base is further articulated by a highly stylized pierced limestone screen. Ultimately, with the city and the country in the grip of the Great Depression, the period of the great Art Deco skyscrapers came to an end with the completion of Rockefeller Center.

#### Corbett, Harrison & MacMurray<sup>34</sup>

Corbett, Harrison & MacMurray was established in 1928 by Harvey Wiley Corbett, Wallace K. Harrison and William H. MacMurray. The firm, which was dissolved in 1935, is best known as one of the three firms selected to design Rockefeller Center.

San Francisco-born Harvey Wiley Corbett was the son of physicians. He graduated from the University of California with a degree in engineering in 1895 and enrolled in the atelier of Jean Louis Pascal at the École des Beaux-Arts in 1896 receiving his diploma in 1900. On his return to the United States he entered the office of Cass Gilbert as a draftsman in 1901. Two years later he formed a partnership with F. Livingston Pell with whom he designed the Maryland Institute (1905-08) in Baltimore and Municipal Group (1908-13) in Springfield, Massachusetts. In 1912 he joined in partnership with Frank J. Helmle and it was during this association that Corbett's reputation as a designer and advocate of tall skyscrapers was established. The Bush Tower (1916-18, 130-132 West 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, a designated New York City Landmark) is an early example of his use of the stepped form in skyscraper design as it was influenced by the New York City Zoning Resolution of 1916. Corbett's tall building designs of the 1920s and 1930s helped define American modernism. Along with the National Title Guaranty Company Building, he designed One Fifth Avenue (Helmle & Corbett, in association with Sugarman & Berger, 1926, in the Greenwich Village Historic District), the Master Building (310 Riverside Drive, Helmle, Corbett & Harrison, 1928-29, a designated New York City Landmark in the Riverside-West End Historic District Extension II), the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company North Building (11 Madison Avenue, with D. Everett Waid, 1929-50), and the Criminal Courts

Building (100 Centre Street, with Charles B. Meyers, 1939). In the 1940s Corbett, as chief architect, with Grosvenor Atterbury (1869-1956) and planner Arthur C. Holden (1890-1993) designed the Amsterdam Houses for the New York City Housing Authority. A theorist and educator as well as a designer, Corbett, a fellow of the American Institute of Architects, was awarded the medal of honor by the New York Chapter in 1954.

Wallace K. Harrison (1895-1982) studied construction engineering at the Worcester Polytechnic Institute. After working as a draftsman for the firm of McKim, Mead & White, he entered Corbett's atelier at Columbia University where he learned the Beaux-Arts methods of design. He then studied at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris. Returning to New York in 1922, he worked as a draftsman for Bertram G. Goodhue and Raymond M. Hood. He joined Helmle and Corbett in 1927 in the new firm of Helmle, Corbett & Harrison which was reorganized in 1928 with Helmle's retirement and the addition of William H. MacMurray into Corbett, Harrison & MacMurray. Harrison left in 1935 and established his own firm with Andre Fouiloux. They were joined by Max Abramovitz in 1941, and the firm was renamed Harrison & Abramovitz in 1945 following Fouiloux's death. Harrison & Abramovitz's projects in New York City included the extension of the U.S. Rubber Company Building (1230 Sixth Avenue, 1954-56, part of Rockefeller Center, a designated New York City Landmark), the Socony-Mobil Building (150 East 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, with John B. Peterkin, 1954-56, a designated New York City Landmark) and Time Life Building (1261-1267 Sixth Avenue, Harrison & Abramovitz & Harris, 1956-60, a designated New York City Interior Landmark), the United Nations, and Lincoln Center, as well as the Empire State Plaza in Albany. Harrison was awarded the AIA's gold medal in 1967.

William H. MacMurray (1868-1941) served largely as the business partner for the firm remaining in partnership with Corbett until at least 1940.

#### Rene Paul Chambellan (1893-1995)<sup>35</sup>

Rene Paul Chambellan, who was responsible for the design of the building's limestone screen (and interior decorative elements), became a noted architectural sculptor and model-maker executing sculpture, bas-reliefs, and panels in a number of materials, including bronze, stone, and terra cotta. Born in West Hoboken (now part of Union City), New Jersey, he was educated at New York University (1912-14), the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design (1914-17), and the École Julian (1918-19) in Paris and was a student of the sculptor Solon Borglum. He served as a sergeant in the U.S. Army in France in 1917-19. After returning to the United States, Chambellan worked with Raymond Hood and John Mead Howells on the ornament of the Tribune Building (1924) in Chicago, and participated in the design and execution of the ornament of many important building of the 1920s and 1930s in New York City.<sup>36</sup> Chambellan did many of the flat, highly stylized designs popular on Art Deco buildings. In addition to his work for Corbett, Harrison & MacMurray on the National Title Guaranty Company Building, he was responsible for the theater wall decoration in the firm's Bushnell Memorial Hall in Hartford, Connecticut.

#### Subsequent History of Montague Street and the National Title Guaranty Company Building<sup>37</sup>

With the Great Depression, little new building occurred on Montague Street through the 1930s when the buildings on the western end of the south side including the Art Association building were replaced or altered. On the eastern end, the IND subway made the Fulton Street el superfluous and the latter was dismantled in 1941 paving the way for the new Civic Center planned under Borough President John Cashmore. As part of the new plan, Fulton Street was



widened and renamed Cadman Plaza West in 1959. Along the north side of the block, the Mechanics Bank was demolished, and new headquarters were built for the Brooklyn Savings Bank, Brooklyn Union Gas Company, and Bankers Trust, replacing the New York Title and Mortgage Building and library. Over time, additional changes have been made. The Real Estate Exchange Building was demolished and the western section of the south side of the street was replaced with new residential apartment houses with commercial ground floors. The National Title Guaranty Company Building has remained largely intact although there have been some changes to the ground floor sometime prior to the 1970s. Along with the neighboring Brooklyn Trust Company and People's Bank (both designated New York City Landmarks), the National Title Guaranty Company Building forms a significant architectural ensemble representative of Montague Street's pre-Depression era commercial transformation.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The building at 189 Montague Street was demolished in 2016, exposing most of the east and north facades of the National Title Guaranty Company building. At the time of the designation of the National Title Guaranty Company Building, there was no New Building (NB) application for a replacement for 189 Montague Street in the New York City Department of Buildings, Building Information System. The description of the east and north facades of the National Title Guaranty Company building are restricted to what was visible when 189 Montague Street was extant.

<sup>2</sup> The Lenape "system of land tenure was that of occupancy for the needs of a group." Sales that the Europeans deemed outright transfers of property were, to the Native Americans, closer to leases or joint tenancy contracts where they retained rights to the property. Reginald Pelham Bolton, *New York City in Indian Possession*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Indian Notes and Monographs, v. II, no. 7, (New York: Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, 1920, reprinted 1975), 7, 14-15.

<sup>3</sup> Resources vary on the spelling of the family's surname. Hezekiah Beers Pierpont retained the Anglicized version of the name, likely for business purposes, however he had his children use the original Pierrepont. *Genealogical and Family History of Southern New York and the Hudson River Valley* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1913), I, 343.

<sup>4</sup> Dirck Janse Woertman consolidated the titles of patents originally granted to Hudde, Manje and Ruyter. Woertman's son-in-law Joris Remsen, a farmer, purchased part of the estate in 1706 and sold 14 acres to his son-in-law Jacobus De Bevoise, in 1734. Henry R. Stiles, editor-in-chief, *The Civil, Political, Professional and Ecclesiastical History and Commercial and Industrial Record of the County of Kings and the City of Brooklyn, N.Y. from 1683 to 1884*. (New York: W. W. Munsell & Co., 1884), I, 128-9; Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 449-450.

<sup>5</sup> Burrows and Wallace, 449-450.

<sup>6</sup> Stiles, I, 111; Burrows and Wallace, 449-450.

<sup>7</sup> This section based on Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC), *Borough Hall Skyscraper Historic District Designation Report (LP-2449)* (New York: City of New York, 2011) prepared by Christopher D. Brazee, 5-21; David Ment, *Building Blocks of Brooklyn* (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Education and Cultural Alliance, 1979), 29-62.

<sup>8</sup> This decision was heavily influenced by Hezekiah B. Pierpont, who owned a portion of the land purchased by the city and who believed a grand civic building would help promote the development of his vast estate as an elite enclave. Burrows and Wallace, 581-582.

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<sup>9</sup> Constructed between 1845-48, with later alterations by Vincent Griffith and Stoughton & Stoughton, Brooklyn City (now Borough) Hall is a designated New York City Landmark.

<sup>10</sup> Margaret Latimer, "Brooklyn," *The Encyclopedia of New York City*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> The Continental and Phenix buildings were demolished and replaced by the Montague-Court Building (H. Craig Severance, 1925-27) that is included in the Borough Hall Skyscraper Historic District.

<sup>12</sup> Brooklyn Bridge (John A., Washington, and Emily Roebling, 1867-1883) is a designated New York City Landmark.

<sup>13</sup> Ferry service began in 1853 and ran until 1912. Brooklyn City Railroad Company began running horse cars on Court and Fulton Streets and Myrtle and Flushing Avenues in 1854. In 1891 a cable car was installed on Montague Street providing transfers to residents and commuters between the Fulton Street el and the ferry. Later replaced by a trolley, it continued to serve the area until 1924. Ment, 32; *Brooklyn Daily Eagle Almanac* (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 1916), 444.

<sup>14</sup> All three buildings have been demolished.

<sup>15</sup> Brooklyn Trust altered and enlarged the building at 177-179 Montague Street, finally replacing it with a new building (York & Sawyer, 1913-16) a designated New York City exterior and interior landmark.

<sup>16</sup> The Franklin Building is within the Brooklyn Heights Historic District; the Mechanics Bank building was demolished in 1959 with the widening of Fulton Street and the previously altered Real Estate Exchange Building was demolished in 2016. Ment, 49-50.

<sup>17</sup> The Art Association held its last exhibit in 1892 and by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was disbanded. Ment, 47-48, 52.

<sup>18</sup> The Lawyers Title Insurance Company at 188 Montague Street and the Lawyers Mortgage Company at 186 Montague Street are both in the Borough Hall Skyscraper Historic District. No. 186 Montague Street is all that remains of the row of buildings that stretched from 176 to 186 Montague Street until a fire essentially destroyed the western section; it was restored and enlarged by two stories in 1941-42 by Slee & Bryson. The two banks at 192 and 196 Montague Street were demolished around 1959 and replaced by the Lafayette National Bank at 200 Montague Street (1959-60, enlarged 1967-68, Philip Birnbaum; reclad 2006, Façade MD/Facade Maintenance Design), which is also within the Borough Hall Skyscraper Historic District. *Borough Hall Skyscraper Historic District Designation Report*; Ment, 53-54.

<sup>19</sup> Within the Borough Hall Skyscraper Historic District.

<sup>20</sup> National Title Guaranty Company was established as a stock company and its capitalization came from the sale of shares. Originally capitalized at \$150,000 by 1927 that figure had reached \$2,000,000 plus a mandated \$1,500,000 surplus, two years later it had grown to \$3.5 million with a \$2.5 million surplus. "New Title Co. Here; Manasseh Miller to Head Project," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 20, 1924, 20; "New Title Co. Open in Boro Tomorrow," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 28, 1924, 21; "National Plans Office Building for Queens Branch," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 2, 1927, 45; "New Brooklyn National Bank Is Announced," *Brooklyn Standard Union*, May 28, 1929, 3.

<sup>21</sup> The building at 160-16 Jamaica Avenue was partially demolished in 2016.

<sup>22</sup> "Merger Arranged by Title Company," *New York Times (NYT)*, March 31, 1929, 38; "New Brooklyn National Bank Is Announced," *Brooklyn Standard Union*, May 28, 1929, 3.

<sup>23</sup> This appears to be an inversion of the Modern/Modernistic dichotomy discussed by Ada Louise Huxtable in *The Tall Building Artistically Reconsidered: The Search for a Skyscraper Style* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 39.

<sup>24</sup> "One of Country's Modern Designed Buildings in Kings," *New York Herald Tribune*, March 30, 1930, E2; "New Bank to Serve Brooklyn Heights," *NYT*, March 30, 1930, RE1.

<sup>25</sup> Advertisement, *NYT*, January 22, 1930, 3; "National Title Cuts Dividend to \$4 Per Year," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 20, 1931, 38; "Brooklyn Business News," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, September 18, 1931, 36; "Van Schaick Sets Up Plan," *NYT*, August 3, 1933, 1; "Liquidation Ordered for National Title," *NYT*, January 24, 1935, 27.

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<sup>26</sup> “Mortgage Officials Indicted for Fraud,” *NYT*, May 29, 1935, 4; “Title Jury Finds 4 Guilty; 2 Freed,” *NYT*, December 4, 1936, 2; “Conviction Voided for 3 in Title Case,” *NYT*, July 13, 1937, 37.

<sup>27</sup> Based on LPC, *2 Park Avenue Building Designation Report (LP-2186)* (New York: City of New York, 2006), prepared by Virginia Kurshan; LPC, *275 Madison Avenue Building Designation Report (LP-2286)* (New York: City of New York, 2009), prepared by Michael D. Caratzas. Additional sources include David Gebhard, *The National Trust Guide to Art Deco in America* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1996); Paul Goldberger, *The Skyscraper* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981); Ada Louise Huxtable, *The Tall Building Artistically Reconsidered*; Cervin Robinson and Rosemarie Haag Bletter, *Skyscraper Style: Art Deco New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975); Carol Willis, *Form Follows Finance: Skyscrapers and Skylines in New York and Chicago* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1995).

<sup>28</sup> Goldberger, 61.

<sup>29</sup> Goldberger, 57.

<sup>30</sup> Huxtable, 39.

<sup>31</sup> Much of the information about Art Deco is adapted from: LPC, *Barclay-Vesey Building Designation Report (LP-1745)* (New York: City of New York, 1991), prepared by Margaret M. M. Pickart; LPC, *The Long Distance Building of the American Telephone & Telegraph Company Designation Report (LP-1747)* (New York: City of New York, 1991), prepared by David Breiner; LPC, *Western Union Building Designation Report (LP-1749)* (New York: City of New York, 1991), prepared by Betsey Bradley; LPC, *1 Wall Street Building Designation Report (LP-2029)* (New York: City of New York, 2001), prepared by Virginia Kurshan; Robinson and Bletter; Gebhard; and LPC research files.

<sup>32</sup> Two examples are 21 West Street (a designated New York City Landmark) and the Film Center Building (630 Ninth Avenue, a designated New York City Interior Landmark).

<sup>33</sup> The attribution is based on the appearance of Corbett’s name (Harvey Wiley Corbett, Arch’t) on two drawings for the National Title Guaranty Company Building in the collection of Avery Library, Columbia University.

<sup>34</sup> LPC, *Rockefeller Center Designation Report (LP-1446)* (New York: City of New York, 1895), prepared by the Research Department, 17-18; “Corbett, Harvey Wiley” and “Harrison & Abramovitz” in Adolf K. Placzek, editor-in-chief, *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects* (New York: Free Press, 1982), 1: 451-452, 2: 324-327; “Harvey Corbett Architect, Dead,” *NYT*, April 22, 1954, 29; Paul Goldberger, “Wallace Harrison Dead at 86; Rockefeller Center Architect,” *NYT*, December 3, 1981, A1, D26.

<sup>35</sup> “R. P. Chambellan, Long a Sculptor,” *NYT*, November 30, 1955, 33; LPC, Chambellan files; Robert A. M. Stern, Gregory Gilmartin, and Thomas Mellins, *New York 1930* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987), 656, 704-705; NYPL, Artists files; “Rene Paul Chambellan,” *Who Was Who in America* (Chicago Marquis, 1963), 3: 147.

<sup>36</sup> These included: American Radiator Building (Raymond Hood, 1923-24), 40 West 40<sup>th</sup> Street; war memorials at the New York Life Insurance Co. Building (Cass Gilbert, 1925-28), 51 Madison Avenue; the figural sculpture on Pratt Institute’s Memorial Hall (John Mead Howells, 1926-27), 215 Ryerson Street, Brooklyn; the figural sculpture on the interior of the Williamsburgh Savings Bank (Halsey, McCormack & Helmer, 1927-29), 1 Hanson Place, Brooklyn; the sculptural decoration, with Jacques Delamarre, on the Chanin Building (Sloan & Robertson, 1927-29), 122 East 42<sup>nd</sup> Street; the terra-cotta panels (and possibly the sculpted reliefs) of the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design (Frederic C. Hiron, 1928), 304 East 44<sup>th</sup> Street; the terra-cotta panels on the State Bank & Trust Co. (Dennison & Hiron, 1927-28), 681-685 Eighth Avenue; the model of and ornament on the Panhellenic Tower (John Mead Howells, 1927-28), 3 Mitchell Place; the model of the Daily News Buildings (Raymond Hood, 1929-30), 220 East 42<sup>nd</sup> Street; the decoration of the Majestic Apartment (Irwin S. Chanin, 1930-31), 115 Central Park West; the ornament on the Century Apartments (Irwin S. Chanin, 1931), 25 Central Park West; the models for the second-story sculpture panels on the penthouse addition to the Russell Sage Foundation Building (Grosvenor Atterbury, architect, John A. Tompkins II, associate, 1922-23), 122-130 East 22<sup>nd</sup> Street; and the terra-cotta panels on the former Suffolk Title and Guarantee Company Building (Dennison & Hiron, 1929), 90-04 161<sup>st</sup> Street, Jamaica. Chambellan performed a variety of tasks at Rockefeller Center (Associated Architects, 1931-33), including creating architects’ models, providing technical assistance to other artists, and executing bronze plaques at the entrance to and stainless doors on the interior of Radio City Music Hall, as well as, with Foster Gunnison, producing the central lighting fixture in the auditorium, designing six bronze fountainhead figures in the Channel Gardens, and executing

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decorative spandrel panels on the British Building (originally the British Empire Building) and La Maison Francaise. He was also responsible for the ornament on the Airlines Terminal Building (John B. Peterkin, 1940, demolished), 80 East 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. Of the extant New York buildings listed, only the State Bank and Trust Company building, is not a designated New York City Landmark.

<sup>37</sup> Based on Ment, 57-62.

## 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 the National Title Guaranty Company Building 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 the National Title Guaranty Company Building is a 16-story office building in the Art Deco style; that it was designed by the firm of Corbett, Harrison & MacMurray, led by senior partner Harvey Wiley Corbett, who was a major proponent of the skyscraper as a modern urban form; that the building's verticality is emphasized by projecting piers rising from stepped buttresses at the base and decidedly vertical brickwork spandrels; that the base is decorated by a pierced limestone screen set as a series of panels between the buttresses; that this screen was designed by Rene Chambellan, the noted architectural sculptor; that the National Title Guaranty Company was established in 1924; that the building was commissioned by the company in 1929 and remained its headquarters until 1935; that it is remarkably intact and is one of an ensemble of three buildings reflecting the early 20<sup>th</sup> century commercial character of Montague Street.

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 National Title Guaranty Company Building, 185 Montague Street, Borough of Brooklyn, and designates Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 244, Lot 13 as its Landmark Site.

Meenakshi Srinivasan, Chair  
Frederick Bland, Wellington Chen,  
Michael Devonshire, Michael Goldblum,  
John Gustafsson, Jeanne Lutfy, Commissioners



National Title Guaranty Company Building  
185 Montague Street  
Borough of Brooklyn, Tax Map Block 244, Lot 13  
*Photo: Sarah Moses, 2017*





National Title Guaranty Company Building detail

*Photos: Sarah Moses, 2017 (top); The American Architect (May 1930) (bottom)*



National Title Guaranty Company Building upper façade detail

*Photo: Sarah Moses, 2017*





National Title Guaranty Company Building east (left), west (right), and north (bottom) facades  
*Photos: Marianne S. Percival, 2016*

