

**56-58 PINE STREET BUILDING**, 56-58 Pine Street, a/k/a 26-28 Cedar Street,  
Manhattan.

Built 1893-94; architect, Oswald Wirz.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 41, Lot 19.

On September 17, 1996, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the 56-58 Pine Street Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 3). There were two speakers in favor of designation and no one spoke in opposition. There were also two letters in favor of designation, including one from Council Member Kathryn Freed. The hearing was continued until November 19, 1996 (Item No. 3). There were no additional speakers at that time. Both hearings were duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law.

Summary

This distinguished Lower Manhattan office building, built in 1893-94 by developer James G. Wallace and designed by his company's architect Oswald Wirz, is a rare survivor. The building represents a period of great urban and business growth, as well as technological advancements in the building industry. As a twelve-story commercial structure, it illustrates a phase in New York's progression from four- and five-story commercial buildings to the mammoth office towers which now fill the commercial sections of the city. Faced with brick, stone, and terra cotta, the building is distinguished by its Romanesque Revival characteristics, seen in the round-arched openings, the deeply set windows, and truncated columns, and embellished by intricate foliate panels and fantastic heads. The building's height and ornate design scheme, while typical of the time it was built, give it an unusual and distinctive presence in downtown Manhattan.



## DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

### The Commercial Center of Lower Manhattan<sup>1</sup>

Historically, Lower Manhattan has always been New York's commercial center, due originally to the proximity of the rivers and the trade that resulted from shipping. As businesses expanded, warehouses and counting houses began to take over the riverfront section and then the area to the north. The connection between Wall Street and business was formalized with the establishment, in 1792, of the New York Stock Exchange. The Exchange was housed in various Wall Street buildings until constructing its own headquarters on Broad Street near Wall in 1865.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, businesses needed to keep precise records, a result of the requirements of the expanded service industries of banking and insurance. These operations increased to such an extent that they needed specialized office buildings, separate from manufacturing and production facilities.<sup>2</sup> Lower Manhattan, already New York's trading center, was the natural location for the explosive growth of this new building type during the 1880s and early 1890s. A Lower Manhattan location, close to Wall Street was particularly important for banks and insurance companies and other businesses related to the financial world. Pine Street, during the 1880s and 1890s became home to numerous insurance companies, vestiges of which can still be noted on some of the area's older structures.<sup>3</sup>

### James G. Wallace

James G. Wallace was one of the developers who took advantage of the expanding business market during the 1880s and 1890s to construct several speculative office buildings downtown, near the financial center of Wall Street. The 1898 *Real Estate Record and Guide* called Wallace "a New York builder of the better class."<sup>4</sup> Wallace's office buildings were all twelve stories high, with modern amenities,<sup>5</sup> and included the Beard Building at 125 Cedar Street (aka 120-122 Liberty Street, 1895) and the J. Munroe Taylor Building on Cortlandt Street (1891, demolished), as well as 56-58 Pine Street. Wallace maintained his own offices in the Pine Street building, which was known originally as the Wallace Building. Working during the last decades of the nineteenth century, Wallace was responsible for the construction of numerous warehouses in what is now the SoHo area of Manhattan, as well as tenements, flats and apartment houses on the east

side, between 26th and 59th Streets.

### Oswald Wirz (1850?-1900)<sup>6</sup>

Oswald Wirz emigrated from Switzerland to the United States in 1880; nothing is known about his early life and training. He established a short-lived partnership with Robert Nickel in 1886. A year later he opened his own architectural practice, and then worked with the construction firm of James G. Wallace until 1895. In 1899 he became the head draftsman for George W. Spitzer. He designed three flats buildings on East 91st Street (now in the Carnegie Hill Historic District) in the Renaissance Revival style and designed the alterations for a store and loft building in what is now the Tribeca East Historic District. While working as the Wallace firm's in-house architect, Wirz designed the company's two other office buildings, the J. Munroe Taylor Building and the Beard Building, as well as the Wallace Building on Pine Street. Although the ground floor of the Beard Building has been completely altered, its upper stories share certain characteristics with the Pine Street Building, including its brick and terra-cotta facades, continuous brick piers between recessed windows, and its swirling, foliate designs surrounding grotesque heads.

### Tall Office Buildings in New York<sup>7</sup>

By the mid-nineteenth century, the tip of Manhattan was occupied by four- and five-story commercial buildings, their height limited by the weight of masonry-bearing walls and by how many stairs tenants and visitors were willing to climb. Increasing population, transportation requirements, and business growth combined to put development pressure on the limited land available in Lower Manhattan. Numerous technological advances occurred during the mid-nineteenth century which enabled taller buildings to be constructed. These included the development of the passenger elevator, iron and steel framing, fire-proof construction, wind bracing, improved foundation construction, central heating, ventilation, plumbing, and electric lighting. By 1868-70 when the six-story Equitable Building (Gilman & Kendall and G. B. Post, architects) was constructed, the possibilities for tall office buildings had begun to be realized. After 1870 this new building type gained such popularity that by 1900 ten-story buildings in lower Manhattan were considered small, and ever taller office structures

were replacing low, obsolete buildings wherever possible.

As these new, taller office structures became established as a building type, architects of the period searched for an appropriate stylistic expression. Some architects of the early tall buildings approached the stylistic problem by maintaining a strong horizontal emphasis and visually piling up a series of small structures, one on top of another. By mid-century, arcading -- vertical groupings of two or three stories separated by band courses or cornices -- became a popular approach to unifying windows and floors in multi-storied buildings. By the 1860s the popularity of the Second Empire style led to the addition of mansard and towered roof forms to the top of these structures. Two important buildings of the 1870s ushered in a new stylistic phase in tall buildings. The Western Union Building (1872-75, G.B. Post, demolished) and the Tribune Building (1873-75, R.M. Hunt, demolished) displayed a grid-like wall treatment which expressed the iron framing system which was evolving beneath the surface, allowing for ever higher structures. By the 1880s nine- and ten-story buildings, constructed with iron and wood framing members, were common, often with flat roofs and varied groupings of stories within the facades.<sup>8</sup> During the 1890s, as construction techniques improved, buildings rose even higher. The tripartite division of the facade into base, shaft, and capital, based on the classical column, was becoming more popular. The facades of these buildings were often given a strong vertical emphasis by the grouping of floors within extended sections.

The ornamentation used on these tall buildings varied, and was often related to the picturesque styles seen on other buildings of the period. The specific ornamental motifs were often taken from the classical and Renaissance vocabulary, including columns, pediments, swags, and classical moldings. At the same time, some architects looked to the Romanesque period for their inspiration and used such elements as heavy, rough-cut stone, or dark brick, round arches, deeply set windows, truncated columns, and emphatic moldings.<sup>9</sup>

#### No. 56-58 Pine Street Building

By the end of the nineteenth century, speculative office buildings were answering a growing business need in New York City. While large firms could support their own corporate headquarters, many more needed a smaller amount of well-located office space.<sup>10</sup> Pine Street, in the heart of the insurance

district and only a block from Wall Street, was an advantageous location. The Wallace Building, housed a variety of other firms as well as the developer's own offices.

In 1893, when this building was constructed, it was one of the tallest structures in the area. At twelve stories, it replaced a four-story office building by taking advantage of the newly developing steel framing technology.<sup>11</sup> Increasing demand for space led to the addition of three more stories in 1919.<sup>12</sup>

In choosing the Romanesque Revival style for his building, Wirz used forms suggesting strength and durability, and gave the whole composition a highly individualistic interpretation. At 56-58 Pine Street, the broad, round arches of the first story openings are characteristic features of the Romanesque Revival style. They are linked by groups of truncated colonnettes in polished granite. The deeply set windows, the rough-cut stone found at several locations on the facade, the variety of materials, and the Byzantine-style ornament further distinguish this building as being in the Romanesque Revival style. To all this Wirz added stylized faces and grotesque heads which give this building an unusual decorative character. Set amid the swirling spandrel designs or placed high up on the facade, the faces are not immediately evident, but some study reveals the unique and highly evocative nature of this building.

#### Description

The main facade of this building is on Pine Street, with a secondary facade on Cedar Street. Constructed with 12 stories, as indicated by the main cornice on Pine Street, the three floors of the 1919 addition are set back from the original plane of the facade so that they are barely visible on Pine Street at street level. The original Pine Street facade, of pink brick, stone, and terra cotta, is divided vertically into four sections.

#### Pine Street Facade

Base:

The lowest section is four bays wide, on a raised granite basement which increases in height as the ground slopes down toward the east. The two eastern bays of the basement have vents masked by stone balustrades. At the ground story, each of the four bays is marked by a large, round-arched opening, separated from the next by clustered, polished granite colonnettes. Ornate terra-cotta capitals top the

colonnets, with a writhing, serpent-like figure crowning two of the groups. Thick, foliate terra-cotta molding borders all four of the arched openings. The three eastern arches have replacement glass windows and doors which open onto a store (occupying the ground floor of this building at the time of designation). Three non-historic steps lead to the store entrance, and the two windows are guarded by small, delicate iron fences (not original). Each of these three openings is capped by a rounded awning (installed 1994). Above each arch, smooth-finished stone voussoirs contrast with the rest of the building's richly-textured surfaces. The building's main entrance is recessed within the western bay and reached by three steps of the same granite as the basement. Topped by a semi-circular transom, the replacement glass doors have brass hardware and railings. The spandrels above the entrance arch are embellished by terra cotta in swirling foliate designs, which also incorporate the numbers "56-58." To each side of the entrance arch is an engaged and rope-molded colonnette, rising from the level of the capitals, and displaying a small head at the bottom. They support urn-like forms (the tops of which have been removed) which rise through to the next story and frame a narrow, balustraded balcony fronting the second-story window. A continuous stone sill marks the separation of the first and second stories.

#### Second and Third Stories:

Moving up the facade, the next section is two stories high. Its four bays are distinguished by continuous piers which are faced with alternating blocks of smooth and rusticated stone. The edges of each pier are adorned by an engaged, terra-cotta colonnette which stops just short of the full two stories. A terra-cotta panel, with a face set amid the swirling foliage, caps each pier. Each bay contains paired windows, recessed from the piers. Ornate metal spandrels connect the windows vertically, as does a narrow colonnette which rises through both levels and links the two windows of each pair. All windows on this section and throughout this facade have replacement aluminum sash. The two central windows of the second story have fixed vents instead of glass, and between these two central bays are two large flagpoles which protrude from the building at an angle. Above the third story, a heavy stone cornice with stylized brackets and dentils completes this section of the facade.

#### Fourth Through Tenth Stories:

The third and largest section of the facade runs from the fourth through the tenth stories. This section is marked by four continuous piers faced with pink Roman brick and edged with terra-cotta rope-moldings, which create three bays. Each of the two outer bays of this section has a single window, while the central bay has four windows, each separated from the other by a cluster of thin colonnettes which rises continuously through these seven stories. The windows are all deeply recessed and the spandrels between the stories are covered by terra-cotta panels which include faces set within swirling designs. Between the ninth and tenth stories the spandrel panels are further embellished by projecting hoods, shields and finials (some broken). A plain panel of rough-finished stone is located at the bottom of each pier while near the top of each is applied a large, engaged terra-cotta colonnette with rope moldings. These colonnettes are crowned by a writhing serpent with a fantastic head and large, open mouth, while another large terra-cotta head, rendered with great expression and flowing hair, emerges from the bottom. Between the serpents above the tenth story windows are voussoirs formed of brick and terra cotta. A continuous band course which also serves as the sill for the eleventh story windows finishes this section.

#### Top:

The fourth section of the building is comprised of the eleventh and twelfth stories, with the same four piers continuing on this part of the facade. At the eleventh story, the windows are deeply recessed behind round-arched openings with rounded edges. The four arches of the center bay are linked by terra-cotta impost blocks and a continuous brick molding above them which echoes their rounded forms. This molding is highlighted by three small heads located where the semi-circles meet. At the twelfth story, each end bay contains two windows and the center bay has five, all square-headed and deeply recessed between short colonnettes. Paired, engaged colonnettes are attached to the piers of this section of the facade, rising to the cornice where the center two colonnettes are terminated by large terra-cotta heads. On the end piers, the colonnettes continue above the cornice where originally they were capped by large finials. An ornate stone cornice with dentils and moldings finishes this story, indicating the original height of the building.

#### Addition:

Of the 1919 addition, which is three stories high



and faced in yellow brick, only the historic copper cornice and a portion of the historic chimney on the eastern side of the building are visible at street level.

#### Cedar Street Facade

The secondary facade on Cedar Street is a simpler version of the Pine Street facade, finished in the same pink brick, stone, and terra cotta. Four large brick piers rise from granite bases through the twelfth story, creating three bays, symmetrically arranged. Vertically, the building has five sections, including the top section which was the addition of 1919.

##### Base:

On the ground floor is a central service entrance with storefronts on either side. Reached by two steps down, the western storefront has a non-historic facade, and a plain wooden cornice above it. The storefront on the east retains its original door and window framing and is topped by an original metal cornice with swirling, foliate designs. In the center bay, a replacement door set within a cement panel retains its original terra-cotta surround and terra-cotta spandrel, embellished by two cherubim with intertwined fish tails. To each side and near the top of the entranceway are two ornamented, engaged colonnettes. These colonnettes carry urns which serve as end elements for the balustrade that fronts the center window of the second story.

##### Second and Third Stories:

The second and third stories comprise the second section of this facade. The four continuous piers are faced with alternating blocks of smooth and rough-cut stone. The central bay has one window, while the side bays have three windows each. Recessed from the piers, the windows are linked within the side bays by thin engaged colonnettes which span both stories. Between the floors, the spandrels are marked by flat balustrades. The windows of this section are large, with double-hung sash. A stone cornice finishes this section of the facade. Just below the cornice, each pier is capped by a terra-cotta panel with foliate designs swirling around a fantastic head.

##### Fourth Through Tenth Stories:

The next section extends from the fourth through the tenth stories. The main piers continue, faced in brick, with additional narrow piers between the three windows of each side bay. A narrow terra-cotta

molding borders the larger piers, while the narrow piers have rounded corners leading to the deeply recessed windows. Above the fourth story, the windows have replacement metal sash. Each window has a stone sill with dentils and terra-cotta voussoirs above it. At the tenth story, the narrow piers are capped by fantastic heads. (The head on the westernmost pier has been replaced by corbelled yellow brick.) Just above this, the larger piers are topped by larger heads with snakes entwined around them. Brick and terra-cotta voussoirs fill the intervening spaces. A large cornice crowns this section of the building.

##### Top:

At the eleventh story the same three bays continue, framed by grouped colonnettes. The wider, side bays have four windows, separated by single colonnettes. The windows are so deeply recessed that they are not visible from the street. A large, projecting stone cornice crowns this section of the building, originally the top of the structure.

##### Addition:

The two stories which rise above this were part of the later addition. Faced with yellow brick, these floors are identical to each other but do not relate to those below them. Nine windows are spaced evenly across each story. A continuous terra-cotta lintel, its squared lines reflecting the window shapes, is the only ornamentation on this section. A plain bronze cornice finishes the building.

#### Conclusion

The 56-58 Pine Street Building continues to serve as a reminder of the late nineteenth century, when commercial growth and advancements in building technology were beginning to transform Lower Manhattan into the skyscraper district it is today. The building's unusual decorative scheme, including Romanesque-inspired designs in brick and terra cotta, ornate patterns, and fantastic heads, creates a distinctive facade amid its towering neighbors.

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#### *NOTES*

1. Background information on early Manhattan development patterns can be found in M. Christine Boyer, *Manhattan Manners, Architecture and Style, 1850-1900* (New York: Rizzoli, 1985), 27-42, and Charles Lockwood, *Manhattan Moves Uptown* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1976), 1-29.
2. Sarah Bradford Landau and Carl Condit, *The Rise of the New York Skyscraper* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 5. It wasn't until 1875 that the New York City Department of Buildings created the category of "Office Building."
3. A building two doors away from 56-58 Pine Street bears the inscription "The New Caledonian Insurance Company" and around the corner on Cedar and William Street is the Germania Insurance Company. In *King's Handbook of New York* (Boston: Moses King, 1892), numerous insurance companies are listed, many with photographs, with addresses on Pine Street (pp. 595-613), including The Lancashire Insurance Company, The Northern Assurance Company, and the Guardian Assurance Company.
4. *A History of Real Estate, Building and Architecture in New York City* (New York: Arno Press, 1967), 349.
5. For the most modern buildings at this time, this would include fast, safe elevators, the latest plumbing improvements, electric lights, steam heat and good ventilation, as well as quality materials on the interior appointments.
6. Information about Oswald Wirz was compiled from Dennis Steadman Francis, *Architects in Practice New York City, 1840-1900* (New York: Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records, 1979), 83; and "Oswald Wirz Obituary," *New York Times*, Oct. 25, 1900, 2.
7. Much of the information in this section is from Landau and Condit, as well as Robert A.M. Stern, et al., *New York 1900, Metropolitan Architecture and Urbanism 1890-1915* (New York: Rizzoli, 1983), 147-164; and Alan Gowans, *Styles and Types of North American Architecture, Social Function and Cultural Expression* (New York: Icon Editions, 1992), 202-206.
8. Iron skeleton framing was first used in New York on the first seven stories of the eleven-story Tower Building (1888-89, Bradford Lee Gilbert, demolished).
9. The Romanesque Revival style became popular in this country as a result of the influence of Henry Hobson Richardson, and his work of the 1880s. The style was applied to a variety of structures including: domestic and educational buildings; warehouses (such as the Archives Apartments, originally the U. S. Federal Building, 1892-93, a New York City Landmark); theaters (the Auditorium Building in Chicago, 1886-89); and office buildings, including 56 Pine Street.
10. When the Equitable Building showed, in 1870, that office buildings could be profitable, real estate investment in this type of construction grew. One of the earliest speculatively-built office structures, the Morse Building (Silliman & Farnsworth, 1878-80) still survives at Beekman and Nassau streets.
11. Although original drawings for this building were not available, docket books at the New York City, Department of Buildings, Manhattan, note that it was to be constructed with steel framing. NB 903 - 1893. The four-story office building to the west of 56 Pine Street and the five-story Down Town Association Building to the east were both extant when this building was constructed and are typical of the type of buildings which predominated in the area.
12. New York City, Department of Buildings, Manhattan, Plans, Permits and Dockets (Alt. 3167-19). Application to add three stories to the existing building. At the time the building was owned by U.S. Food Products Corporation, distillers of alcohol and spirits, and contained a restaurant as well as offices. The architect for the addition was Kaufman & Levine. Because of the high demand for office space in Lower Manhattan after World War I, many older buildings were enlarged or rebuilt.

## **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 56-58 Pine Street Building has a special character and a special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that the 56-58 Pine Street Building, constructed in 1893-94, is a rare surviving example of an early office building in downtown Manhattan; that the twelve-story building created by architect Oswald Wirz used the latest technological developments, such as steel framing, in its construction; that the developer, James G. Wallace, for whom the building was originally named, constructed this speculative office building during a period of tremendous business and commercial growth in Lower Manhattan; that Wirz, in using the round arches, recessed windows and truncated columns of the Romanesque revival style, created a distinctive decorative program, featuring highly stylized foliate forms, decorated colonnettes, and fantastic faces and heads; that this building continues to add its distinctive presence to the downtown Manhattan business district.

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 56-58 Pine Street Building, 56-58 Pine Street (aka 26-28 Cedar Street), and designates Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 41, Lot 19 as its Landmark Site.



56-58 Pine Street Building, Pine Street facade

*Photo: Carl Forster*



56-58 Pine Street Building, ground story, Pine Street facade

*Photo: Carl Forster*



56-58 Pine Street Building, 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> stores, Pine Street facade

*Photo: Carl Forster*



56-58 Pine Street Building, 1919 addition (Pine Street facade) as seen from neighboring building (minimally visible from street)

*Photo: Carl Forster*





56-58 Pine Street Building, Cedar Street facade

*Photo: Carl Forster*





56-58 Pine Street Building, 1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> stories, Cedar Street facade

*Photo: Carl Forster*



56-58 Pine Street Building, 1919 addition (Cedar Street facade)

*Photo: Carl Forster*



56-58 Pine Street Building, Pine Street entrance



56-58 Pine Street Building, ground story detail, Pine Street facade

*Photos: Carl Forster*



56-58 Pine Street Building, spandrel detail, 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> stories, Pine Street facade



56-58 Pine Street Building, terra-cotta detail, top of 3rd story, Pine Street facade

*Photos: Carl Forster*





56-58 Pine Street Building, details, 7<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> stories, Pine Street facade



56-58 Pine Street Building, hood detail, 9<sup>th</sup> story, Pine Street facade

*Photos: Carl Forster*



56-58 Pine Street Building, details, 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> stories, Pine Street facade



56-58 Pine Street Building, details 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> stories, Pine Street facade

*Photos: Carl Forster*



56-58 Pine Street Building, entrance detail, Cedar Street facade



56-58 Pine Street Building, spandrel detail 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> stories, Cedar Street facade

*Photos: Carl Forster*

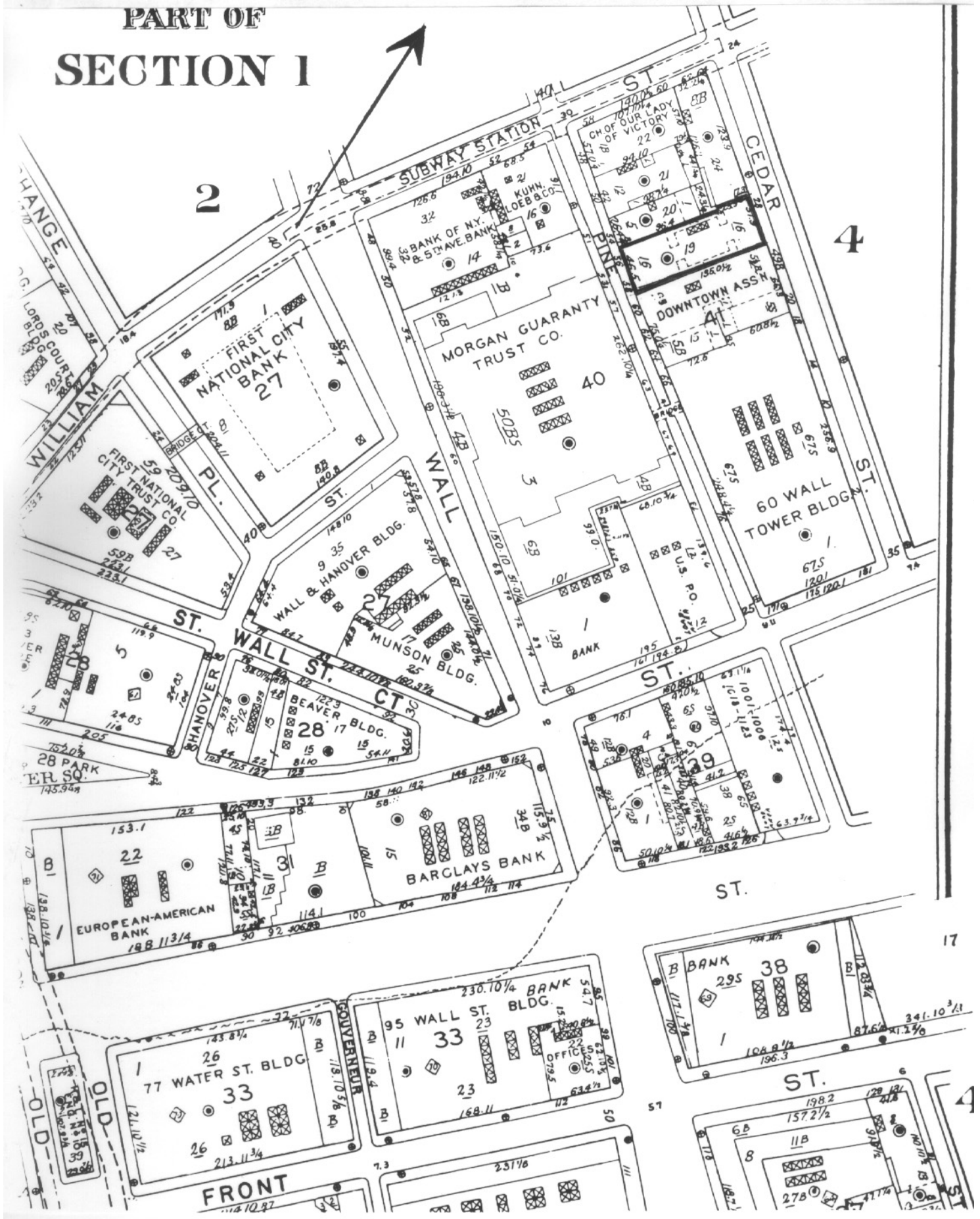


56-58 Pine Street Building, terra-cotta detail, 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> stories, Cedar Street facade

*Photo: Carl Forster*



# PART OF SECTION 1



56-58 Pine Street Building, 56-58 Pine Street  
(aka 26-28 Cedar Street), Manhattan

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 41, Lot 19

Source: Sanborn Manhattan Landbook, 1994-95, Plate 1

