

PIKE STREET SYNAGOGUE (CONGREGATION SONS OF ISRAEL KALWARIE), 13-15 Pike Street, Manhattan. Built 1903-04; Alfred E. Badt, architect.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 283, Lot 45.

On March 18, 1997, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Pike Street Synagogue (Congregation Sons of Israel Kalwarie), and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 3).¹ The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. There was one speaker in favor of designation. The owner did not take a position but asked that the record be left open.

Summary

The Pike Street Synagogue, constructed in 1903-04 for the Congregation Sons of Israel Kalwarie, is a rare surviving synagogue building from that period of New York's history when the Lower East Side served as America's main portal for millions of Jewish immigrants. Designed by the architect Alfred E. Badt, this limestone-fronted building with its twin, lateral staircases up to the porticoed main entrance, and double stair towers projecting from the main facade creates an imposing presence on the crowded street. The basic form and massing of the building followed a stylistic precedent deriving from the Romanesque Revival and the German *Rundbogenstil*. At the same time, the architect included details which relate to the general classicizing tendencies in American architecture of the turn of the century.



When constructed, this synagogue was one of the largest on the Lower East Side, and one of the few built specifically for this purpose. The Congregation Sons of Israel Kalwarie, started in 1853, continued to worship in this building until the 1980s. The building stood vacant for several years, but recently has been rehabilitated for a variety of uses with a Buddhist temple on the main level, apartments above, and commercial space on the ground floor.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Jewish Community in New York²

The first Jews arrived in the Dutch colony of Nieuw Amsterdam in 1654, coming from Brazil in an unsuccessful attempt to reach Holland. Although the Jews were allowed to stay in the colony, they gained political as well as religious rights only when the British took control in 1664. Around 1682, the first Jewish congregation in New York was established: Congregation Shearith Israel or Remnant of Israel. It was not until 1729 that the congregation constructed its first synagogue building, a small structure on Mill Street (now William Street) which served until 1818, when it was replaced with a larger one. Between 1815 and 1825 the Jewish population of New York swelled to 500, with immigrants coming mostly from Europe primarily because of the fall of Napoleon. In 1825 a group of German and Polish Jews broke away from Congregation Shearith Israel to form their own synagogue, Congregation B'nai Jeshurun. This was the beginning of a trend, as numerous other congregations were then created out of existing groups because of political differences, different interpretations of religious law and customs, or simply because of the desire to worship with fellow countrymen using common rituals. By 1860 there were approximately 27 synagogues in New York City, most of which resulted from divisions within existing synagogues. This growth in the number of congregations was supported by, but not wholly attributable to, the increasing Jewish population which rose to 10,000 in 1846 and then to 60,000 in 1880.

During the early eighteenth century, most of New York's Jews lived close together downtown, indicated by the fact that Shearith Israel built, and then rebuilt its synagogue on Mill Street. Typically, immigrants of common backgrounds often chose to live near each other in an effort to provide mutual support in their new land. As they became more comfortable in their new home and achieved more financial success, they were often willing to move away from the original group. Thus by the 1820s, the area of Broadway, Laight, Charlton, Greene, and Wooster Streets began attracting some wealthier Jews. By the 1830s and 1840s the area around Bayard, Baxter, Mott, and Chatham Streets was home to many Dutch, German, and Polish Jews, while Chrystie, Market, Henry, and Division Streets began to attract many other new Jewish immigrants and became the nucleus of what came to be known as the Jewish Lower East Side. As this neighborhood became more densely populated, synagogue congregations subdivided based on kinship

and on countries and towns of origin, each group supporting its own synagogue.

The population density of the area allowed for the existence of many synagogues in a neighborhood, most of which were small groups which rented rooms where they could hold their services. Once a congregation reached a certain size and had enough financial resources, it often rented or purchased an existing building, in many cases a former church. Among the early nineteenth century congregations on the Lower East Side, only Shaarey Tefilah (1845, 112 Wooster Street, demolished), Anshe Slonim (1849-50, 172 Norfolk Street, a designated New York City Landmark), Rodeph Shalom (1853, 8 Clinton Street, now Congregation Chasam Sopher), and the Eldridge Street Synagogue (1887, Khal Adas Jeshurun with Anshe Lubz, 12-16 Eldridge Street, a designated New York City Landmark) erected new buildings for their own use. Of the 350 New York congregations in existence in 1905, fewer than fifty worshiped in buildings constructed as synagogues.³

Congregation Sons of Israel Kalwarie

In 1852 an important Orthodox synagogue was organized called the *Beth Hamedrash* or House of Study. This was the first synagogue in America which trained rabbis who could perform various important ritual functions and interpret the law. Previously, rabbinic decisions had to be obtained from rabbis in Europe, and special jobs such as the supervision of kosher butchering were left up to the individual synagogues.

Desiring to create their own rabbinic school, a small group of Russian-Polish Jews broke from this congregation in 1853, and formed the *Beth Hamedrash Livne Yisroel Yelide Polen* (House of Study of the Children of Israel Born in Poland). A man named Judah Middleman became their first rabbi, and the group rented a room on Walker and Baxter streets in which to hold services.⁴ By 1882, it had taken the name Congregation and Chevra Ukadisha [burial society] B'nai Israel Mikalwarie (Sons of Israel from Kalwarie, or Kalwarja, a small town on the Polish-Lithuanian border) and purchased a building located at 13-15 Pike Street.⁵ It remodeled this previously residential building for use as a synagogue.⁶ The congregation continued to grow and prosper, and housed a well respected, progressive religious school for children run by Mr. Albert Lucas.⁷ With an influx of new immigrants around the turn of the century, there was a need for more space. In 1903 the congregation moved to temporary quarters while

building a large new structure on the site.⁸

The new synagogue opened to great ceremony in March 1904.⁹ Several rabbis from other important synagogues gave speeches, as did Rabbi Israel Cooper, who had been serving as leader of this congregation for 25 years. The building could seat 1,500 people, making it one of the largest in the area. Because of its size, this building often was used for large meetings and ceremonies.¹⁰

Synagogue Architecture

Except for some direction as to the interior arrangement of several important ritual objects, the Jewish religion does not dictate the form of synagogue buildings. Jewish prayer services can occur in individual rooms, former church buildings, or private houses. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, however, American architects started looking for an “appropriate” synagogue style. During this period, when a style was valued for its associations, both Gothic and Romanesque Revival designs connoted the ancient character of the religion.¹¹ The Romanesque design trends were also part of America's adaptation of the *Rundbogenstil* as it was brought here by German architects and publications at mid-century.¹²

Several mid-nineteenth century synagogue buildings provided precedents which became generally accepted forms for this building type. Eidlitz and Blesch's Wooster Street synagogue for Congregation Shaarey Tefilah in 1848 with its round-arched openings and corbel table at the roofline, was the first to use the Romanesque vocabulary. In Anshe Slonim, architect Alexander Saeltzer was the first to use distinct, projecting tower forms flanking the central section of the facade. These towers served the practical purpose of enclosing interior stairs to the women's galleries. Congregation B'nai Jeshurun built a new building on Greene Street in 1851 (demolished) which was very similar to Anshe Slonim, with its twin towers and pointed-arch openings. In addition, like Anshe Slonim, the three main doors in the central section of the facade were raised above ground level and reached by a set of stairs. Rodeph Shalom, which built its synagogue on Clinton Street in 1853 (now Congregation Chasam Sopher), reverted back to the round-arched style but maintained the twin stair-blocks which “had become a permanent feature of the synagogue facade.”¹³

Near the turn of the century, synagogue architects, like other American designers, were influenced by the return to classicism which became common after the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893. At this same time, archeological expeditions in Palestine were

uncovering synagogue structures dating back to the Greco-Roman period which displayed classical forms. In 1897, the well-known synagogue architect, Arnold Brunner designed a temple-fronted structure for Shearith Israel on Central Park West and West 70th Street which included huge columns, pilasters, and a large pediment. This building set a precedent for the use of classical forms and ornament on other synagogues of the period.

The Pike Street Synagogue

The Sons of Israel Kalwarie congregation hired architect Alfred E. Badt to create the plans for its new synagogue. Little is known of Badt. His name appears in New York City directories only for the year 1904. He is associated with several tenements and rowhouses in New York, including 23 Thompson Street and 118 East 17th Street.

The building for the Congregation Sons of Israel Kalwarie draws on many of the forms and ornamental styles described above. The Romanesque or *Rundbogenstil* influence can be seen in several areas of the building, including the plan, a basilica on a raised basement; the corbel table near the roofline; and the round arches over the entrance, in the blind arcade which crowns the building, and the window openings which are further enhanced with bifurcation. The tripartite facade with its projecting stair towers flanking the raised center section follows a well-established format. Double lateral stairs (with precedents ranging from Michelangelo's Senator's Palace in Rome to P. B. Wight's Academy of Design) lead to a recessed entrance, with openings set between elegant columns. These and other columns near the windows, as well as the classical moldings displayed throughout the facade, reflect the classicizing tendencies of this period.

Description

This smooth-faced, limestone building is three stories high above a raised basement.¹⁴ A wide bandcourse separates the main floor from the basement while another bandcourse (with brackets and extra moldings in the center section) is located above the first story. Above the windows, further horizontal emphasis is provided by a small, round-arched corbel table, embellished by a rosette within each arch. This in turn is capped by another bandcourse and then a larger, round-arched, blind arcade. Within these arches are shallow indications of bifurcated windows, and small rosettes are located in the spandrels between the arches. A final cornice and a flat roof crown the facade.

Base:

Symmetrically arranged, the tripartite facade has twin projecting towers at each side with a recessed section in between. The central entrance on the raised main story is reached by a double lateral staircase fronted by balustrades. The stone newels have simplified arches and capitals and are capped by gabled roof-like forms. A short, segmental-arched window covered by a metal grille is located at the basement level in each of the tower sections. At the center of the basement level, under the stairway, are three segmental-arched openings topped by narrow moldings. Originally two windows with a central door, all three openings are now full length. A recessed area is located within these openings, with non-historic doors leading to the ground floor store and to the apartments in the upper stories.

Main level:

In the center section of the main level, the entrance is recessed within a portico with three openings, defined by attenuated columns with foliate capitals. The columns carry round-headed, blind arches edged with simple moldings which have been covered by panels with Chinese lettering. Within the portico the ceiling is divided into three sections, each vaulted with what appear to be Guastavino tiles.¹⁵ Three non-historic red doors lead to the building's main floor. Two stone lions flank the portico and a large incense holder is located in the middle of this area (all added in the renovation). Each of the side towers at this level has a large, round-headed, bifurcated window highlighted by narrow, engaged columns and a crisp egg-and-dart molding.

Upper level:

Above the main story, the central, recessed section of the facade has three bays with round-headed, double-height windows. Originally filled with stained glass, these windows retain their original shape (bifurcated and topped by a large, circular window), with narrow columns between them.¹⁶ Each side tower contains a single bay with paired windows on each of the two levels. At the lower level, the two rectangular openings are linked by a narrow column. Above this is a round-arched, bifurcated window with columns and moldings, similar in arrangement to those on the main floor of the towers.

Later History

The Congregation Sons of Israel Kalwarie existed for more than one hundred years. By the late 1970s the membership had declined drastically and the synagogue building was vandalized and in disrepair. Some members of the congregation wanted to sell the property while others did not, precipitating a court battle for the right to sell. By 1994, the building was purchased by a developer who renovated it for a variety of uses. The ground floor houses commercial space, the main floor serves as a Buddhist temple, and the upper levels have been converted to housing. The major exterior adaptation has been the replacement of the original stained glass windows, most of which were missing or broken. The building continues to contribute a significant historical and cultural presence to its local community.

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NOTES

1. The Pike Street Synagogue had been the subject of a previous public hearing on September 11, 1984 (Item No. 8), LP-1514. This hearing was continued until November 13, 1984 (Item No. 2). At that hearing there were three speakers in favor of designation. The Commission took no action at that time.
2. The information in this section was compiled from the following sources: Gerald Wolfe, *The Synagogues of New York's Lower East Side* (New York: Washington Mews Books, 1978); Hyman B. Grinstein, *The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York, 1654-1860* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1945); "New York City," in *Encyclopedia Judaica* 12 (Jerusalem: Encyclopedia Judaica, 1971), 1062-1075; and LPC, *Anshe Slonim Synagogue Designation Report* (LP-1440) (New York: City of New York, 1987), report prepared by Virginia Kurshan.
3. Wolfe, 31.
4. Wolfe, 25-26, and Grinstein, 474.

5. New York County, Office of the Register. Liber Deeds and Conveyances, Liber 1658, Page 124.
6. New York City, Department of Buildings, Manhattan. Plans, Permits and Dockets. Alt.796 - 1882.
7. "The Pike Street Synagogue," *The Hebrew Standard*, June 26, 1903, 4. The newspaper was enthusiastic about the religious school at the Pike Street Synagogue, stating that the education of children was vitally important and that in this school it was being undertaken in a modern way and in "a language they understand." The newspaper also praised the plans for the new building, which included "fine and airy classrooms."
8. New York City, Department of Buildings, Manhattan. Plans, Permits and Dockets, NB 265-1903.
9. "New Jewish Synagogue Open," *The Hebrew Standard*, March 18, 1904, 4.
10. One such meeting took place on January 10, 1913, at a lecture by Rabbi Judah L. Magnes. This well-known rabbi had just broken with Reform Judaism and this lecture turned out to be the start of the modern orthodox Young Israel Movement. Wolfe, 90-91.
11. Moorish designs also came to be seen as acceptable because of the long Jewish presence in Moorish Spain. After the German architect, Gottfried Semper, designed a synagogue in Dresden (1838-40) which displayed a mixture of Byzantine and Saracenic forms, these were also used on American synagogues. Later, the Gothic style came to be seen as too closely related to the Christian religion to be appropriate.
12. Kathleen Curran, "The German Rundbogenstil and Reflections on the American Round-Arched Style," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 47 (Dec. 1988), 351-373. The *Rundbogenstil* was the result of an effort by progressive German architects to create a synthesis of classical and medieval architecture by drawing on historical precedents in the round-arched Byzantine, Romanesque, and Renaissance styles. The bifurcated window, as seen on the Pike Street Synagogue, including a large, round arch with a pair of inscribed windows topped by a bull's eye tympanum, was a common motif of this style. Thought by nineteenth century theorists to have originated in northern Italy during the Romanesque period and widely used during the Renaissance, this form became a hallmark of the nineteenth-century round-arched styles, both here and in Germany. See also LPC, *128 West 18th Street Stable Designation Report* (LP-1816) (New York: City of New York, 1990), report prepared by Gale Harris.
13. Wischnitzer, 56.
14. Repairs have been made to the limestone at numerous places on the facade.
15. This author has not yet been able to verify this.
16. All the windows except the two behind the stairs have been replaced by non-historic, vinyl-covered sash.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Pike Street Synagogue (Congregation Sons of Israel Kalwarie) has a special character, and 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 Pike Street Synagogue, constructed in 1903-04, is one of the oldest synagogue structures surviving on New York's Lower East Side; that it was built for one of New York's early Orthodox congregations, the Congregation Sons of Israel Kalwarie, founded in 1853, and served as this group's spiritual home for more than seventy years; that this building was one of the few built on the Lower East Side specifically as a synagogue, and served as an important symbol and meeting place for the area for many years; that the architect Alfred E. Badt used a variety of historic forms for this building, including round-arched windows and projecting stair towers derived from the Romanesque Revival, as well as classical columns and moldings, to create a grand and imposing facade on one of the area's wider streets; that the architectural elegance and historical associations of this building continue to enhance the neighborhood in its present adaptation.

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 Pike Street Synagogue (Congregation Sons of Israel Kalwarie), 13-15 Pike Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 283, Lot 45 as its Landmark Site.



Pike Street Synagogue, 13-15 Pike Street, Manhattan

Photo: Carl Forster



Pike Street Synagogue, window details
Photos: Carl Forster



Pike Street Synagogue, upper stories

Photo: Carl Forster



Pike Street Synagogue, entrance detail

Photo: Carl Forster



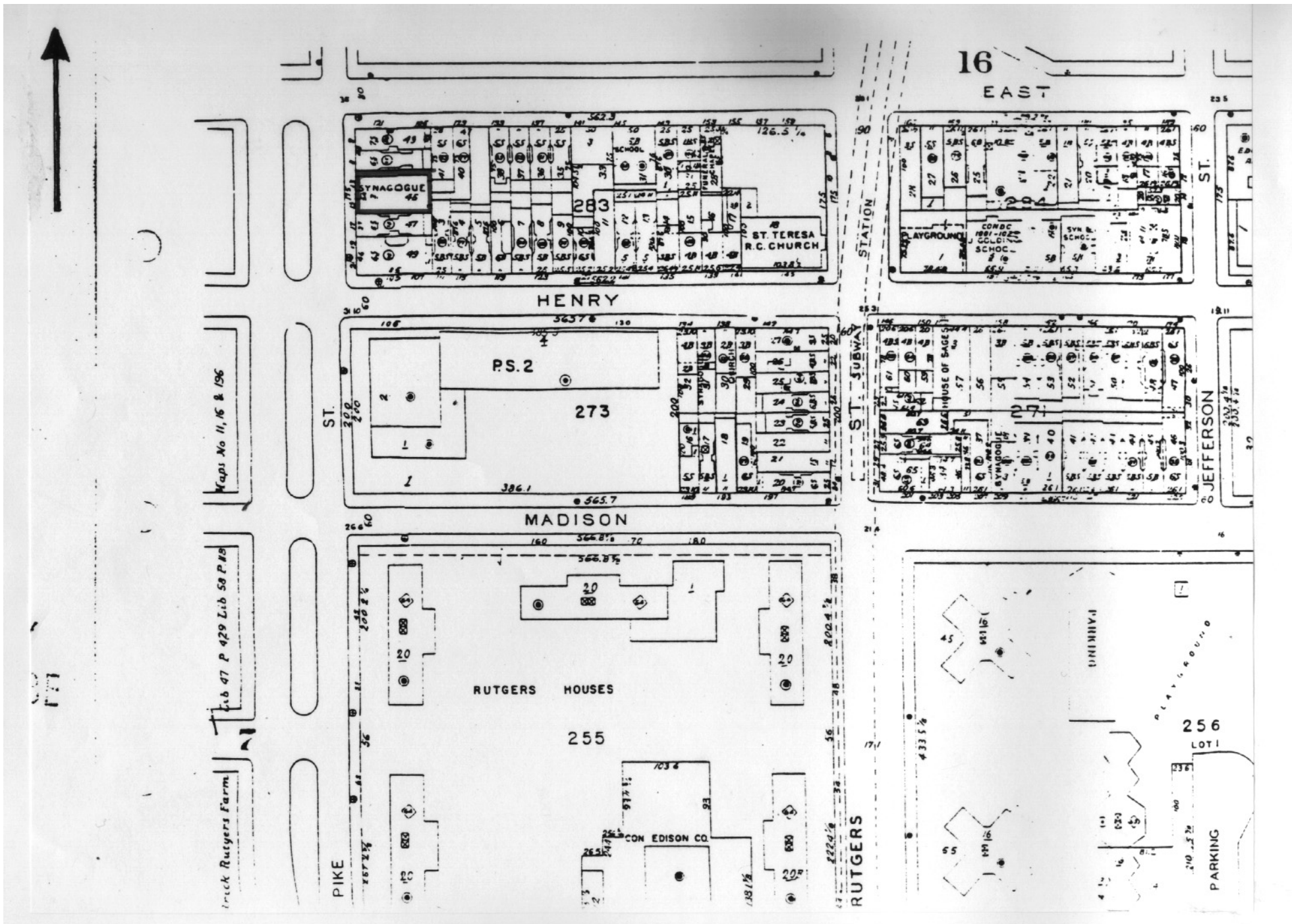
Pike Street Synagogue, stair detail

Photo: Carl Forster



Pike Street Synagogue, stair detail

Photo: Carl Forster



Pike Street Synagogue, 13-15 Pike Street, Manhattan
 Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 283, Lot 45
 Source: Sanborn Manhattan Landbook, 1996-97, Plate 13

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