

AMERICAN TRACT SOCIETY BUILDING, 150 Nassau Street (aka 144-152 Nassau Street and 2-6 Spruce Street), Manhattan. Built 1894-95; Robert Henderson Robertson, architect; William W. Crehore, engineering consultant; John Downey, Atlas Iron Construction Co., and Louis Weber Building Co., builders.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 100, Lot 3.¹

On March 16, 1999, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the American Tract Society Building (Item No. 2). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A representative of the building's owner stated that they were not opposed to designation. Three people spoke in favor of designation, including representatives of the New York Landmarks Conservancy and the Historic Districts Council. In addition, the Commission received several letters in support of designation.

Summary

The American Tract Society Building, at the southeast corner of Nassau and Spruce Streets, was constructed in 1894-95 to the design of architect R. H. Robertson, who was known for his churches and institutional and office buildings in New York. It is one of the earliest, as well as one of the earliest extant, steel skeletal-frame skyscrapers in New York, partially of curtain-wall construction. This was also one of the city's tallest and largest skyscrapers upon its completion. Twenty full stories high (plus cellar, basement, and three-story tower) and clad in rusticated gray Westerly granite, gray Haverstraw Roman brick, and buff-colored terra cotta, the building was constructed with a U-shaped plan, having an exterior light court. Combining elements of the Romanesque and Renaissance Revival styles, the design, with two similar principal facades, has an overall tripartite vertical scheme, but is also arranged in six horizontal sections. A three-story arcade, open at the top story and with winged caryatids at the upper corners, surmounts the western half of the building; a three-story hipped roof tower rises through the arcade, creating a picturesque feature in the skyline of lower Manhattan. The building's visibility is heightened by its corner location near City Hall Park and adjacent to Printing House Square.

The American Tract Society, founded in 1825 to publish and distribute religious tracts and literature, built on this site that same year. It emerged as one of the largest American publishers prior to the Civil War. The vicinity of Park Row and Nassau Street, center of newspaper publishing in New York City from the 1830s through the 1920s, was redeveloped, beginning in the 1870s, with a series of important tall office buildings. The American Tract Society Building, planned as a speculative venture when the Society was experiencing financial decline, was intended to provide it with a large rental income to continue its missions. The Society moved out, however, in 1914 and lost its building through foreclosure. The lower portion was leased to the publishers of the *New York Sun* from 1914 to 1919.



DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

American Tract Society²

The American Tract Society [*hereafter* ATS], founded in 1825, was a non-denominational Protestant organization that published and distributed religious literature. ATS was the first American organization to specialize in the publication of "tracts" (religious leaflets or pamphlets), as well as religious books, hymnals, and periodicals, and emerged as one of the largest American publishers prior to the Civil War. The American "tract movement," modeled after the Religious Tract Society (1799) in London, was established by religious reformers who perceived a threat of moral disorder in the United States from the growth of cities, expansion of the frontier, and increased immigration. Historian Paul Boyer stated that "improbable as the fact may seem today, the lowly tract was once welcomed as an important and exciting innovation in the campaign to shore up a threatened moral order."³ Prior to ATS publications, little religious literature was available in the United States, other than the Bible. The mission of ATS was, in fact, influenced by what were felt to be the limitations of the American Bible Society,⁴ founded in New York City in 1816 to promote the distribution of the Bible.

ATS was formed through the merger of two earlier tract societies in New York and New England, founded respectively in 1812 and 1814. Rev. William Allen Hallock (1794-1880) was the agent for the New England Tract Society (based in Andover, Mass.) when it changed its name to the American Tract Society in 1823 with the intention of becoming a national organization. The New York Religious Tract Society, considering a similar goal, contacted the New England group in 1824 about a possible merger. Hallock, believing that "the great wicked city of New York"⁵ should be its home, was influential in effecting this in May 1825. He was elected corresponding secretary of the American Tract Society and served in this capacity for the next forty-five years (plus another ten as emeritus). In this important position, Hallock was credited with having "conducted the extensive publishing and missionary correspondence of the society, supervised, in cooperation with an interdenominational committee, all of its publications, standard religious volumes as well as tracts, edited the *American Messenger* (1830-70), organized the society's colportage system, and wrote tracts which had a circulation of hundreds of thousands of copies."⁶ The first president of ATS (1825-42) was merchant-banker Sampson Uryling Stoddard Wilder, while banker Moses Allen was

treasurer (1825-63). ATS was further backed financially by such wealthy New Yorkers as silk jobber Arthur Tappan and merchant Anson Greene Phelps. ATS was largely dependent on its endowment and on annual contributions, as its publications were free or offered at a small cost.

In its first year, ATS printed nearly 700,000 tracts, and by 1850 was publishing over five million. New York City had already surpassed Boston and Philadelphia as the nation's most important publishing center during the early nineteenth century, and ATS assisted in maintaining this distinction. The growth of ATS was encouraged by the rise of American literacy during this period.⁷ ATS was also one of the earliest missionary organizations in the United States; this work was carried out after 1841 by "colporteurs" who distributed literature around the country, especially in the South and the Western frontier. After the Civil War, ATS focused its mission on distributing tracts to freed slaves, Indians, and immigrants, and on publishing books, particularly in foreign languages. By 1895, it had branches in Boston, Philadelphia, Rochester, Chicago, Cincinnati, and San Francisco.

Tract House⁸

In May 1825, a lot at the southeast corner of Nassau and Spruce Streets⁹ was purchased for \$15,000 by Tappan, Phelps, and Allen, who declared it to be held "in trust" for the American Tract Society. This lot was near the American Bible Society's Bible House (1820), at 115-117 Nassau Street. The cornerstone of the four-story Tract House was laid in May, and the building was completed in time for ATS's annual meeting in 1826.¹⁰ The architect of Tract House, a member of ATS who donated his services, was John McComb, Jr., the designer with Joseph Francois Mangin of City Hall (1802-11), a designated New York City Landmark.¹¹ Tract House held ATS's offices, committee rooms, a tracts sales room, a general depository, printing and binding rooms, and quarters for the printer and stereotype founder. A portion of the building was leased in order to provide ATS with needed income. Between 1842 and 1846, Tract House and adjacent property were officially conveyed to ATS. The directors, needing to accommodate modern steam-powered printing machinery, decided to construct a new five-story Tract House in 1846-47 on the same site. The first two stories were rented out, the third floor held the depository and offices, the fourth floor was the bindery, and the fifth floor was the printing department (which suffered a fire in 1859). Among

the tenants was the printmaking firm of Currier & Ives. Tract House was altered in 1871-72 (Robert G. Hatfield, architect)¹² with the addition of one story (a mansard roof with arched dormers) for increased rental income.

ATS was affected financially during the Panic of 1873, and entered a prolonged period of decline. At the annual meeting in 1886, a resolution was passed for a "thorough examination of all the affairs and business of the Society."¹³ A Special Committee the following year recommended the "sale, exchange, or lease" of Tract House so that "the Society may occupy less expensive quarters."¹⁴ Nothing occurred, however, until January 1894, when the Executive Committee "decided on a bold course of action"¹⁵ (during the recession of 1893) and approved the construction of a new speculative office building on the site. As noted in ATS's *Annual Report* of 1894:

*the original site has become too valuable to be used economically for manufacturing purposes; the centre of the city has moved far to the north, and with it the leading bookstores and charitable institutions. It became clear to the Committee that the best interests of the Society would be promoted by removing up town, and erecting on the original site a large modern structure more fully adapted to the purposes of the present day.*¹⁶

The *Annual Report* two years later further stated that

*The old site was believed to be a safe and remunerative investment, and so valuable that by a loan upon the land a building could be erected which would pay the rental of other and more desirable quarters, provide a sinking fund to extinguish the mortgage, and eventually leave the institution with a fixed income, after fulfilling the specific purposes of the donors, sufficient to render substantial aid in furthering the general objects of the Society.*¹⁷

Architect R.H. Robertson, known for his churches and religious institutions, was commissioned to design the new building. Demolition of Tract House was begun in March 1894, and a lot on Nassau Street to the south was purchased by ATS in April for \$72,500. ATS moved to leased quarters for offices and general depository at 10 East 23rd Street, with additional loft space at 309-311 East 22nd Street.

"Newspaper Row": Park Row and Nassau Street¹⁸

The vicinity of Park Row, Nassau Street, and Printing House Square, roughly from the Brooklyn Bridge to Ann Street, was the center of newspaper publishing in New York City from the 1830s through the 1920s,

while Beekman Street became the center of the downtown printing industry. By 1836, besides Bible House and Tract House, Nassau Street was home to fourteen newspapers and "numerous bookstores, stationers, paper-warehouses, printers, [and] bookbinders," and several periodicals of a religious nature.¹⁹ Among the more significant structures of the mid-nineteenth century to be built in this vicinity were the New York Times Building (1857-58, Thomas R. Jackson, demolished), 40 Park Row, and New York Herald Building (1865-67, Kellum & Son, demolished), Broadway and Ann Street. By the 1860s, Park Row became known as "Newspaper Row" and the plaza at the northern end of Nassau Street at Park Row and Spruce Street as "Printing House Square." Beginning in the 1870s, tall office buildings, some associated with the newspapers and others speculatively built, replaced the earlier, smaller structures. A group of important late-nineteenth-century structures was built on Park Row (with its advantageous frontage across from City Hall Park and the U.S. Post Office) and adjacent Nassau Street: Tribune Building (1873-75, Richard Morris Hunt, demolished), 154-170 Nassau Street; Morse Building (1878-80, Silliman & Farnsworth; 1900-02, Bannister & Schell), 140 Nassau Street; Temple Court Building and Annex (1881-83, Silliman & Farnsworth; 1889-90, James M. Farnsworth), 3-9 Beekman Street, a designated New York City Landmark; Potter Building (1883-86, N.G. Starkweather), 35-38 Park Row, a designated New York City Landmark; New York Times Building (1888-89, George B. Post; 1903-05, Robert Maynicke), 41 Park Row, a designated New York City Landmark; World (Pulitzer) Building (1889-90, George B. Post, demolished), 53-63 Park Row; American Tract Society Building (1894-95, R.H. Robertson), 150 Nassau Street; and Park Row Building (1896-99, R.H. Robertson), 15 Park Row, a designated New York City Landmark.²⁰

The New York Skyscraper of the 1890s

During the nineteenth century, commercial buildings in New York City evolved from four-story structures modeled on Italian Renaissance *palazzi* to much taller skyscrapers. Made possible by technological advances, tall buildings challenged designers to fashion an appropriate architectural expression. Between 1870 and 1890, nine- and ten-story buildings transformed the streetscapes of lower Manhattan. During the building boom following the Civil War, building envelopes continued to be articulated largely according to traditional *palazzo* compositions, with mansarded and towered roof profiles. New York's tallest buildings — including the seven-and-a-half-story Equitable Life Assurance Co. Building (1868-70, Gilman & Kendall and George B.

Post) at Broadway and Cedar Street, the ten-story Western Union Building (1872-75, George B. Post) at Broadway and Liberty Street, and the ten-story Tribune Building (1873-75, Richard M. Hunt), all now demolished — incorporated passenger elevators, iron floor beams, and fireproof building materials. Beginning in the later 1870s, tall buildings were characterized by flat roofs and a variety of exterior arrangements, often in the form of multi-storied arcades. The period through the 1880s was characterized by stylistic experimentation in which office buildings in New York incorporated diverse influences. Fireproofing was of paramount concern as office buildings grew taller, and by 1881-82 systems had been devised to "completely fireproof" them. Ever taller skyscrapers were made possible by the increasing use and refinement of metal framing. In 1888-89, New York architect Bradford Lee Gilbert used iron skeleton framing for the first seven stories of the eleven-story Tower Building at 50 Broadway (demolished).

Beginning around 1890, architects began producing skyscraper designs that adhered to the tripartite base-shaft-capital arrangement associated with the classical column, a scheme that became commonly employed in New York. As steel skeleton framing was adopted for tall buildings in New York, architects and engineers introduced caisson foundations which carried the weight of the skeleton frame down to bedrock. Architects [Francis H.] Kimball & [G. Kramer] Thompson and engineer Charles SooySmith were leaders in this effort with the Manhattan Life Insurance Co. Building (1893-94, demolished), 64-66 Broadway, credited with being the first skyscraper with a full iron and steel frame, set on pneumatic concrete caissons.²¹ This was followed by the American Surety Co. Building (1894-96, Bruce Price), 100 Broadway, also with SooySmith, which was the first New York skyscraper with a full steel frame, set on pneumatic concrete caissons, and is today a designated New York City Landmark.²² An additional consideration in office building design was to provide maximum light and ventilation, for which contemporary architects devised several solutions, including exterior light courts. The American Tract Society Building utilized many of the successful design and construction techniques of these earlier buildings.

The Architect: R.H. Robertson²³

Robert Henderson Robertson (1849-1919) was a successful and prolific architect who employed the popular architectural styles of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Born in Philadelphia, he was educated in Scotland (he was of Scottish ancestry on both sides) and at Rutgers College, from which he graduated in 1869; he apprenticed in the Philadelphia office of Henry A. Sims until around 1871. Robertson moved to New York City and worked for a short time

in the office of George B. Post, and in 1873-74 for Edward Tuckerman Potter. With Potter's half-brother, William Appleton Potter,²⁴ he formed the firm of Potter & Robertson in 1875. The partnership lasted until 1881 and produced over two dozen executed designs, many in the Victorian Gothic style. The firm is particularly known for Stuart Hall (1875-77), Princeton Theological Seminary; Witherspoon Hall (1875-77), Princeton University; the Baldwin House (1877-78), Newport, R.I.; and "Hillside" (Adam House) (1878), Oyster Bay, N.Y., the latter two in the Queen Anne style.

In the 1880s, Robertson became influenced by the Romanesque Revival sparked by the work of the distinguished Boston architect Henry Hobson Richardson, however he handled the style with a free interpretation. Critic Montgomery Schuyler in 1896 commented that "the Romanesque, or at least the Romantic, phase of [Robertson's] design seems to be so much the more characteristic and important as to constitute artistically the bulk of his work."²⁵ Among his churches in this mode were the Madison Avenue M.E. Church (1884, demolished), at 60th Street; St. James Epis. Church (1887, remodelled), Madison Avenue and East 71st Street; Rutgers Riverside Presb. Church (1889-90, demolished), Broadway and West 73rd Street; and St. Luke's Epis. Church (1892-95), 285 Convent Avenue, located within the Hamilton Heights Historic District. Other works in this style included the Mott Haven Railroad Station (1885-86, demolished); YWCA (1885-87), 7-11 East 15th Street, and Margaret Louisa Home (1889-91), 14-16 East 16th Street, both located within the Ladies' Mile Historic District; Bushnell House (c. 1887), Springfield, Ohio; Academy of Medicine (1889, demolished), 17 West 43rd Street; Lincoln Building (1889-90), 1-3 Union Square West, a designated New York City Landmark; and MacIntyre Building (1890-92), 874 Broadway, located within the Ladies' Mile Historic District.

Robertson also designed a number of town houses and country houses, notably the Shingle style Auchincloss House (Hammersmith Farm) (1887-89), Newport. In the early 1890s, he began looking to the Renaissance Revival and free Classical style, as seen in his United Charities Building (1891-92, with Rowe & Baker), 105 East 22nd Street (aka 287 Park Avenue South); St. Paul's M.E. Church and Parish House (1895-97), 540 West End Avenue, a designated New York City Landmark; the New York Savings Bank (1896-97), 81 Eighth Avenue, an early example of Classical Revival bank design and a designated New York City Landmark; and Fire Engine Co. 55 (1898-99), 363 Broome Street, a designated New York City Landmark. Robertson received a number of commissions for office buildings and skyscrapers downtown, including the Mohawk Building (1891-92), 160 Fifth Avenue, located within the Ladies' Mile Historic District; Corn

Exchange Bank Building (1893-94, 1902, demolished), 15 William Street; American Tract Society Building (1894-95); and Park Row Building (1896-99). Among his later designs were the neo-Tudor style Bedford Park Presb. Church (1900), 2933 Bainbridge Avenue, Bronx, and the Lying-In Hospital (1902), 305 Second Avenue. In 1902, Robertson took William A. Potter's nephew, Robert Burnside Potter, as a partner in the firm of Robertson & Potter. Thomas Markoe Robertson joined his father after 1908 in the firm of R.H. Robertson & Son.²⁶

Construction of American Tract Society Building²⁷

R.H. Robertson filed for the construction of the American Tract Society Building in May 1894, his design was published that month in *American Architect & Building News*, and work began immediately on the large, approximately 95-by-100-foot lot. The designs of such early skyscrapers would not have been realized without the collaboration of skilled builders and engineers. The engineering consultant on the American Tract Society project was William Williams Crehore.²⁸ John Downey, a builder in New York City,²⁹ served as general contractor. George R. Read, a leading New York real estate broker, was credited as superintendent of construction; he also advised ATS on the project and acted as managing agent.³⁰ Keystone Bridge Works, Pittsburgh, a subsidiary of the Carnegie Steel Co., supplied the 2,665 tons of iron and steel used in this building.³¹ The Atlas Iron Construction Co. was contractor for the structural steelwork.³² Louis Weber Building Co. was masonry contractor.³³

Because the soil consisted of clay and sand, with bedrock located some one hundred feet below the surface, pneumatic caissons (used on other contemporary skyscrapers) could not be employed. The site was excavated to thirty-five feet below sidewalk level and wooden piles (tree trunks twenty to twenty-five feet in length) were driven, upon which concrete was poured. The piles were then capped with granite blocks, upon which brick piers were built, topped by cast-iron shoes for columns. *Engineering News* noted that "parts of each of the two back walls, where column foundations could not be provided, are carried on [trussed] cantilevers."³⁴ The work necessitated underpinning and shoring up adjacent structures, including the Morse Building.

The American Tract Society Building was one of the earliest steel skeletal-frame skyscrapers in New York City. The Atlas Iron Construction Co., under contract to erect the structure at a rate of two stories a week, reportedly employed the largest derrick yet seen in New York for such work.³⁵ The structure of the first six stories was in place by the end of December 1894. Ground-story columns are one-story high, while those on the upper stories are two-stories in height, said at the

time to be "among the largest made for structural work."³⁶ Floors were fireproofed with firebrick arches and concrete, while columns were encased in brick. *Engineering News* noted that the outer walls are a hybrid combination of masonry bearing and curtain wall, which was typical of other contemporary skyscrapers: the two major street facades are "self-supporting to the fifth floor, and above this are carried by box girders at each fourth floor," while the side and rear brick walls are "self-supporting to the 13th story and then carried by lattice girders."³⁷ The building was constructed with a U-shaped plan above the ground story, having an exterior light court to the south to bring in light and air to the offices.

Work was largely completed in September 1895 at a cost of \$1.1 million. One of the tallest buildings in the city upon its completion, the American Tract Society Building was only surpassed by the Manhattan Life Insurance Co. Building, the World Building,³⁸ the tower of Madison Square Garden, and St. Patrick's Cathedral. These buildings, however, reached their zenith through the use of tall towers or domes, while the American Tract Society Building included more usable floor space. The ATS Building consists of twenty full stories (plus cellar and basement), plus another three in a hipped roof tower on the western half,³⁹ rising a total of 292 feet. By contrast, among the other skyscrapers, Manhattan Life had only seventeen full stories and a much taller tower reaching a height of 348 feet, while the World Building had about eighteen full stories and a tall dome rising to 309 feet.⁴⁰ The American Tract Society Building represents the engineering achievements, technical innovations, and physical amenities found in the New York skyscraper building type during this period. ATS boasted that "the building is equipped with the latest and most approved appurtenances and apparatuses convenient or necessary for an office of the highest standard,"⁴¹ including steam heating, electric and gas lighting, and six elevators placed in a curved arrangement. There was space for over 700 offices, the ground floor had two storefronts, the basement had four stores with entrances on Spruce Street, and there was a restaurant on the 22nd floor. Because of the building's proximity to the civic center, ATS hoped that it would attract a clientele of lawyers and real estate figures, particularly after the New York City Department of Public Works made arrangements to lease the basement, the southern storefront, and the 17th floor.

Design of the American Tract Society Building⁴²

The two principal street facades of the American Tract Society Building, with similar articulation below the upper portion and five bays each, are clad in rusticated gray Westerly (R.I.) granite on the five-story base, and gray Haverstraw (N.Y.) Roman brick and

buff-colored terra cotta on the upper stories. Combining elements of the Romanesque and Renaissance Revival styles, the design has an overall tripartite vertical scheme (basically the base-shaft-capital arrangement that became prevalent for skyscraper design after this period), as well as vertical emphasis through the arrangement of arcades and window groupings. But the design is also arranged in six horizontal sections, emphasized by cornices and band courses. The tall and massive building appears to be square at the corner, but actually is not, due to the somewhat irregular lot configuration. The original elaborate main entrance portico on Nassau Street consisted of paired columns supporting a decorative entablature, surmounted by a round-arched transom flanked by spandrel sculptures.⁴³ The building employs an extensive amount of terra-cotta ornament on the upper stories, which was manufactured by the New York Architectural Terra Cotta Co.⁴⁴ A three-story arcade, open at the top story and with terra-cotta winged caryatids at the upper corners,⁴⁵ surmounts the western half of the building; a three-story hipped roof tower rises through the arcade. Originally, the top of the building was further embellished with large corner orbs, roof cresting, finials, and a large flagpole. This roof profile, part of a New York tradition of towers and ornamental building terminations, was originally seen most effectively from City Hall Park looming above George B. Post's earlier New York Times Building, and contributed to the distinctive skyline of lower Manhattan. Robertson's arcaded design of the base and top of the American Tract Society Building was undoubtedly meant to make the building a compatible neighbor to the Romanesque Revival style Times Building.⁴⁶ While it is tempting to speculate that the winged figures at the top of the American Tract Society Building were related to the activities of ATS, the fact is that a very similar figure adorned the corner entrance of Robertson's earlier Corn Exchange Bank Building, and was a feature that brought favorable comment.

In the 1890s, the new skyscrapers of lower Manhattan were controversial for their height and exterior design. In that context, the American Tract Society Building was not universally admired. As stated by Sarah Bradford Landau, "detractors object[ed] to the breaking up of the street elevations into six horizontal divisions and to the considerable diversity of treatment from top to bottom. Again, the divisions appear to correspond to the 50-foot segments of the curtain wall as specified in the building code, but without question the design also affirms the architect's preference for a layered, horizontal appearance..."⁴⁷ Montgomery Schuyler thought that Robertson "does not, artistically speaking, take his skyscrapers seriously enough" and was critical of the division of the building's base into two parts, and of the "arbitrary"

division of the main body into three parts, without coherently expressing the framing, so that the design did not "correspond to any actual requirement, mechanical or aesthetic." Schuyler did, however, enjoy the building's termination, which he considered

*the most effective feature in the sky line of the lower city, as seen from either river... This does not pretend to "belong" to the building, or to answer any utilitarian requirement... It is confessedly an extraneous and picturesque crowning member. It has been so carefully designed in scale that it is effective and telling as far as it can be seen, and it would be rather petty to insist upon the illogicality of a feature which so completely justifies itself to the sensitive beholder.*⁴⁸

Engineering News found, however, that "the general treatment of the building by its designer is very good and the appearance is quite pleasing, more so than might have been expected when the great height and uniform width are taken into consideration. This result has been attained by breaking up the surface by bold belt lines and by a bold treatment of details."⁴⁹

R.H. Robertson, not alone among leading New York architects of the day, was ambivalent on the question of skyscraper design. Just a month after filing for this building, he was quoted in the *Real Estate Record & Guide*:

*Personally, I do not favor the erection of high buildings. They are uninteresting architecturally, and the problem of making anything architecturally interesting and well adapted to the purpose, where every room must be light and where there must be no dead wall space, where, in short, you have the minimum amount of pier and maximum amount of glass is a very difficult one. But for these restrictions of course something monumental could be made out of the building.*⁵⁰

Today, the American Tract Society Building is recognized as one of the earliest, as well as one of the earliest extant, steel skeletal-frame skyscrapers in New York. Its design, by a distinguished New York architect, represents a critical period in the contemporary search for an appropriate solution for the architectural expression for a skyscraper. The building's significance is further enhanced by the fact that the original design of its two principal facades is nearly intact, except for alterations to the base and removal of some roof elements, and by its picturesque roof profile. Its visibility is heightened by its corner location near City Hall Park and adjacent to Printing House Square.

Later History⁵¹

ATS's ownership of the building that it had commissioned was filled with "painful disappointments."⁵² The *New York Times* reported in May 1896 that "the erection of the new building of the [American Tract Society] organization [has] caused a large indebtedness."⁵³ Two free-fall elevator accidents occurred in 1896 and 1897; the latter, with two fatalities, was called "the most serious accident to a passenger elevator that has happened in New York City in many years."⁵⁴ The fears about elevator safety affected the ability to attract tenants to the building. Agent George R. Read informed ATS in May 1897 that "the amount of income to be received... this current year... is not so large as anticipated, by reason of the serious difficulty which has been experienced since the opening of the building to the public in the running of the elevators."⁵⁵ By 1898, ATS had relocated its publishing and administrative offices at this site. A later director of ATS characterized the building as suffering from mismanagement and a rental agent that "leased offices to tenants of questionable character which caused many problems and eventually defaults on rents."⁵⁶ In response to its critical financial problems, ATS was forced to reduce its depositories, to stop publishing books temporarily, and to curtail its colportage. By 1913, ATS could not pay the principal on the building's mortgage. After fund-raising efforts failed, the building was surrendered to the New York Life Insurance Co. (NYLIC) in 1914⁵⁷ and ATS moved out in August.⁵⁸ The property was officially transferred through foreclosure to NYLIC in January 1917.⁵⁹

In 1914-19, NYLIC leased the lower portion of the building to the Sun Printing and Publishing Association, publishers of the *New York Sun* and *Evening Sun*, and floor space to accommodate the newspapers was constructed in the light court on the second through fifth stories in 1914-15 under architect Walter S. Timmis. The *Sun* moved into the building in July 1915.⁶⁰ In October 1919, NYLIC sold the property to the 150 Nassau Street Corp., which retained it until the end of 1936, when it reverted to NYLIC due to a mortgage default. NYLIC divested itself of the building in 1945, and the property has changed hands several times since. In 1955, then owner Nassauco, Inc., installed the current flat marble veneer surround at the main entrance.

The American Tract Society Building was originally constructed on Manhattan Tax Map Block 101, Lot 3; in May 1967, the portion of Tax Map Block 101 on which the building stands was merged with the block to the east, so that it is now part of Tax Map Block 100. The building was purchased in August 1967 by Pace College, which was acquiring a number of historic properties in the vicinity. After a proposal to demolish them for a large office tower fell through, Pace University sold this property in 1982.

Description

The American Tract Society Building, with principal facades on Nassau and Spruce Streets, was constructed with a steel skeletal frame and is partially of curtain-wall construction above the fifth story on the street facades and above the thirteenth story on the secondary facades. Twenty full stories high, plus cellar, basement, and three-story tower, it is clad in rusticated gray Westerly (R.I.) granite on the five-story base, and gray Haverstraw (N.Y.) Roman brick and buff-colored terra cotta on the upper stories. The principal facades, five bays each, are articulated in a similar fashion below the upper section. The building has a U-shaped plan above the fifth story, having an exterior light court to the south. Combining elements of the Romanesque and Renaissance Revival styles, the design has an overall tripartite vertical scheme, but is also arranged in six horizontal layers. The structure is surmounted by an arcade and tower on the western half. Windows are one-over-one double-hung wood sash.

Base The five-story (plus basement) base is clad in rusticated granite on the principal facades, which are similar in articulation. The base is divided into two horizontal sections. The first and second stories have a large round arch in each bay (except for the main entrance on Nassau Street), within which is rectangular fenestration on the ground floor, a stone spandrel panel, and a second-story window flanked by colonnettes and sidelights. This lower section is capped by a band course ornamented with a fret motif. The upper section (third through fifth stories) has colossal paired arches in each bay with a smooth-faced granite pier with stylized capitals, decorative spandrels, and fifth-story wrought-iron grilles. Air conditioning vents have been inserted into the spandrels above the third story on the Spruce Street facade and a portion of the Nassau Street facade. This section is capped by a decorative band course.

Ground Story: Nassau Street The original elaborate, projecting two-story main entrance portico consisted of paired Ionic columns supporting a heavy decorative entablature, which was surmounted by a large round-arched transom, bearing the inscription "The American Tract Society Building," flanked by spandrel sculptures of robed, winged female figures. This entrance portico was altered in 1912 (Alt. 174-1912, T. Markoe Robertson, architect), and in 1955, a two-story flat marble veneer surround (BN 2635-1955) was installed. The entrance currently has non-historic anodized aluminum and glass doors with sidelights and transom. The two original storefronts had entrances in the outer bays, with double doors and transoms, while the bays between the main and storefront entrances had display windows above bulkheads. Currently, the bays on this facade contain (from north to south): 1) non-historic anodized aluminum and glass doors and sidelight, and metal signband; and historic steps and transom frame,

with a tripartite window 2) non-historic masonry bulkhead, windows with anodized aluminum frames, and awning; and the historic transom frame, with a tripartite window 3) [see entrance above] 4) historic stone stepped platform; non-historic painted masonry walls flanking aluminum and glass doors and ceiling, transom (now painted) 5) historic stone stepped platform; non-historic aluminum and glass door and window, transom (now painted).

Basement and Ground Story: Spruce Street Due to the fact that the site slopes to the east, the basement level is visible on this facade, and the four easternmost basement bays were originally designed with storefronts that had steps leading down, and were flanked by sidewalk railings. Currently, the basement bays contain (from east to west): 1) service entrance with non-historic metal doors 2) historic bronze shopfront with non-historic metal and glass doors, awning, and rolldown gate 3) non-historic masonry panels and louvers 4) non-historic masonry panels. Sign bands and awnings have been placed between the basement and ground floor levels. Ground-floor bays, except for the westernmost, retain historic decorative iron framing⁶¹ with transoms, the latter all covered except for the westernmost. The westernmost bay originally had double doors and transom for the ground-story corner storefront; it now has a non-historic masonry bulkhead and window with anodized aluminum frame.

Midsection [Sixth through 18th stories] The midsection of the two principal facades, clad in brick and terra cotta, is divided horizontally into three four-story sections that are similar in articulation. Each bay has paired windows. The first story of each section is simply articulated, flanked above and below by band courses (consisting of a stone upper band and terra-cotta molding); the sixth-story windows have decorative surrounds. Each bay of the upper three stories of each section has a colossal molded surround with animal head corbels, decorative spandrels, and a bracket/capital on the central pier. The 18th story functions as the building's major terminating cornice on the western, and western portion of the northern, facades; large scroll brackets, alternately single or paired, flank single windows and support a decorative entablature.

Upper Section The upper section consists of two full stories, clad in brick and terra cotta, pierced by rectangular windows and having decorative spandrels. This was originally surmounted by a pierced parapet, but it was replaced later with a solid brick one (1998-99). The parapet on the eastern half of the northern facade is ornamented by animal heads. On the western half of the building, these stories have a superimposed three-story arcade that is open at the top story.

Arcade The arcade is fully articulated on the principal facades and consists of five bays on the west side and two on the

north. Two-story, three-quarter-round brick columns with composite capitals and corner piers support brick arches that are open to the sky at the top story. There are continuous ornamental moldings within the arches, and cartouches in the spandrels. The southern and eastern elevations of the 21st story have open brick arches that correspond to the rest of the arcade; the southern side has been rebuilt and parged (1998-99). This top story of the arcade is tied by metal braces to the tower, and there are tierods across the arches. One-story-tall terra-cotta winged caryatids anchor all four corners; these are currently bound by straps attached to the building, which are held by metal plates on the east side (1998-99). The arcade is surmounted by a copper cornice, with an egg-and-dart motif and animal heads, that flares at the corners above the caryatids. Originally, large corner orbs were placed above the caryatids; these have been removed. A section of the copper cornice on the arcade's southern side has also been removed (1998-99).

Tower The three-story hipped roof tower rises through the open top story of the arcade. There are rectangular windows on the 21st and 22nd stories; the walls, originally clad in tile, have been parged. The roof, originally also clad in vitrified tile but now covered in asphalt shingles, has round-arched copper dormers on the 23rd story and oculi with arched copper hoods above. Originally, the top of the roof was further embellished with cresting and corner finials, and a large flagpole was originally placed on the western side.

East Elevation The east elevation, clad in red brick, now mostly painted and parged, is unarticulated. The lower portion consists of a party wall of an adjacent five-story building that has been demolished. The rest of the elevation has a shallow L-shaped plan. The northern portion has three bays of windows at the lot line, while the majority of the elevation is recessed with continuous horizontal window groupings interrupted by piers; windows have mostly one-over-one sash. There has been recent (1998-99) spandrel repair work. Exterior piping has been applied to various stories. A large exterior metal vent runs the entire height of the building and is bracketed to the southeast corner.

South Side/Light Court The south side of the building, including the exterior light court, is clad in red brick, now partly painted and parged. This elevation is partially visible above the adjacent Morse Building, and from the southeast, due, currently, to an adjacent vacant lot. Floor space was constructed within the light court on the second through fifth stories in 1914-15 (Alt. 2954-1914, architect Walter S. Timmis). Fire escapes are located on each side of the court, and an arched steel brace is placed at the 18th story. Band courses, corresponding to the main cornice on the 18th story of the principal facades, have been removed.

Report prepared by
JAY SHOCKLEY

NOTES

1. The American Tract Society Building was originally constructed on Manhattan Tax Map Block 101, Lot 3. In May 1967, the portion of Tax Map Block 101 on which the building stands was merged with the block to the east, so that it is now part of Tax Map Block 100.
2. Stephen E. Slocum, Jr., "The American Tract Society, 1825-1975" (NYU, doct. diss., 1975); "American Tract Society," *The Encyclopedia of New York City*, Kenneth T. Jackson, ed. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Pr., 1995); Moses King, *King's Photographic Views of New York* (Boston: M. King, 1895), 326-327, and *King's Handbook of New York* (Boston: M. King, 1893), 412-413; "William Allen Hallock," *Dictionary of American Biography* 4, Dumas Malone and Allen Johnson, eds., (N.Y.: Chas. Scribner's Sons, 1932), 158-159, and *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* 10 (N.Y.: James T. White & Co., 1909), 489; ATS, *Dr. Hallock's Golden Wedding: Fifty Years' Labors in the Tract Society, 1822-1872* (N.Y.: ATS, [1872]); Paul Boyer, "The Tract Societies," in *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Pr., 1978); I.N. Phelps Stokes, *The Iconography of Manhattan Island, 1498-1909* (N.Y.: Robt. H. Dodd, 1928).
3. Boyer, 23.
4. Among the perceived limitations were the length, complexity, and multiple interpretations of the Bible; the required level of literacy of its readers; and the cost of its publication and distribution.
5. ATS, *Dr. Hallock's ...*, 8.
6. *DAB*, 159.
7. This rise was due in part to such technological innovations as the steam-powered rotary press and wide availability of oil lamps.
8. Slocum; New York County, Office of the Register, Liber Deeds and Conveyances.
9. This was the site of The Horse and the Manger Tavern (before 1748), known as the Coach House by 1786, and as Marting's Tavern by 1796: Stokes, v.3, 979.
10. ATS conducted its operations during construction at 3 Cedar Street.
11. Slocum, 54; Damie Stillman, "John McComb, Jr.," *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects* 3 (N.Y.: Macmillan Co., 1982), 134.
12. NYC, Dept. of Buildings (Alt. 798-1871).
13. Slocum, 170.
14. ATS, *Annual Report* (1896), 121.
15. Slocum, 171.
16. ATS, *Annual Report* (1894), 9.
17. ATS, *Annual Report* (1896), 122.
18. Gerard Wolfe, *New York: A Guide to the Metropolis* (N.Y.: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 74-77; Federal Writers' Project, *New York City Guide* (N.Y.: Octagon Bks., 1970), reprint of 1939 edition, 99-100; Edwin Friendly, "Newspapers of Park Row," *Broadway, the Grand Canyon of American Business* (N.Y.: Broadway Assn., 1926), 129-134; Record and Guide, *A History of Real Estate, Building and Architecture*

- in New York City* (N.Y.: Arno Pr., 1967), reprint of 1898 edition, 50-52.
19. "Paternoster Row of New-York," *New York Mirror*, May 14, 1836.
 20. The shift of newspapers away from downtown began after the *New York Herald* moved to Herald Square in 1894 and the *New York Times* moved to Longacre Square in 1904, though the *New York Evening Post* constructed a new building in 1906-07 (Robert D. Kohn) at 20 Vesey Street (a designated New York City Landmark), and the majority of newspapers remained downtown through the 1920s.
 21. The front wall was masonry loadbearing: Sarah B. Landau and Carl Condit, *Rise of the New York Skyscraper, 1865-1913* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Pr., 1996), 224.
 22. The building employed both curtain walls and masonry bearing walls: Landau and Condit, 231.
 23. LPC, architects files, and *Upper East Side Historic District Designation Report* (LP-1051)(N.Y.: City of New York, 1981), 1325-1328; Dennis S. Francis, *Architects in Practice, New York City 1840-1900* (N.Y.: Comm. for the Pres. of Archl. Recs., 1979); James Ward, *Architects in Practice, New York City 1900-1940* (N.Y.: Comm. for the Pres. of Archl. Recs., 1989); Sarah B. Landau, *Edward T. and William A. Potter: American Victorian Architects* (N.Y.: Garland Pr., 1979); Montgomery Schuyler, "The Works of R.H. Robertson," *Architectural Record* (Oct.-Dec. 1896), 184-219.
 24. William A. Potter succeeded Alfred B. Mullett as Supervising Architect of the U.S. Treasury in 1875.
 25. Schuyler, 202.
 26. The younger Robertson was a partner in the firm of [John] Sloan & Robertson after 1924.
 27. NYC, Dept. of Buildings, Manhattan, Plans, Permits and Dockets (NB 538-1894); Landau and Condit, 226-231; ATS, *Annual Report* (1895), 10, and (1896), 123-125; "Out Among the Builders" and "Buildings Projected," *Real Estate Record & Guide* [hereafter *REG*], May 12, 1894, 757 and 770; *American Architect & Building News*, May 26, 1894, 92 and pl. 961; "The Building of a Sky-Scraper," *REG*, Sept. 15, 1894, 353-354; "Office Space and Office Renting," *REG*, Sept. 29, 1894, 424; "New Derrick for Rapid Building," *NYT*, Nov. 25, 1894, 19; "Erection of American Tract Society's Building, New York," *Engineering Record*, Dec. 15, 1894, 44-47; "American Tract Society's 20-Story Office Building, New York City," *Engineering News*, Dec. 27, 1894, 526-528; "The American Tract Society Building," *REG*, Feb. 29, 1896, 343; *History of Architecture and the Building Trades of Greater New York* (N.Y.: Union Hist. Co., 1899).
 28. Crehore (1864-1918), born in Cleveland, graduated from Yale University (1886) and Sheffield Scientific School (1888) and began a civil engineering practice in 1890. He was the author of a number of engineering books. "William Williams Crehore," *Who Was Who in America I* (Chicago: Marquis Who's Who, 1960), 275.
 29. *N.Y.C. Directories* (1894-96).
 30. For information on Read, see: "George R. Read," *Record and Guide, A History of Real Estate...*, 165.
 31. The Keystone Bridge Co. was organized in Pittsburgh in 1865 and became the Keystone Bridge Works, a subsidiary of Carnegie Steel Co., around 1893. It was taken over by the American Bridge Co. in 1900. Victor C. Darnell, *Directory of American Bridge-Building Companies 1840-1900* (Washington, D.C.: Soc. for Indus. Archeology, 1984), 67.
 32. Atlas Iron Construction Co. was in business in New York City in 1891-96. Darnell, 40.
 33. Louis Weber, born in Germany, received an education in architecture and engineering in Europe, and apparently began his building concern in New York City in 1867. The firm became known as one of the foremost in masonry construction in the city, handling a diverse assortment of large and complex projects, including office buildings, breweries, piano factories, schools, hospitals, power plants, railroad stations, warehouses, theaters, apartment houses, and commercial buildings. "Louis Weber Building Co.," *Record and Guide, A History of Real Estate...*, 318-319.
 34. Dec. 27, 1894, 526.

35. *NYT*, Nov. 25, 1894.
36. *Eng. News*, 526.
37. *Ibid*, 527.
38. The World Building (1889-90, George B. Post), Park Row and Frankfort Street, was demolished.
39. The upper portion of this tower above the top story held two water tanks.
40. The American Surety Co. Building, at 21 stories and 312 feet, was under construction but not completed until 1896. The Masonic Temple Building (1891-92, Burnham & Root, demolished), Chicago, was 22 stories. Landau and Condit, 197, 218, 226, and 231.
41. *ATS, Annual Report* (1896), 124.
42. Landau and Condit; Schuyler; Barr Ferree, "The Modern Office Building III," *Inland Architect & News Record* (June 1896), 45-46, and "The High Art of Building," *Architectural Record* (May 1904), 462; *Eng. News*.
43. The main entrance is shown in photographs in: "Some Entrances to the Skyscraper," *Architectural Record* (Apr. 1900), 361, and *American Architect & Building News*, Sept. 28, 1901.
44. This is based, according to Susan Tunick, on information from *Brickbuilder* (1896). Thanks to Ms. Tunick for this reference and for identifying the terra-cotta elements on this building. For information on the N.Y. Architectural Terra Cotta Co. and architectural terra cotta in New York, see: LPC, *Potter Building Designation Report* (LP-1948) (N.Y.: City of New York, 1996), prepared by Jay Shockley.
45. These figures were modeled by a Mr. Miranda. *Brickbuilder* (1896).
46. The construction of additional stories on the New York Times Building somewhat obscured this relationship.
47. Landau and Condit, 230.
48. Schuyler, 217-219. Barr Ferree, another critic, also viewed negatively the six horizontal divisions of the facades, as well as their relationship and variety: "There is ample material here for a good design; the architect has brought to his work a broad acquaintance with his art, and a fine mastery of detail, but he did not understand his problem. There is no structural significance in the design -- simply a using-up of space, and an evident fear of long, uninterrupted lines." Ferree, *Inland Architect*, 46.
49. *Eng. News*, 526.
50. "More Views on High Buildings," *RERG*, June 23, 1894, 1009-1010.
51. Slocum; NYC, Dept. of Buildings; N.Y. County; *RERG*, Jan. 27, 1917, II, 50.
52. Slocum, 173.
53. "American Tract Society's Work," *NYT*, May 14, 1896, 3.
54. "Fall of a Passenger Elevator in New York City," *Eng. News*, Sept. 16, 1897, 183. See also: "The Fall of an Elevator in the Building of the American Tract Society" and "Lessons of the Elevator Accident in the Tract Building," *Eng. News*, Sept. 23 and 30, 1897, 202-204 and 218-219; and "The Elevator Accident in the American Tract Society Building," *Eng. Record*, Nov. 21, 1896, 456.
55. *ATS, Annual Report* (1896), 125.
56. Slocum, 173.
57. Slocum, 175.

58. "89 Years on the Site," *NYT*, Aug. 23, 1914, II, 12. ATS moved to the Architects Building at 101 Park Avenue, then to 7 West 45th Street by 1924, to 21 West 46th Street by 1940, to 513 West 166th Street by 1959, and to new headquarters in Oradell, N.J., in 1962.
59. Ironically, ATS stated in its *Centennial Report* (1925) [p. 11] that "nearly the whole of the endowment of the Society is in first mortgages on New York City real estate and no foreclosures have been necessary."
60. "New York Sun Has Moved," *NYT*, July 6, 1915, 9.
61. Storefront and window alterations included: Alt. 479-1900, Alt. 1593-1905, and Alt. 417-1912.

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 American Tract Society 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, among its important qualities, the American Tract Society Building was constructed in 1894-95 to the design of architect R. H. Robertson, who was known for his churches and institutional and office buildings in New York City; that it was commissioned as a speculative venture by the American Tract Society, founded in 1825 to publish and distribute religious tracts and literature, which emerged as one of the largest American publishers prior to the Civil War and was located on this site from 1825 until the loss of this building through foreclosure in 1914; that the building is one of the important tall office buildings that, beginning in the 1870s, redeveloped the vicinity of Park Row and Nassau Street, center of newspaper publishing in New York City from the 1830s through the 1920s; that it is one of the earliest, as well as one of the earliest extant, steel skeletal-frame skyscrapers in New York, partially of curtain-wall construction, and that at twenty full stories high (plus cellar, basement, and three-story tower), it was also one of the tallest and largest skyscrapers in the city upon its completion; that the design combines elements of the Romanesque and Renaissance Revival styles, with two similar principal facades arranged with an overall tripartite vertical scheme, and the building is clad in rusticated gray Westerly granite, gray Haverstraw Roman brick, and buff-colored terra cotta; that the western half of building is surmounted by a three-story arcade, open at the top story and with winged caryatids at the upper corners, through which rises a three-story hipped roof tower, that remains a picturesque feature in the skyline of lower Manhattan; and that the building's visibility is heightened by its corner location near City Hall Park and adjacent to Printing House Square.

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 American Tract Society Building, 150 Nassau Street (aka 144-152 Nassau Street and 2-6 Spruce Street), Borough of Manhattan, and designates Manhattan Tax Map Block 100, Lot 3, as its Landmark Site.



American Tract Society Building, 150 Nassau Street
Photo: Carl Forster



American Tract Society Building, Nassau Street facade
Photo: Carl Forster



American Tract Society Building, midsection of Spruce Street facade
Photo: Carl Forster



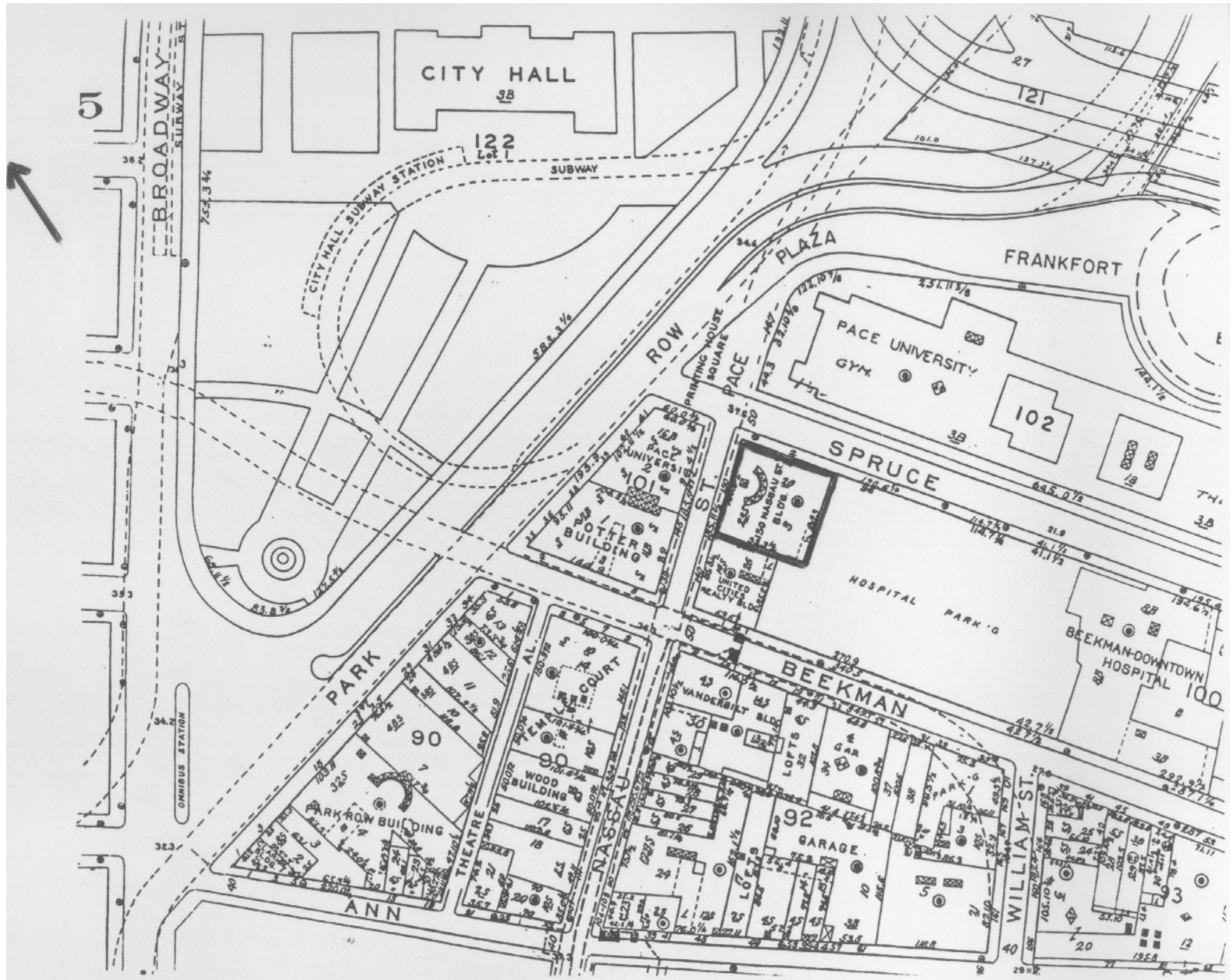
American Tract Society Building, upper section
Photo: Carl Forster



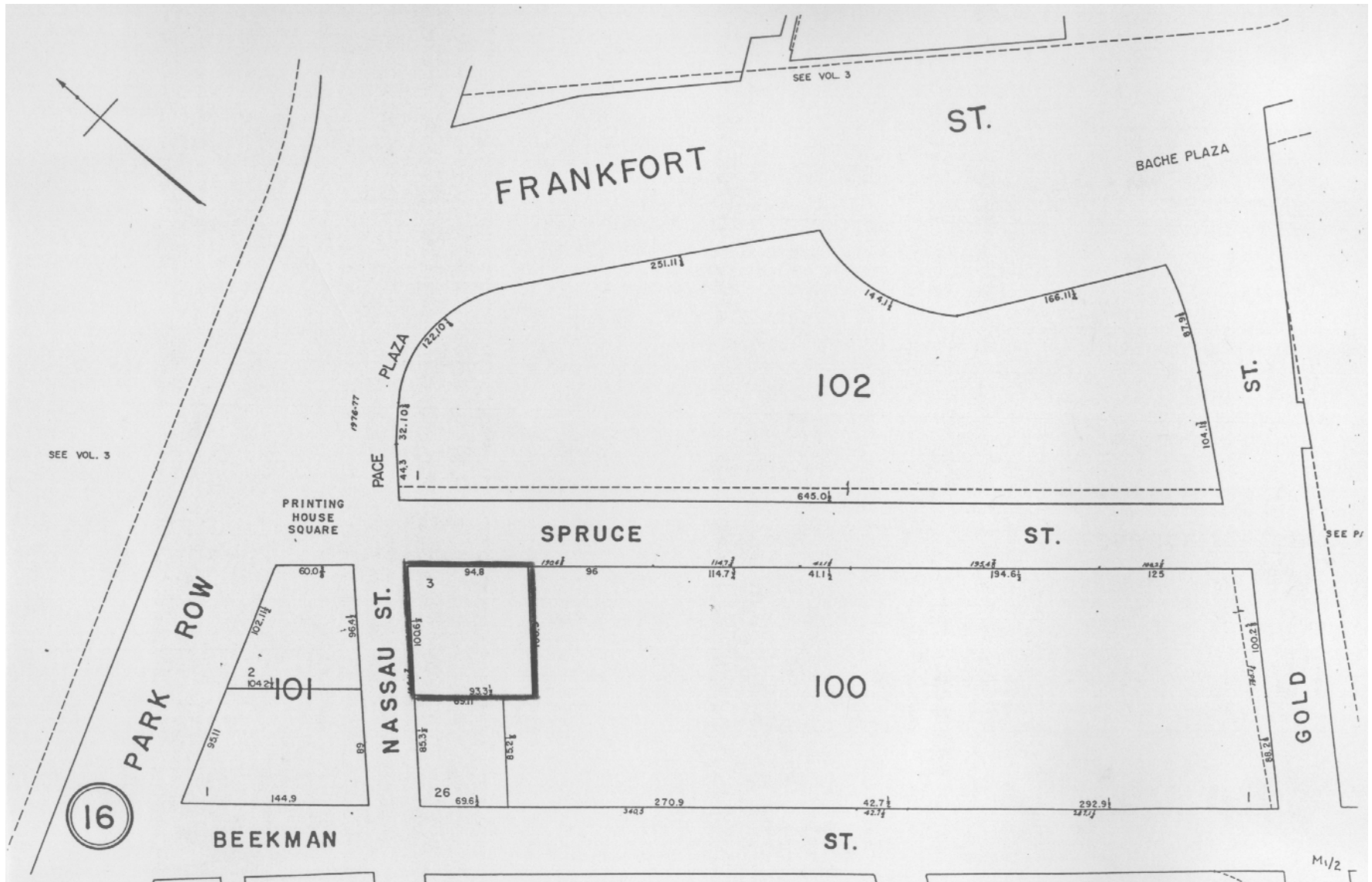
American Tract Society Building, cornice and upper arcade
Photo: Carl Forster



American Tract Society Building, winged caryatid on upper arcade
Photo: Carl Forster



American Tract Society Building, 150 Nassau Street
Source: Sanborn, *Manhattan Land Book* (1998-99), pl. 6



American Tract Society Building, 150 Nassau Street
 Landmark Site: Manhattan Tax Map Block 100, Lot 3
 Source: Dept. of Finance, City Surveyor, Tax Map