

Samuel Gompers Industrial High School



DESIGNATION REPORT

Samuel Gompers Industrial High School

LOCATION

Borough of The Bronx
455 Southern Boulevard
(aka 462 Wales Avenue)

LANDMARK TYPE

Individual

SIGNIFICANCE

Designed in the Medieval Revival style by William H. Gompert in 1924-25, with Art Deco-style features by his successor Walter C. Martin, this 1931-32 secondary school is one of the most impressive public structures in The Bronx.



Samuel Gompers Industrial High School

NYC Municipal Archives

c. 1940

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REPORT BY

Matthew A. Postal, Research Department

EDITED BY

Kate Lemos McHale and Margaret Herman

PHOTOGRAPHS BY

LPC Staff, Research Department

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Samuel Gompers Industrial High School

455 Southern Boulevard, The Bronx

Designation List 529 LP-2666

Built: 1931-32

Architect: William H. Gompert and Walter C. Martin

Calendared: September 20, 2022

Public Hearing: November 15, 2022

Landmark Site: Borough of The Bronx Tax Map Block 2576, Lot 26 in part, consisting of the portion of the lot bounded by a line beginning at the southeast corner of the lot (at the northwest corner of Tinton Avenue and East 145th Street), thence extending westerly along the southern lot line to Wales Avenue, northerly along the western lot line to a point on a line extending westerly from the northwest corner of the auditorium wing of the 1931-32 school building, thence easterly along this line, the north wall of the auditorium wing, and a line extending easterly from the northeast corner of the auditorium wing to the eastern lot line, thence southerly along the eastern lot line to the point of beginning. (BIN: 2003883)

On November 15, 2022, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of Samuel Gompers Industrial High School as a New York City Landmark and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 1). The hearing was duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of the law. Four people testified in support of designation, including representatives of the Art Deco Society of New York, Historic Districts Council, Mott Haven Historic Districts Association, and New York Landmarks Conservancy.

Summary

Samuel Gompers Industrial High School

Located in the Mott Haven section of The Bronx, between East 145th and East 147th Streets, Samuel Gompers Industrial High School (often called Samuel Gompers Vocational and Technical High School, and now Mott Haven Community, Health Education & Research Occupations, and New Visions Charter High Schools) is a significant civic structure designed by William H. Gompert and Walter C. Martin, who served consecutively as Architect and Superintendent of School Buildings for the New York City Board of Education. Blending Medieval Revival and Art Deco aesthetics, the arcaded brick facades and richly ornamented towers make this high school distinctive among New York City buildings.

Conceived in 1921 by the Board of Education as part of a \$25 million building program, William H. Gompert prepared the design in 1924-25, which was approved by the Art Commission of the City of New York in December 1925. Originally called Bronx Vocational High School, it was renamed for Samuel Gompers, the first and longest serving president of the American Federation of Labor, in 1929. The following year, Gompert's design was modified by Walter C. Martin, who added Art Deco ornament and sculptural reliefs that identify the school and its purpose. These changes were approved by the New York City Art Commission in May 1930.

Visible from the elevated Bruckner Expressway and prominent within Mott Haven, the two- to five-story facades are clad with various shades of brown brick and limestone. The primary

facade is marked by two entrance towers that display inscriptions from Marcus Aurelius (*Love The Trade Which Thou Hast Learned*) and Benjamin Franklin (*He Who Hath A Trade Hath An Estate*), flanked by terracotta reliefs. Reminiscent of the kinds of figurative decoration that frame portals in medieval European cathedrals, the stacked panels represent modern and enduring forms of skilled labor, including dignified depictions of men engaged in electrical work. Additional reliefs, in bronze, crown the entrances with heroic images of workers and industry.

Constructed in 1931-32, Samuel Gompers Industrial High School was one of the first vocational high schools in New York City devoted to a specific industry. In particular, the curriculum focused on the "underlying principles" of electricity, which *The Brooklyn Eagle* called "a model of its kind." When the school opened in September 1935, facilities included auto, milling, and forge shops, as well as classrooms devoted to the study of electric light and power. Most of the early students were from The Bronx, followed by Upper Manhattan, and a small number from Queens and Brooklyn. By the early 1970s most students were Black and Latino. Girls were first admitted in the early 1980s.

Samuel Gompers Industrial High School closed in 2012 and was converted to an educational campus containing three secondary schools: Mott Haven Community High School, Health Education and Research Occupations High School (H.E.R.O.), and New Visions Charter High School for the Humanities II.

Building Description

Samuel Gompers Industrial High School

Description

Samuel Gompers Industrial High School stands at 455 Southern Boulevard, in the Mott Haven section of The Bronx. Bordered by East 145th Street, Southern Boulevard, Tinton Avenue, and Wales Avenue, it occupies about two thirds of the block. The facades are clad with limestone, terracotta, and various shades of dark and light brown brick, including vertical soldier bricks in the spandrels. Accompanying features include granite bases, smooth capstones, and corners marked by irregular quoins. In the northwest corner of the site, between Wales Avenue and the Auditorium wing, is a single-wall concrete handball court, painted with a 2001 memorial mural.

Primary (East) Facade

The school's **primary facade** extends along Southern Boulevard and Tinton Avenue. It is divided into five sections: two towers, a two-story center section, and two four-story side sections. Left of the south entrance is the 1931 granite cornerstone. The **entrance towers** incorporate three recessed doors (exit 1 and 2), reached by a single step. Above the doors is a bronze relief depicting *Industrial Trades*. In the relief above the north doors (exit 1), diagonal sections have been removed. Each entrance is flanked by pierced limestone panels with a geometric zigzag pattern. Above the doors, the towers are divided into three bays. The center section takes the form of a slightly recessed round arch with a keystone. Within each arch are limestone reliefs, terracotta panels, an arched multi-pane window, and

a rectangular grid of multi-pane windows. At the base, flanking the limestone panels, is the school's name in capital letters: *Samuel Gompers* (left), *Industrial High School* (right).

The **south entrance tower** is inscribed with eight lines of text in capital letters: *Marcus Aurelius Wrote Love The Trade Which Thou Hast Learned*. Below the quote is a portrait of Aurelius (in profile), superimposed on twin hammers. The **north entrance tower** is inscribed with seven lines of text in capital letters: *Benjamin Franklin Said He Who Hath A Trade Hath An Estate*. Below the quote is a portrait of Franklin (in profile), superimposed on twin hammers.

These text panels are flanked by terra-cotta reliefs depicting various trades. The name of each trade is indicated in capital letters. Each panel has tan-colored male figures set against a brownish red background. On the left side, the panels are labeled, from bottom to top: *Auto, Wiring, Woodwork, Drafting, Industry, Aviation*. On the right side, the panels are labeled, from bottom to top: *Mechanics, Architecture, Science, Light, Motor, Forge*. These panels alternate with griffin reliefs. At top center is a single horizontal panel representing *Electrical Industries*.

The sides of the towers have identical fenestration and terra-cotta reliefs. On the sides that face the center section are three stories of windows and reliefs, including two additional openings at the third story. The outer sides, facing East 145th Street and East 147th Street, as well as the rear side, have single openings, though the rear window in the south tower has been enclosed.

The two-story **center section** is divided into 11 evenly spaced bays. In the center bay, below a double window, is the entrance to a wide passage that leads to a courtyard (not visible from the street). It has a granite and limestone surround, with low relief images of gears and anvils at the upper corners.

Above the opening is a horizontal relief that includes the word *Trades* in capital letters at center, as well as images of tools, workers, trains, skyscrapers, an airplane and zeppelin. A pair of metal flagpoles flank the upper part of the center bay windows.

The four-story side sections flanking the center towers are divided into four bays. Tall 12-over-12 sash windows and brick spandrel panels, with glazed black brick soldier courses, are set within vertical recesses and framed by multi-story recessed panels with limestone sills. The uppermost window in each bay has a round arched opening.

East 145th Street (South) Facade

The East 145th Street facade is divided into 24 four-story bays articulated in a similar manner as the outer flanking sections of the primary (east) facade, and the Wales Avenue facade. The 16-bay center section is slightly recessed, while the east and west sections have four bays. The base is granite, and the uppermost windows have round arches.

Wales Avenue (West) Facade

The Wales Avenue facade is divided into 28 four-story bays. The first-floor windows are partly below grade. This facade is interrupted by two projecting single-bay entrance towers that extend above the roof line. Each entrance is flanked by a pair of (altered) lighting fixtures and non-historic fences. The south entrance (exit 3, closer to East 145th Street) has three steps. The north entrance (exit 4) has one step. Each entrance has a granite surround and three non-historic metal doors. Above each door is a bronze relief, partly obscured by security grilles. The center relief depicts Samuel Gompers, the flanking reliefs contain images of workers. Above the south entrance is the seal of New York City and above the north entrance is the seal of the Board of Education, flanked by fasces. At the top of each entrance tower is a single blank panel. The base is granite, and the

uppermost windows have round arches.

Auditorium (North) Wing

A three-story **auditorium wing** extends into the parking lot. It had a peaked roof and a one-story pavilion (the portion of the parking lot north of this wing is not included in this designation). Faced with brick, the side elevations that face Tinton Avenue and Wales Avenue have five bays with round arch windows at the third floor. The wider two-story elevation that faces the parking lot and East 147th Street has 10 bays. The third-story windows have round arches. It stands slightly taller than the adjacent four-story elevations, with a blank medallion in the pediment.

To the east, adjoining the parking lot, is a one-story brick structure with a partial second story. The first story has three groups of window openings covered by metal shutters (painted white), while the second story has four groups, covered by metal shutters (painted brown). At either end are exits, inscribed *AUDITORIUM*. Each exit has a simple limestone surround and pediment, with multi-pane transom windows and non-historic metal doors. Above the doors on Wales Avenue (exit 5) are bronze reliefs, partly obscured by security grilles. The center relief depicts Samuel Gompers, the flanking reliefs contain images of workers. The brick second story is recessed and has four east-facing windows with metal shutters.

The four-story-tall facades of the main school building that flank the sides of the auditorium wing, face the parking lot and East 147th Street. The four center bays have round arched windows on the fourth floor, whereas the outer bays have rectangular windows. The elevation adjacent to Tinton Avenue has a three-door exit in the right corner of the first floor, with a simple granite surround. This part of the site slopes down toward Tinton Avenue and incorporates five broad steps and a railing.

Alterations: Solid metal entrance and exit doors, grilles above doors, window and air conditioner grilles, gates in center entrance on Southern Boulevard, complementary brick and stone repairs, brick infill in slot windows, brick infill in the round arches at top of towers, cantilevered roof lights, cameras at the corner of Wales Avenue and East 145th Street and at the auditorium exit facing Tinton Avenue, a one-story brick projection with an angled top close to the east end of the auditorium wing, adjoining the parking lot.

History and Significance

Samuel Gompers Industrial High School

The Development of Mott Haven

Mott Haven is located in the south part of The Bronx, bordered by the Harlem River, Bruckner Boulevard, and East 149th Street. Indigenous peoples have lived in the area for thousands of years. The west part of The Bronx and Manhattan was home to the Wiechquaeskecks, a Munsee-speaking people.¹ The first recorded European settler in The Bronx was Jonas Bronck, a Swede, who in 1639 built a fieldstone house near what is now Lincoln Avenue and East 132nd Street. It was here in 1642 that a peace treaty was negotiated between the Dutch and Wiechquaeskecks. Under subsequent British rule, the area became part of Westchester County in 1683. A century later, in 1788, the New York Legislature divided the state into 16 counties, with 21 towns in Westchester.

Richard and Lewis Morris, brothers and merchants from Barbados, purchased the land that would become Mott Haven in 1670. Gouverneur Morris Jr. (1813-88), the fourth son of Lewis Morris Jr., donated the land where St. Ann's Episcopal Church (a New York City Landmark), the oldest existing church in the Bronx, was built near East 140th Street in 1840-41.² As a director of the New York & Harlem Railroad, he allowed the company to lay track through his property to Fordham, where a station opened by 1846. A founding member of the Republican party, Morris' obituary in *The New York Times* described him as "one of the pioneer railroad builders and projectors of the United States."³

By 1850, the area was known as Mott Haven.⁴ Jordan L. Mott (1799-1866), for whom the

area was named, moved his iron foundry to East 134th Street in 1841, where it remained until 1905. Among his fifty patents was an iron stove that burned anthracite coal rather than wood.⁵ Mott was also active in real estate, promoting the Harlem River waterfront as the perfect site for factories of all kinds.⁶ In 1848 he purchased 200 acres from the Morris family, which was divided for sale and residential development. To improve access to the area, a railroad bridge, connecting Mott Haven with Harlem, was built by the New York & Harlem Railroad in the late 1850s.⁷ Mott's son, Jordan L. Mott, as well as other investors, later established a ferry from Mott Haven to 10th Street and Peck Slip, in Lower Manhattan, in 1863.⁸

Industry played an important role in Mott Haven's growth during the 19th century. Janes, Fowler, Kirtland & Company moved their foundry to a site near Westchester and St. Ann's Avenues in 1857. Close to present-day St. Mary's Park, it produced the iron used to construct the dome of the United States Capitol (1855-66).

In the late 1860s, further steps were taken to connect Mott Haven with New York City and points north. Southern Boulevard, the wide artery that now extends as far north as Bedford Park,⁹ was proposed, and named streets were given numbers that conform to Manhattan's grid. For instance, Crane Street became East 145th Street, and Dater Street became East 147th Street. In 1874, New York annexed the area west of the Bronx River, including the towns of Kingsbridge, Morrisania, and West Farms. Prior to 1898 and the consolidation of Greater New York, this area was frequently called the "Annexed District."

The Bronx grew dramatically in the first decades of the 20th century, from 200,500 residents in 1900 to 1.26 million in 1930. Public transit improvements encouraged this trend, such as the opening of the IRT Pelham Line in 1919, which has

two stations near Samuel Gompers Industrial High School, at East 143rd and 149th Streets. At the time when plans for Samuel Gompers Industrial High School were being developed and finalized, almost 38% of the borough’s population was foreign-born, chiefly immigrants from Russia, Italy, and Poland.

Mott Haven was a mixed neighborhood in the 1930s, consisting of mainly Irish American residents south of East 145th Street and German American residents north of East 145th Street.¹⁰ Puerto Ricans began to settle in the area in the late 1940s, principally along Jackson and Prospect Avenues, Intervale Avenue, and Southern Boulevard.¹¹ In the 2020 census, the majority of neighborhood residents identified as Hispanic or Latino (68%), followed by Black or African American (25%).¹²

High Schools and Vocational Education in New York City

Samuel Gompers was conceived as the first full-time vocational high school in The Bronx. This type of school originated in late 19th century, when large numbers of teenagers began to attend high school. Advocates believed specialized curriculums that emphasized manual skills would reduce unemployment and solve labor shortages.

The oldest public high schools in New York City are located in Flushing, Queens, and Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. Girls’ High School (1885-86, a New York City Landmark) is the city’s oldest extant high school structure. In the late 1890s, two public high schools were established in Manhattan, DeWitt Clinton High School and Wadleigh High School, followed by Mixed High School (now Morris High School), the first secondary school in The Bronx. Originally housed in a former grade school building at East 157th Street and Third Avenue in the Melrose section, it moved to a new building at East 166th Street and Boston Post Road

(part of the Morris High School Historic District) in 1904.¹³

The first vocational high school in New York City was Manual Training High School, which opened on Court Street in Brooklyn with 150 students in 1894. The Board of Education later reported: “There is but one manual training high school – that of Brooklyn – in the city. Manhattan or the Bronx should have two or three such schools.”¹⁴ Stuyvesant High School was the first school in Manhattan specifically devoted to manual trades. Proposed in 1896, it opened in 1904 and moved to 345 East 15th Street (a New York City Landmark) in 1908.

Manual or vocational training was also provided through continuation schools, where employed students could attend evening classes and study specific trades on a part-time basis. Bronx Continuation School, the first school of this type in the borough, opened in 1921 – the same year that Samuel Gompers High Industrial High School was proposed. Before moving to 331 East 151st Street in 1932, this continuation school occupied the former Mixed High School building, where Morris High School began.¹⁵

Grants from the Federal government and New York State helped expand vocational instruction. The National Vocational Education Act, commonly known as the Smith-Hughes Act, passed Congress in 1917. This groundbreaking legislation highlighted the national importance of vocational study, while encouraging the establishment of separate schools with specialized curriculums.¹⁶

A Vocational High School for The Bronx

Samuel Gompers Industrial High School was proposed in August 1921, as part of the Board of Education’s 1922 building program. *The New York Times* reported there were plans to build: “thirty-four elementary schools, eight high schools, and one

vocational school. The latter is to be located in the Bronx.”¹⁷ Construction of the Bronx facility was authorized in February 1924.¹⁸

Vocational Education Magazine reported in April 1924 that a “site [was] being acquired at Wales and Tinton Avenue and East 147th Street ... [and] plans were under way for the first vocational school building to be planned and built for boys in New York City.”¹⁹ Period maps indicate that Mott Haven had a mixed-use character, with factories and garages to the south and east of the site, and houses and apartment buildings mostly to the west, bordering St. Mary’s Park.²⁰

Bronx Vocational School for Boys was expected to attract students from Mott Haven, as well as other neighborhoods, including “more than enough excess students” from Manhattan, where vocational schools were overcrowded. Planned for 1,000 students, the four-story building would contain 12 academic classrooms, three drawing rooms, three science rooms, and 24 shops “separated by fire-proof and sound-proof walls.”²¹ The Art Commission of the City of New York approved the design in May 1925.

The school was named for labor leader Samuel Gompers in 1929.²² The Board of Education stopped numbering most schools by 1915, and began assigning names.²³ Though some names were chosen for a school’s location, others referred to inspiring individuals. Gompers was a fitting choice for a vocational school. A national figure at the time of his death in December 1924, his pragmatic pro-labor agenda would shape many progressive New Deal policies in the 1930s.²⁴ *The Age*, a newspaper published in several Australian cities, praised the school’s renaming as “pleasant news ... this is one way democracy builds monuments.”²⁵

In March 1931, the Board of Education announced a new policy in which vocational high schools would highlight specific trades. *The New*

York Herald Tribune reported that this was a “radical departure from the system whereby a number of dissimilar and unrelated trades were taught under one roof.”²⁶ No longer would the city build “polytechnical” schools, but it would consult with industry and labor groups to create more specialized programs. Various types of vocational schools were planned, with a projected seating capacity of more than 17,000.²⁷

Electricity would be the focus of Samuel Gompers Industrial High School. Patrick F. Ryan, President of the Board of Education, observed:

Boys will be trained there to become skilled electricians. The opportunities for trained electrical men are many. In a school providing one type of training as distinguished from many types, it is possible to provide better and more extensive equipment. The interest of employers in the school and its graduates is intensified when the institution is training specialists.²⁸

The Brooklyn Daily Eagle praised the change, reporting that the still-to-be-completed Gompers school would be “a model of its kind.”²⁹ And *The New York Times* called it “the first of a new kind of vocational school for New York City... making vocational training give a comprehensive view of an industry rather than merely of one of the minor functions.”³⁰

The Architects

Samuel Gompers Industrial High School was designed by two architects in separate phases. The first and more important phase occurred in 1924-25 under William H. Gompert (1875-1946), Architect and Superintendent of School Buildings for the Board of Education. Hired in 1923 to reorganize the

Board's Bureau of Construction & Maintenance, he succeeded the innovative and influential architect Charles B. J. Snyder (1860-1945), who designed more than 350 public school buildings between 1891 and 1923.

Gompert was born in New York City and educated in Brooklyn at the Adelphi Academy, Pratt Institute, and Brooklyn Institute of Arts & Science. He established his own architectural firm in 1906, specializing in the design of commercial and institutional structures. Gompert was appointed by the Board of Education in January 1924. He held this position for just four years, participating in the construction of 170 school buildings or additions,³¹ most of which were Collegiate Gothic, a style closely associated with his predecessor, Snyder, as well as various structures at Oxford and Cambridge universities.³² Some notable examples of his work include the New York Training School for Teachers and New York Model School (now A. Philip Randolph High School, 1924-26) in West Harlem and one building at Erasmus High School (1924-25) in Brooklyn, both New York City Landmarks. Samuel Gompers Industrial High School, in contrast, was designed in the Medieval Revival style.

Walter C(hristy) Martin (1887-1977) succeeded Gompert in mid-1928.³³ A life-long resident of The Bronx, he received his architectural training at the Cooper Union in Manhattan. After working with Bronx architect Charles Spencer Clark, Martin formed his own architectural practice in 1914. He was appointed Superintendent of the Tenement House Department for The Bronx in 1918, where he served until 1925, when he became Tenement House Commissioner. Martin was Architect and Superintendent of School Buildings for ten years, from 1928 to 1938, when the position was eliminated as part of a reorganization of the Bureau of Construction & Maintenance.³⁴

Under Martin, Gompert's design for Samuel

Gompers Industrial High School was modified. Martin believed a "pleasing and inviting exterior" was a "psychological factor of great importance in the process of education."³⁵ He added "modernistic" – what we now call Art Deco – ornament and reliefs. The Board of Education reported:

The modernistic type of architecture is especially adaptable to school construction and is embodied in the Samuel Gompers Industrial High School – twin towers are used to give the building architectural distinction . . .³⁶

Art Digest praised Martin's work, claiming he did not "conform to any past style" and the structures he designed offered a "diversion" from typical school architecture.³⁷ Other notable buildings by Martin with Art Deco details include Herman Ridder Junior High School (1929-31) in the Morrisania area of the Bronx, sections of Newtown High School (1930-31) in Queens, and Public School 48 (1932-36) in Jamaica, Queens, all New York City Landmarks.

Design and Decoration

Samuel Gompers Industrial High School is a rare example of a public high school designed in the Medieval Revival style.³⁸ In contrast to many early 20th century school buildings, the architects did not follow Collegiate Gothic models. In what seems to have been a deliberate departure from his other designs, Gompert looked to late 19th century industrial buildings for inspiration. There are no crockets or finials, pointed arches or perforated grilles, just an unadorned parapet with hardly any ornamental projections – choices that were present in his 1925 proposal. Perhaps this style was chosen to evoke the Middle Ages, an era when European artisans learned their vocations through direct hands-on experience.

Of particular interest was Martin's decision

to substitute brown for red brick. In both plans approved by the Art Commission, the overall color was red. Had red brick and terracotta been used, the exterior would have a more utilitarian character, reminiscent of late 19th century warehouses and factories, as well as some commercial structures in the immediate area.³⁹ Instead, Martin chose different shades of light and dark brown brick. While most of the brick is laid in horizontal rows, the slightly recessed spandrel panels contain vertical lines of dark brown soldier bricks that accentuate the building's height. This is particularly evident on the sides of the auditorium wing, where the spandrels are larger and some of the soldier bricks extend from the first to third floor. During the early 1930s, many stylish Art Deco buildings included similar spandrel patterns, such as Raymond Hood's influential Daily News Building (1929-30) on East 42nd Street in Manhattan, and Noonan Plaza Apartments (Horace Ginsbern, 1931) in The Bronx, both New York City Landmarks.

The primary (east) facade on Southern Boulevard has two prominent entrance towers. Though towers were standard elements in late 19th and early 20th century school design, few, if any, had more than one. A possible explanation is that this high school was initially conceived as coeducational and perhaps the towers were planned as separate entrances for boys and girls.

Each tower is embellished with inscriptions and sculptural reliefs that identify the building and its purpose. There are quotes from the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius and the American scientist-statesman Benjamin Franklin that celebrate the value of labor, flanked by slender terracotta reliefs that represent specific trades. Though comparable reliefs were planned as part of Gompert's original design, the imagery was certainly modified by Martin to express the school's focus on electricity.

These crisp dignified images of men engaged

in electrical work are set against brownish-red backgrounds, a color that complements the brickwork. The poses bear a slight resemblance to the workers that appear in Diego Rivera's *Detroit Industry* (1932-33) murals. It seems likely that these panels were fabricated by the Conkling-Armstrong Terra Cotta Company – the Philadelphia firm that supplied similar “two color” panels at Herman Ridder Junior High School.⁴⁰

Martin also redesigned the entrances and exits, creating monumental, multi-layer granite surrounds. Above each group of doors on Southern Boulevard is a bronze *Industrial Trades* relief that depicts two workers standing in front of a skyline. The center portal, which leads to a driveway and courtyard, has a carved limestone *Trades* relief, embellished with gears and tools at the upper corners. Created during the Depression era, these stylized artworks conveyed much-needed optimism – images of men working, places of work, and products of contemporary industry – trains, steam ships, airplanes and zeppelins – silhouetted against a rising sun.

On Wales Avenue, a residential street, the entrance towers are less prominent. A single bay wide, they project slightly forward and above the parapet. These entrances incorporate carved limestone seals of New York City and the Board of Education, flanked by fasces, a common symbol of authority. Above each door (slightly obscured by grilles) is a bronze relief. The center relief depicts the school's namesake – labor leader Samuel Gompers – portrayed in profile, while the flanking reliefs depict workers. Identical reliefs are installed above the exits from the auditorium, facing Wales Avenue.

Construction

The school's final design was submitted to the Art Commission in May 1930, and construction

drawings were completed by year's end.⁴¹ Bidding occurred in January 1931 and contracts were signed throughout the year, with builder Psaty & Furhman, as well as various subcontractors. Max Psaty entered the "construction business" in 1900. His firm was responsible for erecting many notable educational buildings, such as Herman Ridder Junior High School, Hunter College (1940, part of the Upper East Side Historic District), and Benjamin Franklin High School (1940-42, a New York City Landmark).

Construction started in 1931. *The Brooklyn Times Union* described the structure as "complete" in June 1932, but the school did not open because funds were needed for "furniture and equipment."⁴² In August 1932, the Art Commission issued a "certificate of inspection," suggesting that most of construction was complete.⁴³ The Board of Education projected in 1933:

It is hoped that the Samuel Gompers High School will soon be open. This school will do much to relieve the overcrowding in other schools, and it will afford an excellent opportunity to demonstrate the value of a school designed for preparing students for a specific industrial endeavor, namely, the electrical field.⁴⁴

Though the structure was described as "ready" in November 1934, shop equipment contracts were "held up" in January 1935 by the Public Works Administration.⁴⁵ Five months later, in May 1935, electrical equipment was "being installed" in the school's ten laboratories.⁴⁶

Samuel Gompers Industrial High School

Samuel Gompers Industrial High School opened on September 4, 1935. According to *The New York Herald Tribune*, it was the only new school building in New York City that was "ready for occupancy" that term.⁴⁷ *The New York Times* praised the "broad"

curriculum and the practical training offered. Particular attention was paid to the study of neon technology:

This term, for the first time in any New York school, a course in the study of neon lights was introduced. Here the boys learn the principles behind the "Great White Way." They take apart the glittering, dancing figures, the shadow effects and bright lights that blink with brilliant incandescence, and learn how to put them together again. Every phase connected with the installation and operation of the lights found on Times Square is thoroughly investigated.⁴⁸

There were also courses offered on railroad and traffic signals, as well as manual and automatic telephones, radio, bell wiring, burglar alarms and annunciators, the initialization and operation of elevators, installation and upkeep of oil heaters, refrigerators, and other household appliances.⁴⁹

In June 1938, the first commencement was held. There were 117 graduates – all male and predominately white.⁵⁰ One student was Black, Joseph Wilson, a Brooklyn resident who *The New York Age* newspaper reported studied mechanics and welding.⁵¹ Present at graduation was Mrs. Samuel Gompers (Gertrude Greaves), widow of the labor leader for whom the school is named.⁵² *The New York Times* reported:

Among the thousands of boys and girls who will get their diplomas here next month will be a group of . . . student electricians, members of the first graduating class of Samuel Gompers Industrial High School . . . they will stand ready to enter the electrical

engineering field.”⁵³

The majority of early graduates came from The Bronx, followed by Upper Manhattan, and a small number from Queens.⁵⁴

The school’s first Black principal, Cecil A. Benjamin, was appointed in the early 1970s. By this time, the majority of students were Black and Latino, including some who attended a Bilingual Mini-School, which was launched in 1983. Girls were first admitted in the early 1980s. Relatively few enrolled, however, and the student body was still 83% male in 2001.⁵⁵ Often identified as Samuel Gompers Vocational and Technical High School, Samuel Gompers Industrial High School closed in 2012. The building currently houses three secondary schools: Health Education & Research Occupations High School, Mott Haven Community High School, and New Visions Charter High School II.

Conclusion

Samuel Gompers Industrial High School is a prominent civic structure in the Mott Haven section of The Bronx. Designed in the Medieval Revival style by William H. Gompert in 1924-25, it was built in 1931-32 under his successor Walter C. Martin, whose tenure was widely praised for introducing modernistic elements into public school design. Skillfully blending traditional and modernistic elements, Samuel Gompers is one of the finer secondary school buildings in New York City.

Endnotes

- ¹ According to the U. S. Department of Interior Indian Affairs “descendants of the original Munsee now live among the Delaware Nation, the Delaware Tribe of Indians, the Stockbridge-Munsee Community Band of Mohicans, and the Shinnecock Nation, all of which are recognized by the U.S. federal government as Tribal Nations descended from those that once lived in what is now New York City.” See Nan A. Rothschild, Amanda Sutphin, H. Arthur Bankoff, and Jessica Striebel Maclean, *Buried Beneath The City: An Archeological History of New York* (2022), 48.
- ² Frederic Shonnard and W. W. Spenner, *History of Westchester County* (New York History Company, 1900), 151.
- ³ Obituary, *The New York Times*, August 21, 1888, 2.
- ⁴ *Williamsburgh Daily Gazette*, August 17, 1850, 2.
- ⁵ See <https://www.waltergrutchfield.net/mott.htm>
- ⁶ Lloyd Ultan, *The Northern Borough: A History of Bronx* (The Bronx County Historical Society, 2005/2009), 134.
- ⁷ David Henry Valentine, *A Compilation of Laws of the State of New York Pertaining Particularly to the City of New York* (1862), 776, viewed at googlebooks.com
- ⁸ *Special and Local Laws Affecting Public Interests in the City of New York*, (1880), volume 2, 1259, viewed at googlebooks.com
- ⁹ *Proceedings of the Board of Supervisors of Westchester County for the year 1871* (1872), viewed at googlebooks.com
- ¹⁰ “Mott Haven, Bronx,” see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mott_Haven,_Bronx#cite_note-15
- ¹¹ David Luciano and Gabriel Haslip-Viera. "Adjustment Challenges: Puerto Ricans in New York City, 1938-1945. The Writings of Patria Aran Gosnell, Lawrence Chenault, and Frances M. Donohue." *CENTRO: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies* 31, no. 1 (2019): 26+. *Gale Academic OneFile* (accessed October 28, 2022). https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A589697999/AONE?u=nyx_l_oweb&sid=googleScholar&xid=4cfcc49c.
- ¹² See The Bronx, Census Tract 35, in <https://popfactfinder.planning.nyc.gov/>
- ¹³ “Stuyvesant High School Designation Report,” prepared by Jay Shockley (New York: Landmarks Preservation Commission, 1997), 2. The second high school in The Bronx was Evander Childs High School, established 1913. This school was originally located at Olinville Avenue and Magenta Street.
- ¹⁴ *New York Board of Education, Annual Report* (1899) United States, 102.
- ¹⁵ Mark Price, “A History of The Bronx Public Schools (From Consolidation to the Present) (1945), LPC files, 15.
- ¹⁶ Gordon (1999), 67. Some examples in New York City include Automotive High School, Aviation High School, Brooklyn Technical High School, Central High School of Needle Trades, and Brooklyn High School for Homemaking.
- ¹⁷ “\$25,000,000 Asked for Schools in 1922,” *The New York Times*, August 18, 1921, 15.
- ¹⁸ “New Trade School for the Bronx,” *New York Sun*, June 20, 1930.
- ¹⁹ “Plans Started for Boys’ Trade School,” *Vocational Education Magazine* (April 1924), 700-01.
- ²⁰ The land for St. Mary’s Park was acquired by the City of New York in 1888-90.
- ²¹ “Plans Started for Boys’ Trade School.”
- ²² “New Grammar School,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 29, 1929, 28.
- ²³ Price, 23.
- ²⁴ For more information about Samuel Gompers, see: <https://aflcio.org/about/history/labor-history-people/samuel-gompers>
- ²⁵ “A Gompers High School,” *The Age*, August 25, 1930, 12. Also see *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 29, 1929, 28. The first public school named for Gompers was possibly the Samuel Gompers School in Chicago, opened in 1927.
- ²⁶ John Walker Harrington, “Trade Schools Here Fit Pupils As Specialists,” *New-York Herald Tribune*, September 27, 1931, A6.
- ²⁷ *Industrial Arts and Vocational Education*, December 1931, 428.
- ²⁸ Harrington, A6.
- ²⁹ “Brooklyn May Get Industrial High If Plans Materialize,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, September 25, 1931, 31.
- ³⁰ “New Unit To Teach A Whole Industry,” *The New York Times*, March 6, 1932.
- ³¹ Architects’ and Builders’ Appendix, “Bedford Stuyvesant/Expanded Stuyvesant Heights Historic District” (New York: Landmarks Preservation Commission, 2013).
- ³² William H. Gompert, “The Building Program,” Educational Radio Program, published in *Annual Report of the Board of Education of the City of New York* (1923-26), 24, viewed at Municipal Archives of the City of New York.
- ³³ This section is based on “Public School 48 Designation Report” prepared by Marianne Percival (New York: Landmarks Preservation Commission, 2020).
- ³⁴ “Board Abolishes School Post in Row,” *The New York*

Times, May 19, 1938, 23.

³⁵ Walter C. Martin, "Construction of School Buildings," Proceedings of the 22nd Annual Meeting of the National Assembly of Public-School Officials (1933), 70, LPC files.

³⁶ *New York Board of Education, 35th Annual Report* (1933), 116.

³⁷ "New York Adopts a New Style in Schools," *Art Digest* (September 1931), 10.

³⁸ A possible predecessor in the Medieval Revival style is Public School 58, located at 459 East 176th Street in The Bronx. Constructed in the early 1920s, it is a late work by Snyder.

³⁹ Martin told *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* that "the task school officials will face . . . will be to blend a school building into a harmonious scheme with the architecture of the neighborhood." See Floyd Barger, "Modernistic School Claim For Bronx Structure Is Disputed By Brooklyn Man," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, September 3, 1929, 21.

⁴⁰ At Herman Ridder High School the panels above the corner entrance represent knowledge, music, and art. "New Schools for New York City," *Architecture and Building*, March 1932, 12.

⁴¹ "Samuel Gompers School Plans Nearing Completion," *New-York Herald Tribune*, July 12, 1930, 17.

⁴² "Seek Federal Fund for New York City Schools," *The Nation's Schools*, August 1933, 66.

⁴³ A "Certificate of Inspection," August 11, 1932, is noted on Certificate 3940 (May 1930), in records of Public Design Commission.

⁴⁴ *New York Board of Education, 35th Annual Report* (1933), 95.

⁴⁵ "Trade School Ready," *The New York Sun*, November 17, 1934, 36; "School Contracts Stopped, See PWA Blow at Moses," *New York Daily News*, January 8, 1935, 19.

⁴⁶ "Industrial School Outfitted," *New York Herald Tribune*, May 23, 1935, 19.

⁴⁷ "Schools of City Facing Serious Overcrowding," *New York Herald Tribune*, September 7, 1935, 1.

⁴⁸ "Electrical Fields Draw 140 Students," *The New York Times*, May 15, 1938, 46.

⁴⁹ Photo caption, *New York Board of Education, 38th Annual Report* (1935-36), 68.

⁵⁰ "Gompers School Graduates 117," *The New York Times*, June 24, 1938, 13.

⁵¹ He was initially identified as Joseph Bolden of 847 East 22nd Street, probably in Brooklyn. His name was corrected in a subsequent article. *The New York Age*, July 2, 1938, 4; July 23, 1938, 4.

⁵² "Gompers School Graduates 117."

⁵³ "Electrical Fields Draw 140 Students."

⁵⁴ In 1951, the school's yearbook, *Artisan*, listed the addresses of all graduates, viewed at ancestry.com

⁵⁵ "Sex Bias Alleged in City's Vocational Schools," *The New York Times*, August 8, 2001.

Findings and Designation

Samuel Gompers Industrial High School

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and the other features of this building and site, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that Samuel Gompers Industrial High School 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, state, and the nation.

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 Samuel Gompers Industrial High School and designates Borough of The Bronx Tax Map Block 2576, Lot 26 in part, as its Landmark Site, as shown in the attached map.



Samuel Gompers Industrial High School

December 2022



Samuel Gompers Industrial High School

December 2022



North entrance tower, Southern Boulevard

December 2022



Terracotta reliefs, north entrance tower, Southern Boulevard
December 2022



Corner of Wales Avenue and East 145th Street
December 2022



TRADES relief, above entrance to courtyard, Southern Boulevard
December 2022



INDUSTRIAL TRADES relief, above north entrance, Southern Boulevard
December 2022



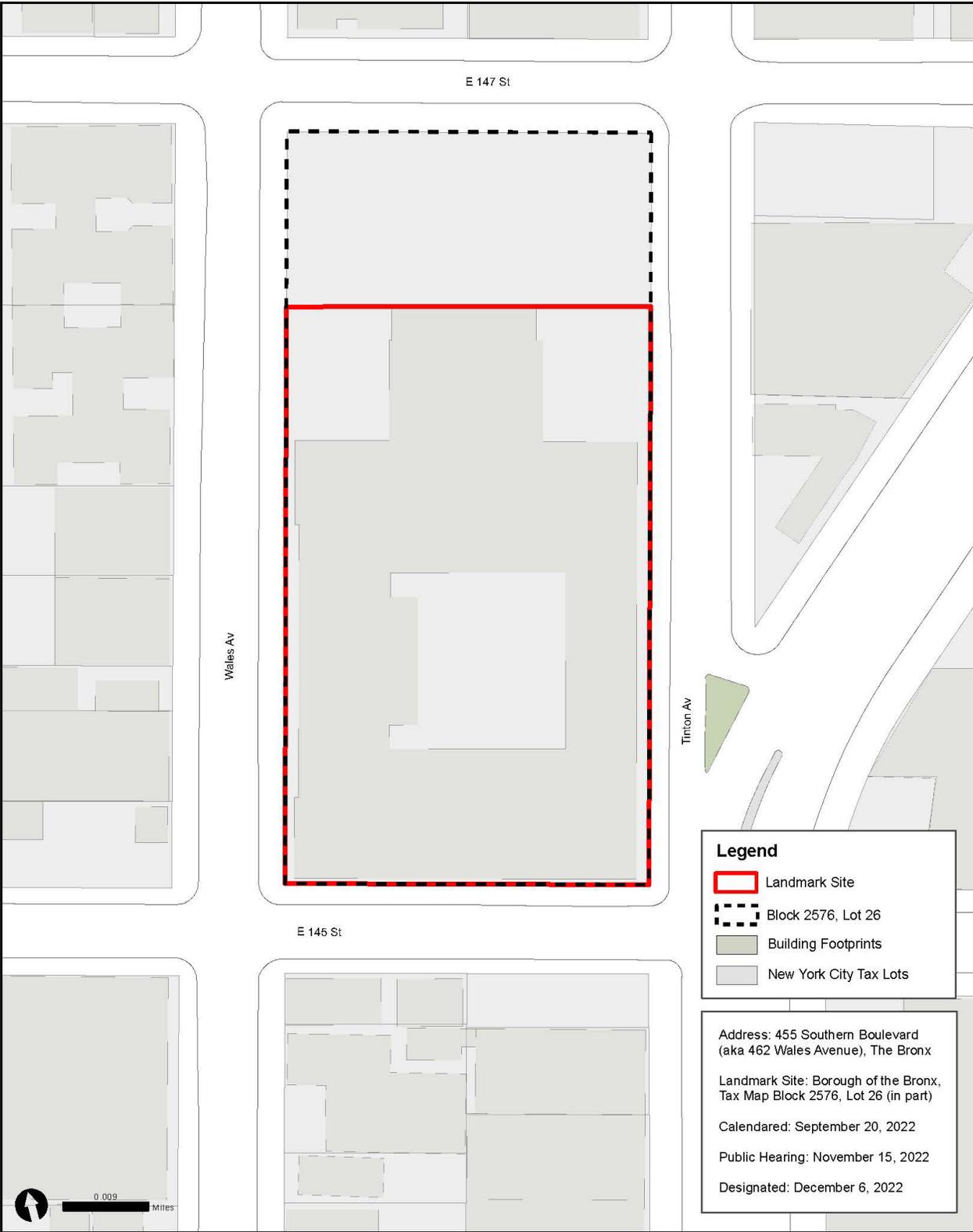
Seal of New York City, above north doors, Wales Avenue
December 2022



Samuel Gompers portrait, above north entrance, Wales Avenue
December 2022



Auditorium Wing, facing East 147th Street (top)
Auditorium Wing Exit, facing Wales Avenue
December 2022



Graphic Source: MapPLUTO, Edition 21v4, Author: New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, DHW, Date: 12.6.2022