

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service



1048

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "X" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen
other names/site number Berkeley School

2. Location

street & number 20 West 44th Street [] not for publication
city or town New York [] vicinity
state New York code NY county New York code 061 zip code 10036

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this [X] nomination [] request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements as set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property [X] meets [] does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant [X] nationally [] statewide [] locally. ([] see continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Russ A Purpant DSHPD
Signature of certifying official/Title

9/18/08
Date

New York State Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property [] meets [] does not meet the National Register criteria. ([] see continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

- entered in the National Register [] see continuation sheet
- determined eligible for the National Register [] see continuation sheet
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register
- other (explain) _____

Edson W. Boell
Signature of the Keeper

11.12.08
date of action

General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen
Name of Property

New York County, New York
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(check as many boxes as apply)

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	buildings
_____	_____	sites
_____	_____	structures
_____	_____	objects
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	TOTAL

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

N/A

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(enter categories from instructions)

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

EDUCATION: school, library

EDUCATION: school, library

SOCIAL: meeting hall

SOCIAL: meeting hall

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)

Late 19th and 20th Century Revivals: Beaux Arts

foundation _____

walls Limestone.

Brick. Terra Cotta.

roof Asphalt.

other _____

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets)

General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen
Name of Property

New York County, New York
County and State

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or that represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all boxes that apply.)

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location
- C** a birthplace or grave
- D** a cemetery
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure
- F** a commemorative property
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by historic American Building Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other repository: General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen Library

Areas of Significance:

(Enter categories from instructions)

Education

Social History

Architecture

Period of Significance:

1890-1958

Significant Dates:

1890

1899. 1903-05

1923

Significant Person:

n/a

Cultural Affiliation:

n/a

Architect/Builder:

Lamb & Rich (original building)

Townsend, Ralph S. (addition)

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 7 Page 1

General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

Description of Building

The General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen building is a seven story, seven bay wide, Beaux Arts and Italian Renaissance Revival building on the south side of West 44th St. between Fifth and Sixth avenues in New York City, New York County, NY. The building fits into the general late-nineteenth-century development pattern and complements the other architect-designed buildings on the block which has several private clubs and hotels including the Beaux-Arts Algonquin Hotel at no. 59 (1902), the neo-Georgian Harvard Club at no. 27 (1893-94; NR listed), the Beaux-Arts New York Yacht Club at no. 37 (1899-1900; NHL and NR), the Neo-Classical Association of the Bar of the City of New York at no. 42 (1895; NR listed), the Royalton Hotel at no. 44 (1897), the Penn Club at no. 30 (1900), and the City Club at no. 55 (1904).

The building as it appears today is actually the result of two building campaigns. It was originally built in 1890 for the Berkeley School for Boys, a private school. It was designed by Lamb & Rich, one of the city's most prominent and prolific architectural firms in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, as a four-story plus basement, seven bay wide Renaissance Revival structure. A wide frieze over the three slightly recessed central bays is a reproduction of a portion of the Parthenon frieze from casts once in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.¹

The General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen acquired the building in 1899, at which time major alterations were made. Ralph Samuel Townsend, another well-known New York City architect, carried out the renovations to the building from 1903 to 1905. Andrew Carnegie, General Society member, paid for the changes to accommodate the General Society programs. The alterations made by Townsend involved removing the existing top story of the building including an elaborate modillioned cornice and frieze and adding three new stories (now five, six and seven) faced with yellow Roman brick, and adding two flanking classroom wings to the rear. In addition, elaborate cast and wrought iron fire escapes were added to the outer bays of the façade and extend from the second to the seventh story. Corinthian order engaged columns and flanking pilasters were installed in the central bays spanning the fifth and sixth stories directly over Ionic engaged columns and flanking pilasters spanning the third and fourth stories, while four single story Doric pilasters separate the central bays on the seventh story.

The symmetrical façade has a two-story base of rusticated limestone surmounted by double height side pavilions with round arches, flanking a slightly recessed three bay central portion with two tiers of double height columns. An attic story completes the composition. The primary story is punctuated with six bronze display cases flanking the centrally located bronze doors in a two story recessed round arch with an elaborate stained glass window in the arch. There are two sets of double service doors on either side of the bronze display cases. Immediately to the right of the entrance is a bronze plaque with the General Society's coat of arms. The remaining windows on the second story are four small leaded glass double hung sash windows with splayed lintels, or voussoirs, at the center flanking the stained glass window and four larger one-over-one double hung

¹ Today, the historic plaster casts de-accessioned from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, including those of the Parthenon frieze from which the façade stone was copied, are housed in the building.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 7 Page 2

General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

round arch windows on the outer two bays on each side. One-over-one double hung sash tripartite windows topped by fixed transoms with a splayed decorative lintel at the fourth story punctuate the central bay of the third and fourth stories. The flanking two bays are punctuated by paired windows topped by fixed transoms with lintels identical to the central bay. The outer two bays on either side feature two story round arch recesses punctuated by tripartite windows topped by fixed transoms on the third story and a round arch casement window flanked by two smaller casement windows and surmounted by segmental arched transoms. Stacked one-over-one double hung sash paired windows topped by round arch fanlights at the sixth story punctuate the central three bays of the fifth and sixth stories. The outer two bays on either side mimic the fenestration of the third and fourth stories, save the transoms at the third story. The seventh story central three bays are punctuated by paired one-over-one double hung sash windows topped by a splayed lintel with carved keystone. The outer two bays on either side include paired one-over-one double hung sash windows surrounded by heavily carved moldings. Elaborate egg-and-dart and banded foliage molding is liberally distributed, primarily as framing devices for openings in the façade. A dentiled cornice supports a parapet topped with a balustrade, which surmounts the building. Without prior knowledge, it is impossible to tell that the upper three stories have been added to the original structure. The party walls are unadorned brick. The roof, originally tin, now has a rolled asphalt cover.

The building has been little altered since Ralph Townsend's 1903 additions. In May of 1917, the stone stairs at the entrance to the building were removed along with sidewalk encumbrances, necessitated by the widening of West 44th Street. At that time, the basement level was designated the main floor and the building was classified as a seven-story building.

The entrance to the building is through paired bronze doors, which replaced revolving doors, leading into a lobby rising two floors high. The lobby's marble tiled mosaic floors, treads and marble wainscoting create a polished first impression to visitors. Marble molding separates the main floor from the first floor which feature plaster panel walls. Above the entrance door is an arched cast bronze frame window of stained glass in geometric pattern interspersed with organic motifs featuring the building number at its center. Located between the street-facing windows is a bronze arm and hammer sculpture, the General Society's symbol, which reaches out from the wall and into the ornately plastered interior. Rectangular coffers with plasterwork beams divide the ceiling of the lobby. Rosettes decorate the intersection of the beams with fillets. The beam is decorated with bundles of embrocated leaves and cross bands.

The entrance to the building is distributed upward by a marble stairway on left winding to the right terminating at the first floor landing, the bronze door elevator to the right, and downward at center by marble stairs to the paired oak, brass and glass doors to the Library. A marble railing glides along the stairs upwards and guards the overhang to the stair leading down to the Library, while bronze handrails follow the stair upwards to the first floor along the marble wainscoting and flank the stairs down. The three-storied Library space was originally used as the drill space for the Berkeley School and now houses the Library, the Museum, the New York Center for Independent Publishing, lecture series, and special events. The Library space measures 85 feet by 100 feet with a 55-foot-wide skylight over the central portion of the space. Through the doors, the stairs continue down three steps to the main reading room flanked by reading areas lined with wooden built-in bookshelves located in the one story portion under the iron balcony. The iron balcony is accessible from the first floor, with gilded cast

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 7 Page 3

General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

iron panels and brass railings. The underside features exposed beams, curled spring brackets and visible rivets. The offices are located up two steps behind the main stairs and the elevator. The Library's tall evenly spaced wood bookshelves that once occupied the main space were removed to open the grand three-storied interior for meetings and lectures. The collection was moved to flanking steel stacks installed in 1923, two story stacks on the left and four story stacks on the right with patterned wrought iron railings. At that time the balcony was expanded to cover the stacks on the left and now houses the Museum. Architectural details include the four main three-story columns with shafts covered in scagliola, Scamozzi Ionic capitals topped with architrave and cornice bringing the eye up to the decorative frieze band around the interior of the skylight well. Wooden bookshelves line the space below. A center hipped copper and wrought iron skylight, decorated with fleur-de-lis along the arms and gilded cherubs at the joining plates, spans the grand central space.

Marble mosaic tiled floors are common throughout the hallways of the building. The first floor landing features The General Society Executive Office to the left and the wood-paneled Assembly Hall to the right, as well as the double bronze elevator doors and rest room opposite the right hand stair. Two round arch doors lead to the balcony overlooking the Library and separate the double return stairs with closets under the stair returns. The Executive Office foyer continues the floor from the landing and the walls are covered in marble wainscot with flanking paired wooden pocket doors. A bronze bust and portrait of Andrew Carnegie dominate the space. The four roomed wood paneled wainscot offices surround a built in vault, a later addition to the space. Two fireplaces with tiled surround, wooden mantel and brass inserts center the rooms along the party wall. The rooms facing the Library feature four one-over-one double hung sash windows that rise into the ceiling and one magnificent, proto-modern, vertical center pivot glass door, which provides access to the balcony.

The stairs feature sheet copper post lights on the Ionic newel posts, marble treads and risers, and a decorative cast iron railing topped with a wooden handrail on small equally spaced bronze support posts. The pattern of the cast iron railing differs on the ascent of the stairs from the pattern along the landing and at each floor. The stairwell from the second floor creates an elliptical void at the center of the hall that rises to the sixth floor. The staircase is partially cantilevered at each landing, with no interior column support for the interior stringer, though the adjacent bearing wall to the rear of the structure supports the other stringer. The unique design of the staircase is attributable to the strength and versatility of wrought iron, which makes up the entire hall and stair structure. The iron riser and tread is visible from underneath. The heavily scrolled decorative railing panels are riveted together and exhibit egg and dart and Greek key coursing embossed at top and bottom. Newel posts crowned with an urn motif finial surmount each floor's staircase. Extending below each post is a decorative hanging pendant visible from the floor below.

The Library dominates the roughly 100 feet by 100 feet main and first floor plans of the building, and is surrounded by an eight-foot wide service corridor on three sides of the main floor. The second through sixth floors have a U-shaped plan that focuses on the skylight of the Library. Oak wainscot over a marble baseboard lines the hallway and along the stairs, common on the upper floors. Behind the stairs are two connected offices with an entrance at each side of the hall. The elevator, restrooms and small rooms open off of the hall landing towards the front of the building opposite the stairs. There are two doors at each end of the hallway that lead to the classrooms. Both wings of the floors contain three classrooms running from the front to the rear of the

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Section 7 Page 4

General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

building. The front classroom is twenty-two feet by twenty-nine feet. The middle classroom is forty-five feet by twenty-nine feet. The rear classroom is thirty feet by twenty-nine feet and only accessible through the middle classroom. Some removable partitions have been installed and other alterations to suit the present school and rental uses.

The utilitarian classrooms differ greatly from the ornate and detailed moldings, trim and railings of the hallways and lobby. The classrooms feature raised panel doors topped with cornices, maple strip flooring, wood base trim, coat rack rails, picture molding and cove ceilings. Each classroom has four one-over-one double hung sash windows overlooking the skylight with the exception of the rear classrooms, which have four windows, two of which face the exterior shaft way. The rear classrooms have an emergency exit that accesses an iron fire escape along the rear of the building. The windows have deep set backs and extend to the ceiling. The building's main roof over the sixth floor features four skylights. The seventh floor covers the space over the common circulation areas below, including the smaller rooms and mechanical systems spaces. There are two exits to the adjacent roof space and a grand hipped skylight directly over the main staircase.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 1

General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen

Name of Property

New York County, New York

County and State

Statement of Significance

Summary

The General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen building, located at 20 West 44th Street, is home to one of nation's oldest and most influential civic organizations, the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen of the City of New York ("General Society" or GSMT). The mission of the GSMT is to improve educational and cultural opportunities for working people in New York City. The building houses the academic programs of the Mechanics' Institute, the Library of the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen ("the Library"), the General Society's Mossman Museum ("the Museum") and the more recently established New York Center for Independent Publishing (formerly the Small Press). Since 1899 the building on West 44th Street has served as the home of the General Society, an institution founded in 1785, which has had many prominent members through the years, among them cabinetmaker Duncan Phyfe, architects John McComb and Joseph Mangin, industrialists and philanthropists William Colgate, Peter Cooper, Charles Pratt, Cornelius Delamater, William Webb, and Andrew Carnegie, engineer/inventor Robert Fulton, and New York City mayors Stephen Allen, James Harper, and Abram S. Hewitt. Many of the General Society's members were progressive leaders who contributed on a national level to the fields of education, industry, commerce, and politics. Founded as a mutual aid society, education has always been an important mission of the organization with the establishment of a day school for General Society members' children and an apprentices' library in 1820. In 1858, the General Society established a tuition-free evening trade school. As one of the oldest and the only continuously operated mechanics' institute in the United States, the General Society is nationally significant under Criterion A in the area of educational history especially for its association with the mechanics' institute movement of the nineteenth century which began in Scotland and England. It is also nationally significant as one of this nation's early subscription libraries established long before the public library system and serving an important role in the intellectual and cultural life of the community. It is significant at the local level in the area of social history as an organization led by leaders prominent in the mercantile, industrial, political, and philanthropical life of New York City. The building, the result of two major construction campaigns, meets Criterion C in the area of architecture as a distinctive local example of Beaux-Arts institutional design. It was originally built in 1890 as a private boys' school and designed by Lamb & Rich, a firm well-known for educational institutions, in the Renaissance Revival style. After acquiring the building in 1899, the General Society commissioned fashionable apartment house architect Ralph Samuel Townsend to make major alterations to it in 1903-05 including adding two wings on the rear, removing the existing fourth story, and replacing it with three new stories. As noted in the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission's designation report, Townsend's work "...is a sensitive design solution, a fine and unusual example of a stylistic blending of Beaux-Arts Classicism and Renaissance Revival design Townsend's addition is an exceptional example of how an addition can alter a building in a successful and sympathetic way."² The period of significance – 1890 to 1958 – encompasses both building campaigns as well as the continued educational and cultural uses of the building.

² Kevin McHugh, Mechanics' and Tradesmen's Institute designation report, NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission, October 18, 1988, p. 10.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 2

General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

History of the General Society

For more than two hundred and twenty years, the General Society has been a constant presence in the physical and cultural development of New York City. The "General Society of Mechanics," as it was originally known, was founded on November 17, 1785 by 22 men at Walter Heyer's tavern on Pine Street³ as a mutual benefit organization to provide social services to members, their widows and orphans. It was incorporated in 1792. In their meetings, members captured the spirit of mutuality and craft pride established in artisan fraternities and guilds in the Middle Ages where they met as brothers, educating themselves in improvements in their crafts. The General Society

...chose a blacksmith, Robert Boyd, as their first president, and selected the blacksmith's insignia and motto as their own. "By Hammer and Hand All Arts Do Stand" asserts the importance of skilled work in the building of a new nation – and honors the blacksmith who made tools for all the trades. In its first 50 years, more than 664 men, from 102 trades and crafts, who called their skills "mechanical" or "handmade" arts joined the General Society.⁴

The Society's first home was at the center of Broadway and Park Place, which was dedicated on January 4, 1803, concurrent with the construction of City Hall.

The General Society was one the country's most prominent trade societies and promoted not only the social and educational interests of the members but their political concerns as well. Its members fought for protective tariffs. Tradesmen including those of the General Society supported "...the Federalists (who favored tariff protections) during and after the ratification of the US Constitution in 1788. This support lasted through the mid-1790s, when journeymen abandoned the Federalists and backed the Democratic-Republicans..."⁵ The Society openly endorsed abolition by the late 1700s.

In 1810 a delegation was sent to the state government in Albany which returned with an act of legislature establishing the Mechanics National Bank, the fourth bank in Manhattan, which eventually became a branch of the Chase Manhattan Bank. The bank's original capital of \$2 million was divided into shares of twenty five dollars each, available to members of the Society, which remained active in the affairs of the bank throughout the nineteenth century.⁶

The educational mission of the General Society came to the fore in its early years.

In 1820 the members of the General Society founded two educational institutions, a day school and a library.... The day school was established for the children of the Society's members and

³ *Historical Sketch and Government of the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen of the City of New York 1785-1914*, (n.p., 1914), 1.

⁴ Janet Wells Greene, "The Library of the General Society of Mechanics & Tradesmen," in Richard Wendorf, ed., *America's Membership Libraries* (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 2007), 181.

⁵ Chad Pearson, entry on Labor in Peter Eisenstadt, ed. And Laura-Eve Moss, Managing editor, *The Encyclopedia of New York State* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005), 848.

⁶ McHugh, 4.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 3

General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

included the children of deceased members in good standing whose mothers could not afford to pay for their instruction.

To enter the school, the children had to be 14 years of age or younger, and be able to "spell in words of two syllables." According to the School Committee Minutes, both boys and girls were admitted to the school from its inception. The School Minutes of December 4, 1821, mention examinations being given in "geography, grammar, arithmetic and generally on the globes." In 1821, the number of scholars was 95 (55 attended free of charge). As of December 21, 1822, there were 105 scholars (56 attended for free). The subjects mentioned in the minutes are "reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar, geography, with the practical use of the globes and maps and the elementary principles of astronomy."

By January 4, 1826, there were 120 scholars, and the Minutes noted discussion regarding a separate school for females. The female school opened May 1, 1826, with 75 pupils, 19 taught free. Pupils were "daughters of the most respectable and valuable members of the Society." The studies were nearly similar to those in the boy's department, except for needlework ("plain and ornamental"), and painting and drawing. In November 1842, the school resolved to start a class in bookkeeping for the female department. In 1887 the school offered instruction in stenography and typewriting for young women, graduating 49 students in that year. This type of vocational training gave women the skills to seek employment outside the home at a time when this was generally not accepted other than in such fields as the garment industry.

In the Minutes of April 18, 1833, teachers were supposed to be "competent to teach drawing, painting and design, the principles of architecture and civil engineering," though it is unclear whether they actually taught these subjects. By 1835 the school began to offer classes in architecture and engineering in the boy's school only as noted in a circular for the *Mechanics' Society School in Crosby-Street*. In addition to a class on "mensuration of heights and distances, plain and spherical trigonometry, and land surveying," extra classes were offered in conic sections, architecture, mechanics, chemistry, mechanical philosophy, drawing and designing, and civil engineering.

The library was established for the children who worked for master craftsmen as apprentices, providing them with an opportunity to improve themselves through reading.

...The founding of the General Society's Apprentices' Library (as it was called) was not without controversy. Not everyone agreed that the apprentices would want to read, nor that this was the best use of the General Society's money. Books were both expensive and scarce in 1820. Although New York City had a lively press that turned out newspapers, tracts, pamphlets, and broadsides, few printers published books, and most of the books available in New York were therefore imported from England. To establish its library, the General Society solicited support and donations of books from the 6,000 "mechanics" of the city. The library opened in 1820 in rooms rented from the Free School Society on Chatham Street. The library consisted of three large boxes of books.... After dark, when the children left their workplaces, the "library" boxes were

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 4

General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

opened by candlelight and children whose employers had vouched for their character were allowed to borrow books. On the first night, apprentices borrowed 300 books.

Within two years the General Society was able to purchase its first school building at 12 Chatham Street By 1822, the Apprentices' Library had 6,000 volumes and 1,200 readers. Nearly 1,000 of those readers were children – male apprentices between the ages of 12 and 17.... To read books belonging to the library, an apprentice had to have a certificate, signed by his employer, which stated that he was employed, that he was allowed to use the library, and that his employer would vouch for his character

As the collection grew the books were kept in locked cases. The librarian, as custodian of the books, enforced the rules. Here are the rules from 1822, according to the Minutes of the Library Committee:

Applicants must come with clean hands and faces and on entering the room must be seated until called up.

No bad language, loud talking, or smoking allowed. Each boy must leave the room on receiving his book and must not play or remain around the door.⁷

The establishment of the Apprentices Library and School was part of a new burst of interest at the time to use education as a tool to prevent licentiousness. Many masters began challenging the "antisocial evils" of their workers such as swearing, drinking, Sabbath-breaking, and gambling. They began to require strict work codes, demanding a new bourgeois standard of order and personal decorum. Merchants and entrepreneurs, including those at the General Society, established educational institutions targeted at the laboring population to teach good habits and skills.⁸

As the Society continued to grow, new quarters were required, and it moved to a new building on Crosby Street in 1832. The school and library remained at the Crosby Street building for 45 years. Free lecture courses for members were instituted in 1837, which continued until 1848. Among the lecturers were Ralph Waldo Emerson, Horace Greeley, Henry Ward Beecher, and Rear Admiral Robert E. Peary.

In 1858 the Society terminated its day classes for children and opened a free night school for apprentices and the working public under the newly established Mechanics' Institute. These classes, which were geared toward the building arts, continue to be offered to the present day. In 1861, library privileges were extended to women. In its many activities, the General Society was well ahead of its time. The City of New York did not institute free public education until 1858, and the New York Public Library would not open until 1895.

As the General Society's programs grew it moved its library and school to Eight East 16th Street in 1878. The General Society's library received public funds in 1886 along with many of the city's private libraries

⁷ Greene, 181-183.

⁸ Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 405 and 498.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 5

General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

so they could offer their books a wider readership. These funds were later cut when the city established its own library system.

Yet again seeking larger quarters, the General Society moved to its current location at 20 West 44th Street in 1899 where they acquired the former Berkeley School for Boys which had been built in 1890 to the design of Lamb and Rich.⁹ The Berkeley School had been founded in 1880 with an emphasis on athletics and military drill along with college preparatory courses. A gift of \$250,000 in 1903 from industrialist and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, a General Society member, made possible the expansion and remodeling of the building by architect Ralph Samuel Townsend. The renovated building included additional upper floors, classroom wings for the Mechanics' Institute, and the formation of an impressive reading room within the former military school's interior parade ground. Additional donations, including \$200,000 as an endowment fund in 1908, insured the survival of the Society.

Mechanics' Institute Movement

The General Society provided educational opportunities early in its history with the opening of its apprentices' library in 1820. By 1835 it provided architecture, mechanics, chemistry, mechanical philosophy, drawing and designing, and civil engineering classes in the boys' division of its day school. In 1858, the General Society terminated its day school for general education and established the Mechanics' Institute, offering "...evening classes for the training of apprentices and those employed during the day in different trades and arts, to acquire free-hand, mechanical and architectural drawing...."¹⁰ The General Society's Mechanics' Institute was part of a movement of worker education first established in Scotland and England in the early nineteenth century. The term 'mechanic' at that time meant artisan, tradesman, or working man. Often established and funded by local industrialists, mechanics institutes provided free courses, particularly in technical subjects. The first fully-fledged mechanics' institute was established in Edinburgh in 1821, building on the early work of George Birbeck, who from 1799 to 1804, provided a course of lectures in practical science for working men.' It was followed in 1823 by an institute in Glasgow, the Mechanics' Institute in Manchester in 1824, and the London Mechanics' Institute in 1824-25. "By the mid nineteenth century, there were over 700 institutes in towns and cities across the United Kingdom and overseas"¹¹ (including the United States, Australia, Canada, South Africa, and India). "Along with lyceums, apprentices' libraries, and other organizations that emphasized self-improvement through education in science, mechanics' institutes grew out of the reform spirit of the early nineteenth century."¹² Mechanics' Institutes based on the Scottish and British model were usually "purpose-built premises" that received "generous financial support for the purchase of books and educational classes" from "progressive industrialists...."¹³

⁹ The General Society acquired the building on September 14, 1899 from Columbia University (which had also owned the Berkeley School's other property at Madison Avenue and 49th Street).

¹⁰ "Historical Sketch and Government of The General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen of the City of New York, 1785-1914," The Cornell University Library Digital Collection.

¹¹ Entry on "Mechanics' Institutes" in Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mechanics_Institutes, accessed May 7, 2008.

¹² Entry on Mechanics' Institutes from www.answers.com/topic/mechanics-institutes. Accessed July 1, 2008.

¹³ Trevor Cockbill, *An Address on the illustrious History of The Mechanics' Institution at Swinden, 1843-1960* (Swindon, UK: The New Mechanics' Institution Preservation Trust Limited, 1997), 3.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 6

General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

In addition to the General Society's Mechanics Institute, other prominent institutes in the United States included the Franklin Institute, Philadelphia, 1824; the Maryland Institute for the Promotion of the Mechanic Arts, Baltimore, 1826; the Ohio Mechanics Institute, Cincinnati, 1828; and the Mechanics' Institute of San Francisco, 1854. "It was not uncommon to find reading rooms, libraries, public lectures, cabinets of models and apparatus, and day and night schools as a part of the institutes' programs. Practice and science were combined to the benefit of the mechanic and industry."¹⁴ There were numerous mechanics institutes around the country some of which evolved into colleges.

Among the group of the major mechanics institutes in the U.S., the General Society is the only institute still in operation as a tuition-free school of the building arts and trades. The emphasis of the Franklin Institute (originally known as the Franklin Institute of the State of Pennsylvania for the Promotion of the Mechanic Arts) was and continues to be science. It opened its science museum in 1825 with its mission being to inspire an understanding of and passion for science and technology learning. The Franklin Institute also operates the Franklin Center with an extensive library, and Center for Innovation in Science Learning. The Maryland Institute for the Promotion of Mechanic Arts in Baltimore later became the Maryland Institute College of Art. The Ohio Mechanics Institute in Cincinnati, like the General Society, had a technical school, a large library and reading room. "In the twentieth century, the institute evolved into a college. In 1958, the institute became known as the Ohio College of Applied Science, with an evening school still known by its original name. The Ohio College of Applied Science was incorporated into the University of Cincinnati in 1969."¹⁵ The Mechanics' Institute of San Francisco "...provided a place for adult education and retraining at a time when no school system in the San Francisco Bay Area taught adults the skills necessary to work in the factories and shipyards that would provide for the economic recovery of the region."¹⁶ While the Institute in San Francisco has a very active library and a popular program of literary and cultural events, it no longer runs an adult education program in technical subjects.¹⁷

The General Society's Mechanics' Institute mission is to provide "privately-endowed free evening instruction to respectable young men and women to improve themselves in their daily vocations," and to assist those who were obliged to become wage earners before completing their desired education.¹⁸ Throughout the twentieth century, the General Society's Mechanics Institute continued to provide vital educational opportunities during periods of prosperity, the Depression and war. In 1915 the GSMT offered classes in the following subjects: Architectural drafting, estimating for builders, mechanical drafting, sheet metal drafting, carriage and automobile drafting, free hand drawing, decorative design, modeling, arithmetic, algebra, and geometry, trigonometry, workshop mathematics, applied mechanics, physics, and industrial electricity.¹⁹ The General

¹⁴ Melvin L. Barlow, *History of Industrial Education in the United States* (Peoria, IL: Chas. A. Bennett Co., Inc., 1967), 27.

¹⁵ "Ohio Mechanics Institute," (Columbus, OH: Ohio Historical Society, 2008), entry at www.ohiohistorycentral.org/entry.php?782.

¹⁶ Inez Shore Cohen, "The Mechanics' Institute of San Francisco," in Richard Wendorf, ed. *America's Membership Libraries* (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 2007), 263.

¹⁷ According to Inez Shore Cohen essay in *America's Membership Libraries*, "By 1856 a technical library was firmly established at the Mechanics' Institute [of San Francisco] with a collection of 487 volumes to support a series of vocational classes in woodworking, mechanical drawing, applied mathematics, and ironwork," 264.

¹⁸ *Mechanics' Institute School Catalog*, Fall 2005-Spring 2006. New York: GSMT, 2005.

¹⁹ "What Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen Is," *New York Times* (November 7, 1915).

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 7

General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

Society reported in 1931 that it enrolled a record number of 3,167 students that year noting that, "It is significant in this time of economic depression the opportunities extended by the society to young men to equip themselves to command a better livelihood and enjoy a higher standard of living are more in demand than ever before."²⁰ Four years later the General Society noted that their Mechanics Institute is "...said to be the largest free technical school of its kind in this country...."²¹ In 1942, the General Society conducted an evening school sponsored by the US Government that taught one thousand men from industrial plants drafting skills for the expansion of the production of munitions for the war. Courses taught included mechanical drafting, freehand drafting, blueprint reading, mathematics for machine shop practice, and lettering and tracing for mechanical drafting. This effort continued into 1943 with the training of aviation mechanics.

The General Society's Mechanics Institute is the oldest tuition-free school in New York City. It has been providing job training for 150 years to qualified students employed in hand crafts and the building trades. The Institute currently provides instruction in architectural drafting, computer-aided drawing (AutoCAD), electrical technology, facilities management, HVAC systems design, plumbing technology, and construction project management. While the Mechanics' Institute of San Francisco²² predates the General Society's Mechanics' Institute by four years, the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen is the only remaining mechanics' institute in the country with a continuously operating technical training school and library services.

Prominent Members

Members of the General Society have "...included men famous for their philanthropy and their zealous commitment to improving young lives."²³ A 1915 article in the *New York Times* entitled "What Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen Is" discusses some of the Society's prominent presidents:

Its roster of over 100 Presidents includes the names of many grand New Yorkers who have been prominent in its mercantile and industrial life. Among them are two former Mayors, Gideon Lee and Stephen Allen, the latter beginning life as a sailmaker. Others of note were Gabriel Furman, John-Slidell, father of the Captain Slidell of Confederate fame; Sheppard Knapp, George Ireland, the first President of the Mechanics' Bank, which was organized in 1810 through the direct interest of the society; John McComb, architect of the City Hall; Benjamin De Milt, Jacob Lorillard and Jacob A. Westervelt, a famous shipbuilder in the days when the United States had a regular merchant marine and who, in 1870, gave the society all the models and pictures of the celebrated vessels he had built.²⁴

A review of the membership register of the General Society offers not only the names of its members, many of them prominent in the community, but also a fascinating look at the various trades that were represented by its

²⁰ "\$185,000 Spent in 1931 by Mechanics' Society," *New York Times*, March 13, 1932, Proquest, p. 15.

²¹ "Mechanics' Group to Mark Founding," *New York Times* (November 17, 1935).

²² The Mechanics' Institute of San Francisco was founded in 1854. According to Inez Shore Cohen essay in *America's Membership Libraries*, "By 1856 a technical library was firmly established at the Mechanics' Institute [of San Francisco] with a collection of 487 volumes to support a series of vocational classes in woodworking, mechanical drawing, applied mathematics, and ironwork," p. 264. While the Mechanics' Institute of San Francisco has an active membership library, lecture and special programs, it no longer offers technical classes.

²³ Greene, p. 184.

²⁴ "What Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen Is," *New York Times* (November 7, 1915).

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 8

General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen

Name of Property

New York County, New York

County and State

members. In 1824, for example, occupations/trades included book binders, carvers, sail makers, painters, hatter, cabinet makers, ship carpenter, butcher, brass founder, turners, hair dresser, ship wrights, Morocco dresser, gilder, carpenter, mason, taylor (sic), watch maker, leather dress, shoe makers, dyer, printer, saddlers, chair makers, stone cutter, and boat builder. Trades represented by members in 1907 included tinsmith, bricklayer, plasterers, carpenters, tailors, builders, painter, electrical engineer, decorator, floorers, iron worker, printer, bronze & iron worker, mechanical engineer, furrier, manufacturer, granite, plumber, stone cutter, tile contractor, ornamental iron, varnish manufacturer, carriage maker, and ship carpenter.

Two of the General Society's early members were architects John McComb, Jr. (b. 1763 – d. 1853) and Joseph Francois Mangin (b.? France – d. after 1818). McComb was the designer of Alexander Hamilton's home known as the Grange (1801-02; NHL) and was a city surveyor (1813-1821) and street commissioner. Mangin was appointed a city surveyor and chief engineer of fortifications in NYC in the 1790s. In 1802 Mangin and McComb submitted the plan that won the design competition for City Hall (1802-11, NHL). In 1803 McComb was appointed the sole architect in charge of construction of City Hall and only his name is inscribed on the foundation. This generated a controversy about whether he or Mangin was the principal designer.²⁵

Inventor, engineer, and painter Robert Fulton (b. 1765 – d. 1815) was a General Society member.²⁶ Fulton's North River Steamboat, powered by a Watt steam engine, began service on the Hudson River on August 17, 1807 as the first commercially successful passenger steamboat in the world. He went on to design a steam vessel for the Navy as well as other ships and ferryboats.

Industrialist Cornelius H. Delamater (b. 1821 – d. 1885) was initiated into the General Society in 1848. Delamater rode the industrial revolution into a position of such success that he turned his business into a major foundry, iron works and construction activity, and shaped the course of events of the Civil War through his support of iron-clad ships for the United States.²⁷ It was at the Phoenix Foundry that Delamater met the Swedish inventor and engineer John Ericsson. The two men established a business partnership that resulted in the development of some of the most revolutionary marine propulsion devices of the day. The collaboration culminated in Delamater's construction of the machinery for Ericsson's turreted ironclad USS Monitor. Delamater subsequently built the machinery for four additional Ericsson-designed monitors during the Civil War.

Many of the General Society's members displayed an active interest in education including Peter Cooper, William Colgate, Charles Pratt, and William Webb. Industrialist, inventor, manufacturer, philanthropist and founder of Cooper Union, Peter Cooper had no formal education, but excelled in a number of fields by virtue of his keen intelligence and entrepreneurial gifts. At an early age he invented a machine for dressing cloth. He became wealthy as a glue manufacturer, his occupation at the time of his initiation into The General Society in 1837. He was an ardent supporter of the free public education for the working classes.

²⁵ Kenneth T. Jackson, ed. *The Encyclopedia of New York City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 705 and 717.

²⁶ Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 343.

²⁷ Northport Historical Society & Museum, "Cornelius H. Delamater (1821-1889)."

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 9

General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

He founded Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in 1857-1859 (NHL) to provide free education to working class students. The following is an excerpt from a letter from Abram S. Hewitt, his son-in-law, who was also a member of the General Society:

The history of the institution [Cooper Union] is one of great beneficence, and at no time has its work been more valuable to the community than the present. I am quite sure that the late Peter Cooper derived a portion of his ideas from his connection with the Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen, and that he based the instruction departments of the Cooper Union upon the experience which he had gathered in your schools.²⁸

William Colgate (b. 1783 – d. 1857), whose company later became known as Colgate-Palmolive, came to America as a boy and served as an apprentice to a soap-boiler. He established a starch, soap, and candle business known as Colgate and Company in 1806 on Dutch Street in New York. In addition to being a member of the General Society, Colgate was a leading philanthropist and helped found Colgate College. Society member Charles Pratt (B. 1830 – d. 1891) was the owner of Astral Oil (later acquired by John D. Rockefeller) and founder of Pratt Institute in 1887 (NR-listed). William Webb (b. 1916 – d. 1899) was an internationally prominent naval architect and founder of the Webb Institute in 1889, a tuition-free school for the study of naval architecture and marine engineering. He was noted for his designs of clipper ships and the Civil War ironclad USS Dunderberg.

General Society members who also served as mayor of New York City included, Stephen Allen, James Harper, Jacob Aaron Westervelt, and Abram S. Hewitt. Stephen Allen (b. 1767 – d. 1852) began his career as an apprentice for a sail maker during the American Revolution and later formed a partnership with his employer. He later started his own successful business and became a director of the Mechanics Bank. Allen was elected mayor for three terms (1821-24). He died during the burning of the steamboat *Henry Clay*. James Harper (b. 1795- d. 1869) and his brother established J. and J. Harper and Brothers publishing house in 1817. He was elected mayor in 1844 as the nominee of the American Republican Party with Whig and Democratic support. Jacob Aaron Westervelt (b. 1800 – d. 1879) owned a shipbuilding firm on the East River for about fifty years that produced about two hundred seagoing vessels. He served as mayor from 1852-1854 during which time he introduced reforms and reorganized the police department. Abram S. Hewitt (b. 1822 – d. 1903) owned an iron mill in Trenton, New Jersey, served as New York City mayor from 1887 to 1888, and was active in philanthropic affairs throughout his life.

Andrew Carnegie (b. 1835 – d. 1919), major American industrialist, leading philanthropist, and advocate of free education, was initiated into the General Society in 1891. He donated more than \$500,000 to the organization, and funded the expansion of the building at 20 West 44th Street. Born in Scotland in 1835, he emigrated to the United States with his family when he was thirteen. He founded Pittsburgh's Carnegie Steel Company which, by the 1890s, became the largest and most profitable industrial enterprise in the world. In 1901 Carnegie sold his company for almost half a billion dollars to J.P. Morgan who created U.S. Steel. Carnegie devoted the remainder of his life to large-scale philanthropy, with special emphasis on education, local libraries, peace,

²⁸ New York Times, January 7, 1900; also in the GSMT Minutes.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 10

General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

scientific research, and music. He preached the obligation of the wealthy to give away their funds for the common good of humanity. As a benefactor of libraries, he funded nearly 3,000 around the world. By the end of his life he had given away about \$350 million, including \$280 million in the United States.

Carnegie's interest in the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen was in keeping with his belief in helping those who would help themselves by providing the means for them to improve themselves and their condition through educational advancement. Carnegie was the guest of honor at The General Society Founder's Day banquet, commemorating its 120th anniversary, held at Delmonico's on November 18, 1905. The President of the organization, William Strauch, noted that Carnegie had given the Society an invaluable bequest:

Through his generosity we were enabled to build the Carnegie Extension to the building, thereby adding thirty-two classrooms, so that we are now giving free instruction to 1,280 young men.

Think of it! Nearly 1,300 young men getting, without any charge whatever, instruction of the most valuable character.²⁹

In his own remarks, Carnegie praised the Society:

All I am here to do is to laud your society, for I have never known one with such a splendid record. The first free library was established by it and not by me. I am still hoping to live long enough to establish the last. Your society with its high aims has been duplicated in Boston. Of your members were Peter Cooper and his great son-in-law, Abram S. Hewitt, who should rank with America's best.³⁰

In his autobiography, Carnegie notes:

The Cooper Union, the Mechanics and Tradesmen Society, indeed every institution in which I became interested, revealed many men and women devoting their time and thought, not to "miserable aims that end with self," but to high ideals which mean the relief and uplift of their less fortunate brethren.³¹

Carnegie's contribution characterized his role as a member, building on the generosity of earlier members like Duncan Phyfe, the artisan turned entrepreneur who was an original eighteenth century charter member of the GSMT. Dozens of other notable examples, amid hundreds of members over the years, made their contributions. By way of example, a dozen or more now little-known members volunteered for the Union Army in 1861, forming a significant part of the cadre that became the military's first engineering battalion, and the founding outfit that became the Army Corps of Engineers. Its original banner, like that carried by the GSMT's mechanics and artisans at George Washington's inaugural parade in 1789, hangs in the Library at 44th Street.

The Collections

The Library houses not only a rich and unique collection of technical and engineering volumes dating continuously back to the eighteenth century, it is home as well to a historically invaluable manuscript collection

²⁹ "Carnegie Says He's Glad to be a Poor Man's Son," *New York Times* (November 19, 1905), ProQuest, 6.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Andrew Carnegie, *Autobiography of Andrew Carnegie*, (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1924), 277.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 11

General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

recording the Society's role in the city and nation over 220 years. Its membership rolls, biographical data, school minutes and Mechanics Institute records have, in recent years, been maintained in increasingly secure and climate-controlled space in the historic building. The incomparable Mossman Lock collection on display on the historic balcony of the Library enhances the visitor's experience. In 1903 John M. Mossman, the famed vault manufacturer, donated to the General Society his singular collection of locks, keys and tools dating from 4000 BC, which is housed in the Museum. The GSMT collection also includes original manuscripts, medallions, coins, paper money, firearms, books and curios of various kinds dating from antiquity up to the present.

In her essay on the history of the General Society, historian and librarian Janet Wells Greene provides the following summary of the library's collections:

The collection today includes books on all subjects, a legacy from what historian Thomas Bender has called the "learned mechanics" of New York City....

The book collection spans three centuries and includes books and periodicals on a wide variety of subjects. Most notable is a collection of materials classified as the Useful Arts. These books and periodicals range from reports on early discoveries, including a treatise on electricity published by Benjamin Franklin in 1757 and a complete set of the *Scientific American* from its founding issues to the mid-twentieth century, to books and scientific reports concerning the building of the infrastructure of urban America – roads, sanitation systems, bridges, skyscrapers, plumbing and heating, masonry, railroads, radios, and factory management. Many of these books were texts for classes taught at the Mechanics' Institute....Others enabled workers in the trades and crafts to teach themselves. They include works on bricklaying, mortar, paint, clocks and watches, locks, printing, graphic design, jewelry making, furniture, and a host of other objects and systems that have come to signify "modern life." A major component of this collection is represented by the books and periodicals on architecture and building that were formerly part of the Slade Architectural Legacy.

Many of the books in the Legacy Collection – books published before 1923 – are works of fiction, biography, history, and travel. These books, which brought a wider view of life to the working people of New York, today serve as a research and reference collection for a diverse audience....

The library's holdings are now divided into "circulating" and "non-circulating" collections. The non-circulating collections include the library's historic volumes, many of which were acquired at its founding, as well as newer special collections of specific subjects....³²

³² Greene, 188-192.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 12

General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

Non-Circulating Collections

The Legacy Collection is composed of books purchased from the date of the library's founding in 1820 to about 1923, when the U.S. copyright law first went into effect....The books and periodicals cover a wide variety of subjects from agriculture, biography, and naval architecture to history, philosophy, religion, and a remarkable collection of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century first-person travel narratives.... The Legacy Collection numbers approximately 60,000 volumes.

Unique among the holdings of the General Society library are two collections of the Small Press Center, established by the General Society in 1984. The mission of the center is to support and educate those who are interested in becoming independent publishers....

...The Mechanics' Institute collection...includes important and unique materials on art, architecture, drawing, design, drafting, architectural and mechanical drawing, jewelry design, printing, publishing, and lithography. Today the Mechanics' Institute collection also includes current books and publications that support the curriculum of the school in heating, plumbing, ventilation, air-conditioning, project management, and historic preservation.

The Luca Valentino Collection is a group of 350 books on cabinetmaking and furniture....The Henry Hope Reed Collection is a gift of books from the personal library of the noted architectural historian, whose books on classical architecture have done much to inspire a revived interest in classical architecture in America....

Circulating Collections

The Builders' Library reflects the most recent collecting policy of the General Society's Library Committee, adopted in 2003. This collection focuses on the built environment, urban trades and crafts, labor and work history, city planning, New York City; architecture, plumbing, heating, ventilation, air-conditioning, design, green architecture, and historic preservation....The Vintage Fiction Collection comprises approximately 40,000 works of fiction published between 1923 and 1950....The Civil War Roundtable Collection, in partnership with the New York Civil War Roundtable, contains recent books in Civil War history. The Van Arsdale Collection, a joint venture between the library and the Harry Van Arsdale Center for Labor Studies of the Empire State College of the State University of New York, is a collection of books in the liberal arts for classes offered by the Van Arsdale Center, a non-traditional program for working adults....³³

The Library of The General Society, rich in history, chronicles the rise of the artisan classes, their struggle and determination to become influential and politically aware, and more importantly, a respected group of citizens. Its books and its architecture underscore the importance of working people in the City's past.³⁴

³³ Greene, 188-192.

³⁴ Joel A. Miele, Sr., P.E., Letter to Kathleen A. Howe, NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, July 29, 2008.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 13

General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

Historic Membership Libraries

The General Society's library collection continues to serve as both a membership library as well as a free library for the students enrolled in the Mechanics' Institute. The General Society is one of only three subscription libraries in New York City; the other being the New York Society Library and the Mercantile Library. The GSMT's library belongs in the prestigious company of the nation's largest historic membership libraries including:

- Redwood Library and Athenaeum (est. 1747; NHL) in Newport
- Charleston Library Society (est. 1748)
- New York Society Library (est. 1754; NR)³⁵
- Boston Athenaeum (est. 1807; NHL)
- Salem Athenaeum (est. 1810)
- Athenaeum of Philadelphia (est. 1814)
- Portsmouth Athenaeum (est. 1817)
- Mercantile Library Center for Fiction (est. 1820), New York City³⁶
- Mercantile Library of Cincinnati (est. 1835)
- Providence Athenaeum (est. 1836)
- St. Louis Mercantile Library Association (est. 1846)
- Mechanics' Institute of San Francisco (est. 1854)
- St. Johnsbury Athenaeum (est. 1871; NHL)
- Lanier Library Association (est. 1889), Tryon, NC
- Athenaeum Music and Arts Library (est. 1899), San Diego, CA

Membership libraries were first established in America during the Colonial period and the early decades of the nation, well before the establishment of public libraries. The GSMT Library and other historic membership libraries represent an important movement in American library history. Although their collections may vary in size and content and their founders represented different constituents

...these libraries share important characteristics, however: they offer open admission to their membership, usually for a modest fee; they are governed by their own members, usually in the form of a board of trustees; many of their collections circulate; they possess art work and special collections that are often quite extensive; and they provide a variety of programs – lectures, readings, musical events, discussion groups, exhibitions and trips – for their members and guests.³⁷

The first membership library in the colonies was the Library Company of Philadelphia established in 1731 by Benjamin Franklin and a group of friends.

³⁵ The New York Society Library's current building at 53 East 79th Street. The Italianate town house, built in 1917 for John S. Rogers, was designed by Trowbridge and Livingston. The building was converted to a library in 1937. It is listed on the National Register.

³⁶ The Mercantile Library Center for Fiction is currently located at 17 East 47th Street. The building was designed by Henry Otis Chapman;

³⁷ Wendorf, 11.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 14

General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen

Name of Property

New York County, New York

County and State

There were so few readers in Philadelphia at the time – “and the Majority of us so poor” – that Franklin had a hard time raising the forty shillings each from the initial fifty subscribers. But his institution “soon manifested its Utility, was imitated by other towns and Provinces, the Libraries (sic) were augmented by Donations, Reading became fashionable, and our People became better acquainted with Books.” In a few years, he concludes, colonial Americans were observed by strangers “to be better instructed & more intelligent than People of the same Rank generally are in other Counties.”³⁸

Early subscription libraries that were directly influenced by Franklin’s Philadelphia model are the Charleston Library Society (1748), the Redwood Library (1747) in Newport, and the New York Society Library (1754). The New York Society Library, the oldest library in New York City, was established by a civic-minded group of six young professionals interested in improving the quality of life for New Yorkers. “Although their city was the provincial capital throughout the colonial era and a place of enormous commercial activity, they felt that their fellow citizens lacked ‘a spirit of inquiry’.”³⁹ The founding members were Philip Livingston; his younger brother William Livingston; William’s brother-in-law William Alexander; the brothers’ cousin Robert R. Livingston; John Morin Scott; and William Smith, Jr. People buying shares in the library entitled them to use the library and to elect trustees and non-shareholders could take out books for a fee.

Many of the membership libraries established in the early decades of the nineteenth century were known as athenaeum including the Boston Athenaeum (1807), the Salem Athenaeum (1810), and the Portsmouth Athenaeum (1817), among others. An athenaeum is a membership library whose classical name suggests a more broadly based cultural institution featuring lectures, works of art, and exhibitions, and (early in the nineteenth century) scientific apparatus and experimentation.⁴⁰

Membership libraries associated with “mercantile” or “mechanics” concerns were established starting in the 1820s with the General Society’s library (1820) and the New York Mercantile Library (1820), (now known as the Mercantile Library Center for Fiction). This type of library served the demands of a rapidly expanding mercantile nation. The General Society’s library was founded “to build a collection of useful and instructive reading material for the free use of the working people of New York” especially apprentices in various trades while the New York Mercantile Library was geared toward young clerks working for merchants. The founder of the Mercantile Library, William Wood, noted that the library would help keep clerks “away from the rum-shop and billiard-room.” Although the mission of the library was to educate young men for success in the mercantile trade, from the very beginning fiction was the most popular part of the collection. Mechanics and mercantile libraries soon spread westward illustrated by the establishment of the Mercantile Library of Cincinnati (1835), the St. Louis Mercantile Library Association (1846), and the Mechanics’ Institute of San Francisco (1854).

³⁸ Wendorf, 16.

³⁹ Mark Bartlett and Sara Elliott Holliday, “The New York Society Library,” in Richard Wendorf, *America’s Membership Libraries*, 65.

⁴⁰ Wendorf, 19.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 15

General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

The Building: From the Berkeley School to the General Society

In 1899, the General Society brought together their educational programs, their library and their growing collection of objects under a single structure at 20 West 44th Street. Lamb and Rich designed the building, originally built for the Berkeley School for Boys in 1890. Christopher Gray notes that:

At a time when there were few models for private school architecture, Lamb & Rich gave the building the feel of a library or professional association, with great banks of windows on the second and third floors....According to an 1893 article in a magazine called *The Cosmopolitan*, seniors in the school took five hours a week each in Greek, Latin, rhetoric and math, as well as English, French and science. Military practice was required for the 292 boys – the ground-floor drill hall is still intact, though it is now used as a library – and the cost was #350 per year. The 1893 edition of King's Handbook of New York City reported that 90 percent of Berkeley graduates had gone to Harvard, Yale, Princeton or Columbia.⁴¹

The original building stood five stories high and occupied slightly less than half of the one hundred foot square lot. When the General Society took over the building, they commissioned Ralph Samuel Townsend to design an extensive renovation that would substantially increase the overall size of the building. The revised façade was well suited to the architectural character of the West 44th/West 43rd Street block, which includes such notable historic structures as the New York Yacht Club, the Harvard Club, and the New York Bar Association Building on West 44th, and the Princeton Club and the Century Association on the West 43rd side of the block.

The renovations to the General Society's new home were possible because of substantial contributions from member and benefactor, Andrew Carnegie. The expanded Apprentice's Library constructed at the new General Society building reflected Carnegie's vision of a center for enlightenment where generations of tradesmen would be exposed to great books and learn through self-directed exploration. Carnegie would expand on the model with the founding the Carnegie Libraries Movement, which would span several decades and lead to the construction of over 2,500 public libraries.

As we see the building today it is the result of two major construction campaigns – 1890 and 1903-05 - resulting in a coherent design solution. Townsend's skillful renovation was respectful of Lamb & Rich's original building and is an outstanding example of an adaptive reuse. The building blends monumental Beaux-Arts and Renaissance Revival elements using a variety of materials including Indiana limestone, yellow Roman brick, terra cotta, and wrought iron. The building's façade is notable for its rusticated base with oversized arched openings, elegant iron fire escapes, frieze reproduced from the Parthenon, and arcaded windows. The most impressive space at the interior is the library which was the former indoor parade ground of the Berkeley School. Townsend converted this large utilitarian space into a grand atrium with faux-marble columns and decorative plasterwork.

⁴¹ Christopher Gray, "A Stately Structure, Where a Grand Idea Failed," *New York Times* (September 7, 2008), Real Estate section, p. 1. Accessed online at www.nytimes.com.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 16

General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen

Name of Property

New York County, New York

County and State

*The Architects*⁴²

Hugh Lamb (1849-1903)

Charles Alonso Rich (1855-1943)

Hugh Lamb entered into a partnership with Lorenzo B. Wheeler in 1872 which lasted until 1882. Lamb and Wheeler are known to have constructed rowhouses and "French flats" on the Upper East Side and in Greenwich Village. From 1882 to 1899 Lamb joined Charles A. Rich as a partner in the firm of Lamb & Rich. Charles A. Rich was born in Beverly, Massachusetts and studied engineering at Dartmouth College, furthering his education in Europe from 1875 to 1880. Rich later became the senior partner in the firm of Rich, Mathesius & Koyle after 1903. His work included the Beaux-Arts style Bryant Park Studios (1900) at 80 West 40th Street and the 1907-08 addition to Richard Morris Hunt's Association Residence. Rich was elected a fellow of the American Institute of Architects in 1913 and retired from practice in the 1930s.

Lamb & Rich was one of the most prominent and prolific of New York City architectural firms in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. They produced many high quality designs in the "chateausque," neo-Renaissance, Romanesque Revival, and neo-Gothic styles, including the Pratt Institute's Main Building (1885-87; NR listed), and the Harlem Club and Harlem Free Library (1889, 1892) in the Mount Morris Park Historic District (NR listed). They also designed Millbank, Brinkerhoff, and Fiske Halls, Barnard College (1890-97; all three buildings NR listed).

Their residential commissions include the Astral Apartments (1885-86, NR listed), at 184 Franklin Street, Greenpoint, Brooklyn, and country houses around New York City such as Sagamore Hill, Oyster Bay (1893; National Historic Site) for Theodore Roosevelt. Lamb and Rich were quite active on the Upper West Side from 1885 through the 1890s, and a number of their designs were published. They designed a number of buildings within the locally designated West-End Collegiate Historic District, among them rowhouses at 301-305 West 76th Street (1891), and 302-306 West 77th Street (1891).

Ralph Samuel Townsend (?-1921)

The career of Ralph Samuel Townsend, the architect of the 1903 additions/renovations to 20 West 44th Street, is not as well documented. He established his architectural practice by 1881 and designed a number of buildings in the Greenwich Village Historic District (NR listed) including the Queen Anne style Portsmouth Apartment House (1882), 38-44 West 9th Street and a number of apartment houses in collaboration with Herbert Harde on the Upper West Side. In 1906, Townsend, by now a partner in the firm of Townsend, Steinle and Haskell, designed the notable Beaux-Arts style apartment building, the Kenilworth (1906-08) at 151 Central Park West, in the Central Park West Historic District (NR listed).

⁴² The architects' biographical entries are from McHugh, 5-6.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 17

General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

The Educational Mission continues

The General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen stands as a record to further the understanding and appreciation of the history of the United States, and the role of the artisans, craftsmen, “mechanics and tradesmen” in the educational, cultural and philanthropic endeavors in the City of New York. For well over two centuries it has responded to and reflected critical shifts in American society, as the nation moved from the age of revolution to the steam age, to the electrical age, to the digital age; and through it all, how artisans coped with the transformations.⁴³ As of 2008, the General Society’s programs continue to flourish. The General Society’s building, library and artifact collections, and educational programs document the social, economic and political transformation of this nationally significant institution that has operated continuously from the formative years of the nation, through the Civil War and two World Wars, and up to the present day. Its charitable and educational missions grew apace in its present home, and its history continues to mirror the evolution of New York City and to an important degree, the nation.

⁴³ Joel A. Miele, Sr., P.E., Letter to Kathleen A. Howe, NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, July 29, 2008.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 9 Page 1

General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 9 Page 2

General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen

Name of Property

New York County, New York

County and State

"Mechanics' Institutes" in Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mechanics_Institutes, accessed May 7, 2008.

"Mechanics' Society School in Crosby-Street." Notice of list of classes for 1835. New York: GSMT files.

"\$185,000 Spent in 1931 by Mechanics' Society." *New York Times*. March 13, 1932, Proquest, p. 15.

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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 10 Page 1

General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen

Name of Property

New York County, New York

County and State

10. Geographical Data

Verbal Boundary Description

The boundary of this nomination is outlined on the attached Sanborn map.

Boundary Justification

The boundary of this nomination includes the entire parcel historically and currently associated with the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen building.

**United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet**

Section 11 Page 1

General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen

Name of Property

New York County, New York

County and State

11. Research and draft nomination prepared by:

Cavell Stephenson
Grants Director
The General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen
20 West 44th Street
New York, NY 10036

212-840-1840

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 11 Page 2

General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen
Name of Property
New York County, New York
County and State

Additional Documentation

Existing floor plans

Prepared September 29, 1999/updated January 4, 2008.

The General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen.

- Main floor
- First floor
- Second floor
- Third floor
- Fourth floor
- Fifth floor
- Sixth floor
- Seventh floor (Roof)
- Vault Level

Black and white photos (current day)

General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen

20 West 44th Street

New York County, NY

Digital photographs by:

Stephen Amiaga

Amiaga Photographers, Inc.

131 Sterling Place

Amityville, NY 11701

Date of photos: 2003 and 2008.

(Note: the building remains the same as it did in 2003 when the earlier photos were taken.)

CD-R with electronic images files at NPS and NYSOPRHP

1. North façade on West 44th Street, facing south (2003).
2. Center entrance bay of north façade, facing south (2003).
3. Detail of walls and ceiling in front hall, main floor, facing north (2003).
4. Stained glass window at north wall of front hall, main floor, facing north (2003).
5. Stair at front hall, main floor, facing southwest. Entrance to library (double doors) at main floor (2003).
6. Library at main floor, facing north (2003).
7. Library at main floor, north and east walls, facing northeast. Museum at balcony level along east wall (2003).
8. Library at main floor, south end beneath curving balcony. Facing west (2003).
9. Committee Room 105 at first floor, facing north (2008).
10. Executive Office Conference Room/Reading Room 102 at first floor, facing southeast (2008).
11. Paneled pocket doors at Reading Room 102, first floor, facing west (2008).

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section 11 Page 3

General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen

Name of Property

New York County, New York

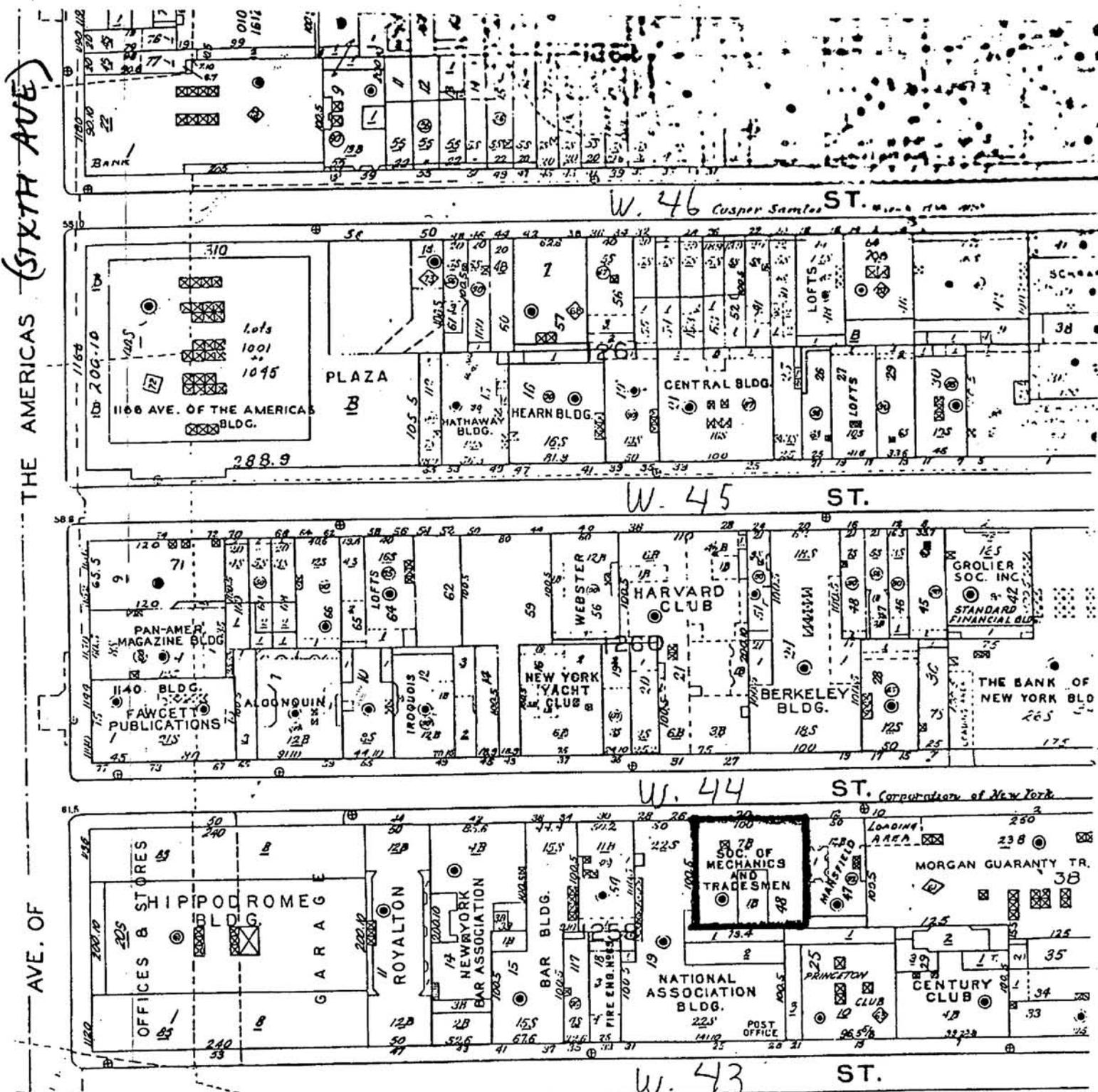
County and State

12. Members' room, first floor, facing northwest (2003).
13. Members' room, first floor, facing south (2003).
14. Museum, first floor. Mossman lock collection, at east balcony above library, facing northeast (2003).
15. Second floor hall, facing east (2008).
16. Second floor hall, facing west (2008).
17. Stair A, at mezzanine, Room 111, facing southeast (2003).
18. Office (room 416) at fourth floor, facing northeast (2008).
19. Classroom (room 404 – lecture hall) at fourth floor, facing south (2008).
20. Classroom 205 at fourth floor, facing west (2008).

Historic Photos (also on CD-R)

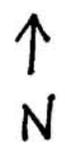
From the collection of the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen.

21. Façade – showing building prior to 1903-05 renovation/addition.
22. Indoor parade ground (now the library) of the Berkeley School showing military drill, ca. 1890s. Facing northeast.
23. Library just prior to 1903-05 renovation, facing southwest.
24. View of classroom, n.d.

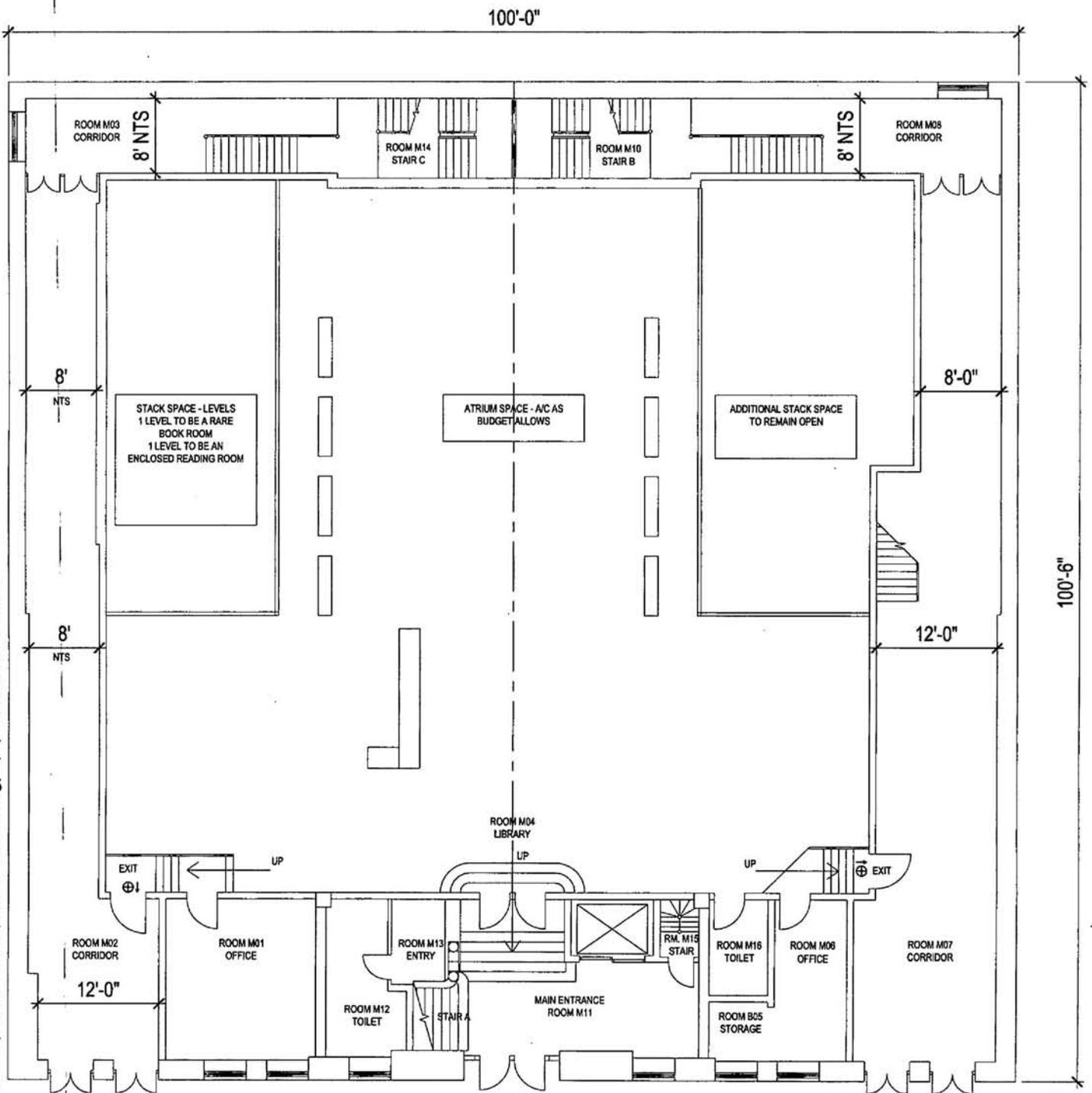


General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen
 20 West 44th Street
 New York County, New York

Sanborn Land Book, 1987-88
 Manhattan, Block 1259, lot 48
 Lot size: 100' wide x 100.5' deep
 Scale: 3/4" = approx. 100'



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44th STREET

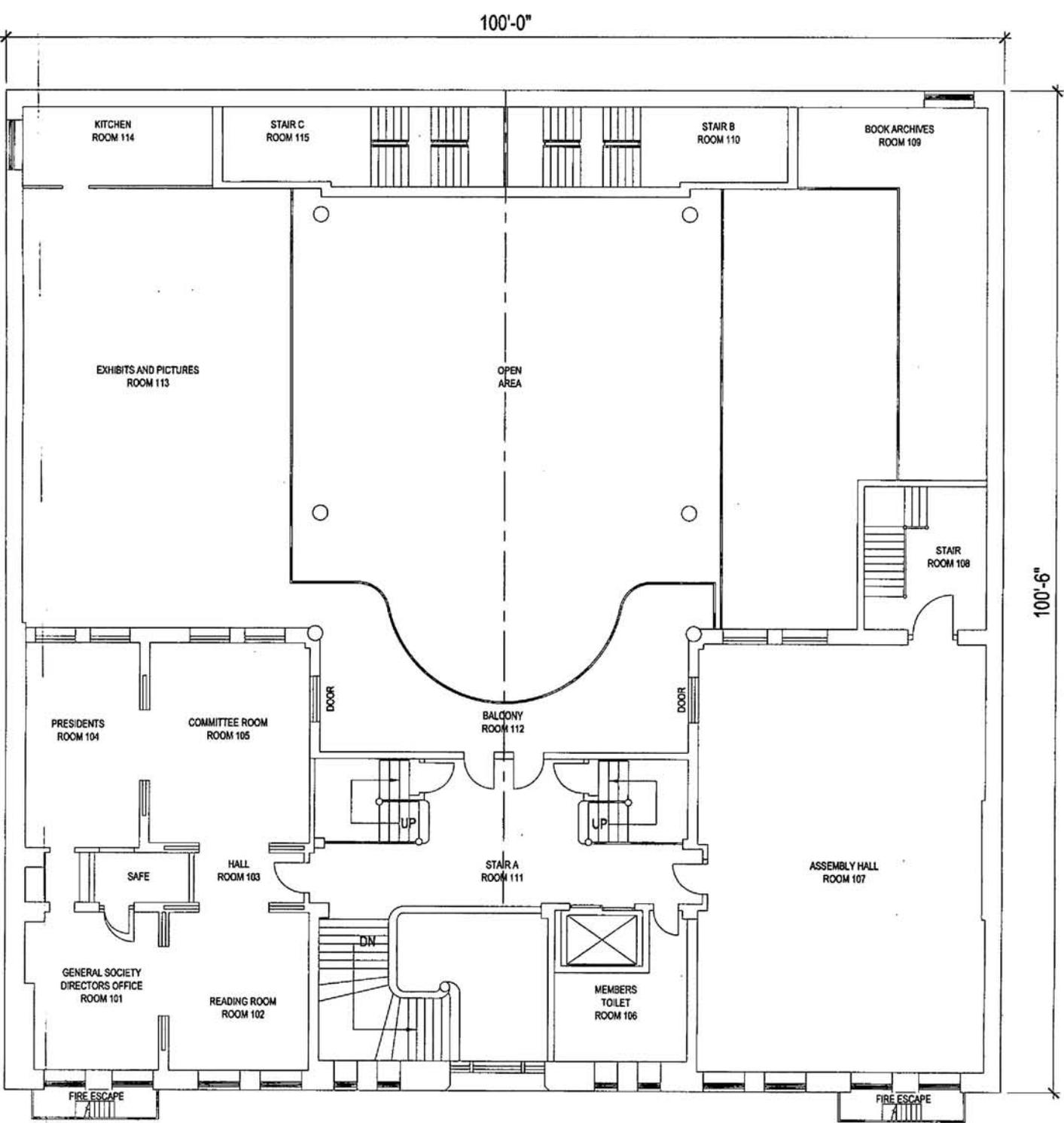
MAIN FLOOR - PLAN VIEW

THE GENERAL SOCIETY
OF
MECHANICS AND TRADESMEN

TITLE:
20 WEST 44th STREET
NEW YORK, NY - 10036
MAIN FLOOR - SPACE DEFINITION

REVISION	DRAWN BY	DATE
ISSUED FOR INFORMATION	...	09-29-99
SCALE: NTS		

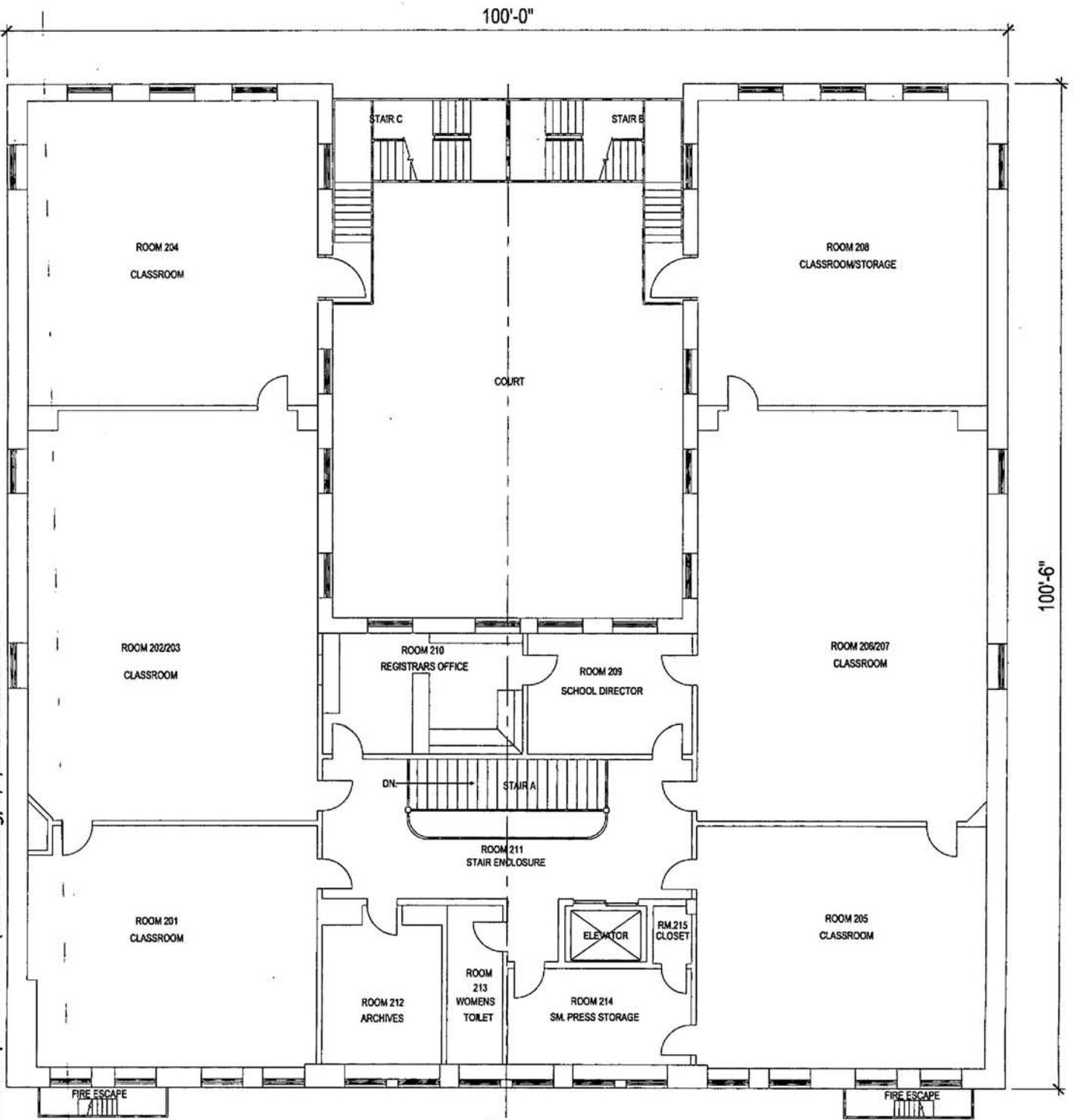
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1st FLOOR - PLAN VIEW

THE GENERAL SOCIETY OF MECHANICS AND TRADESMEN	<small>TITLE</small> 20 WEST 44th STREET NEW YORK, NY - 10036 1st FLOOR - SPACE DEFINITION	<small>REVISION</small>	<small>DRAWN BY</small>	<small>DATE</small>
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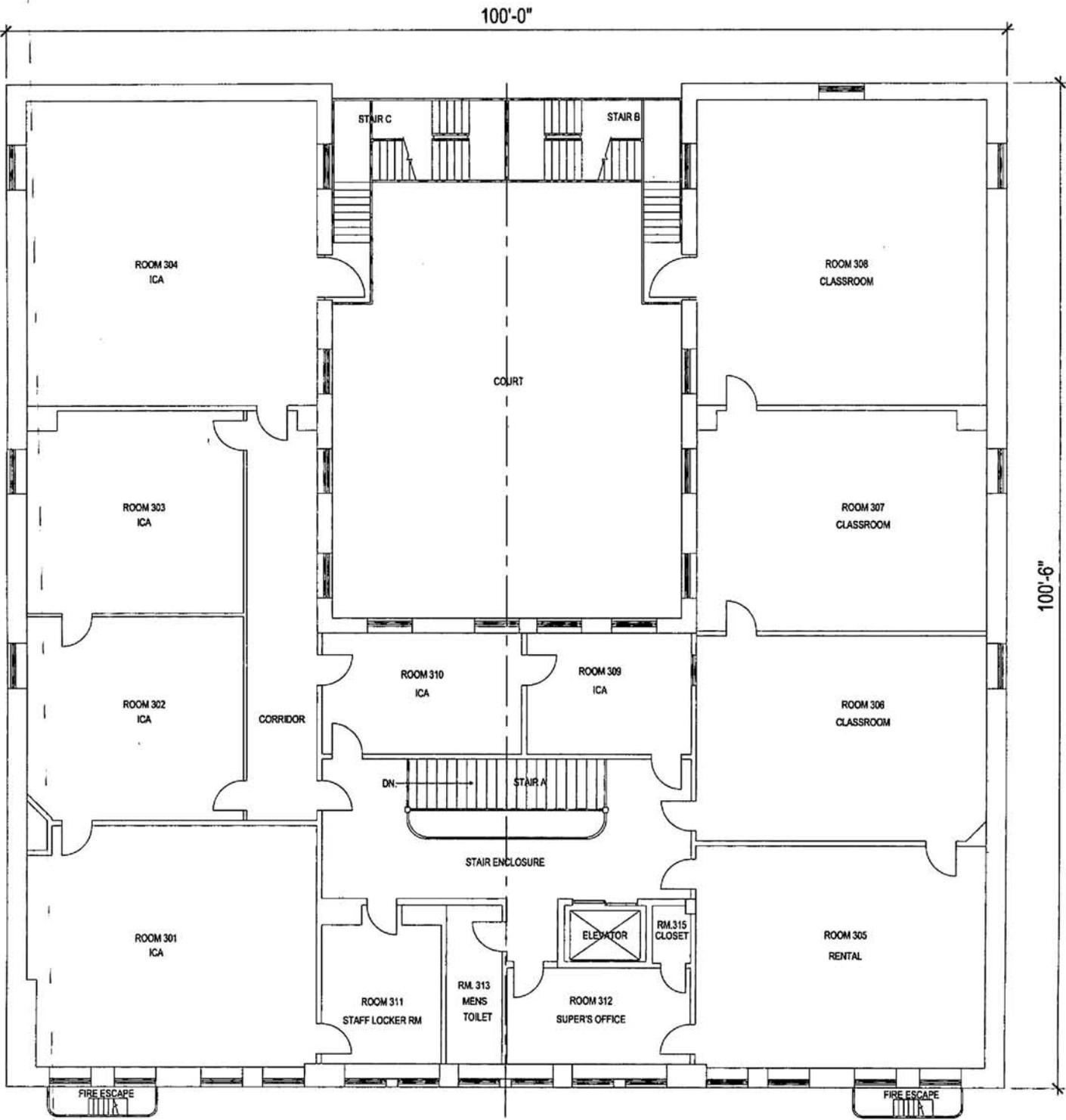
2nd FLOOR - PLAN VIEW

THE GENERAL SOCIETY
OF
MECHANICS AND TRADESMEN

TITLE:
20 WEST 44th STREET
NEW YORK, NY - 10036
2nd FLOOR - SPACE DEFINITION

REVISION	DRAWN BY	DATE
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3rd FLOOR - PLAN VIEW

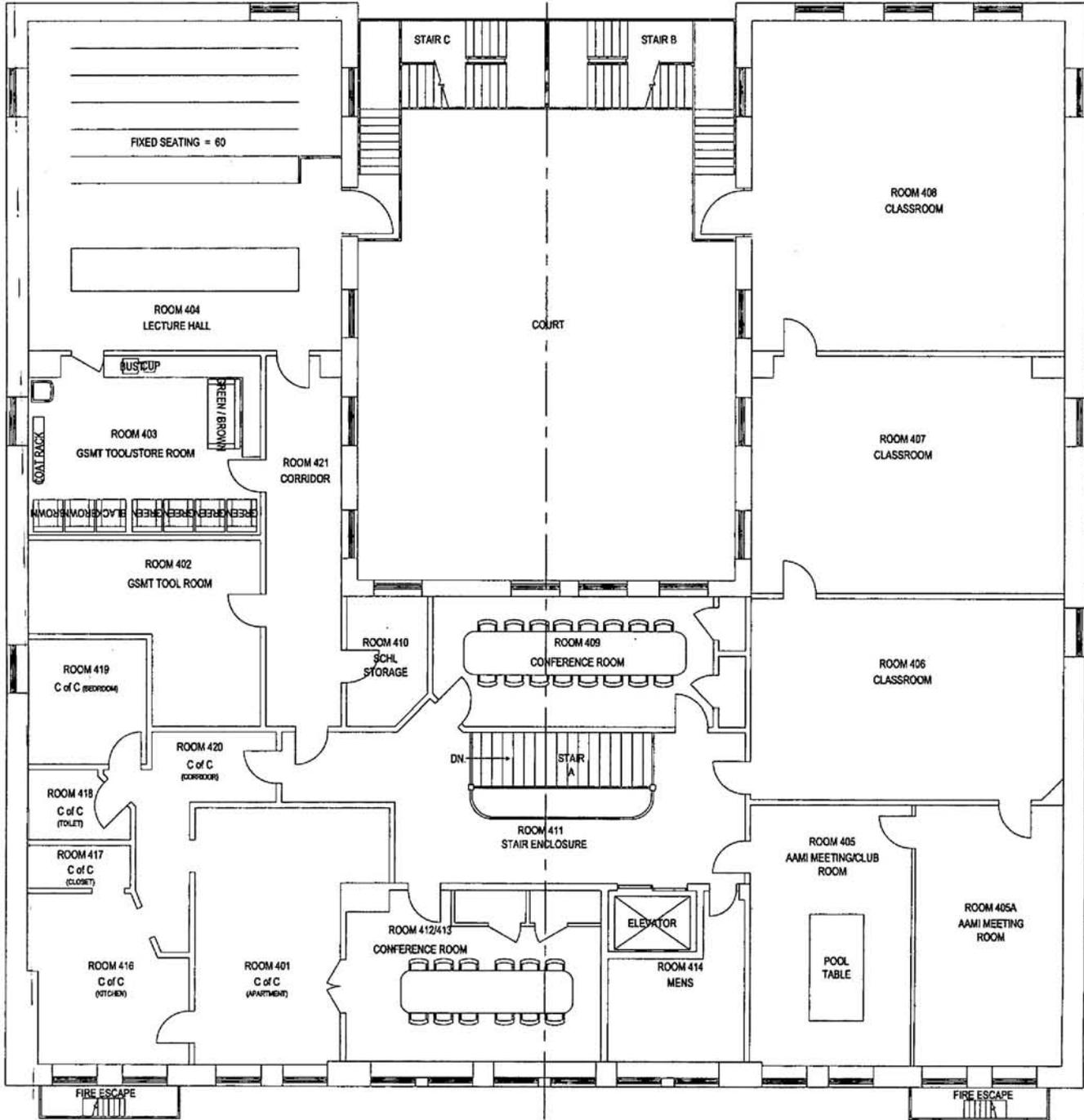
THE GENERAL SOCIETY
OF
MECHANICS AND TRADESMEN

TITLE:
20 WEST 44th STREET
NEW YORK, NY - 10036
3rd FLOOR - SPACE DEFINITION

REVISION	DRAWN BY	DATE
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100'-0"

100'-6"



4th FLOOR - PLAN VIEW

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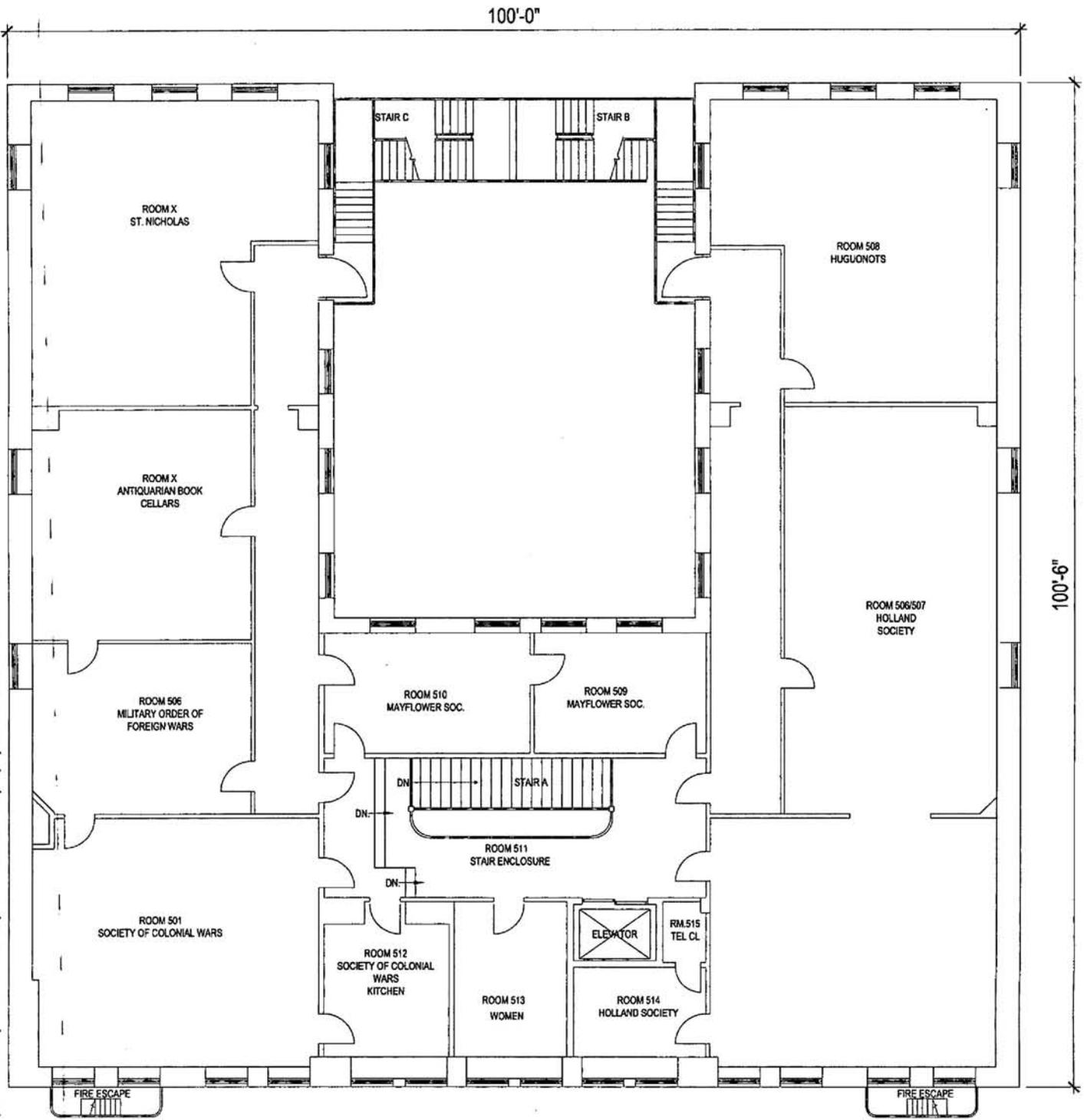
THE GENERAL SOCIETY
OF
MECHANICS AND TRADESMEN

TITLED

20 WEST 44th STREET
NEW YORK, NY - 10036
4th FLOOR - SPACE DEFINITION

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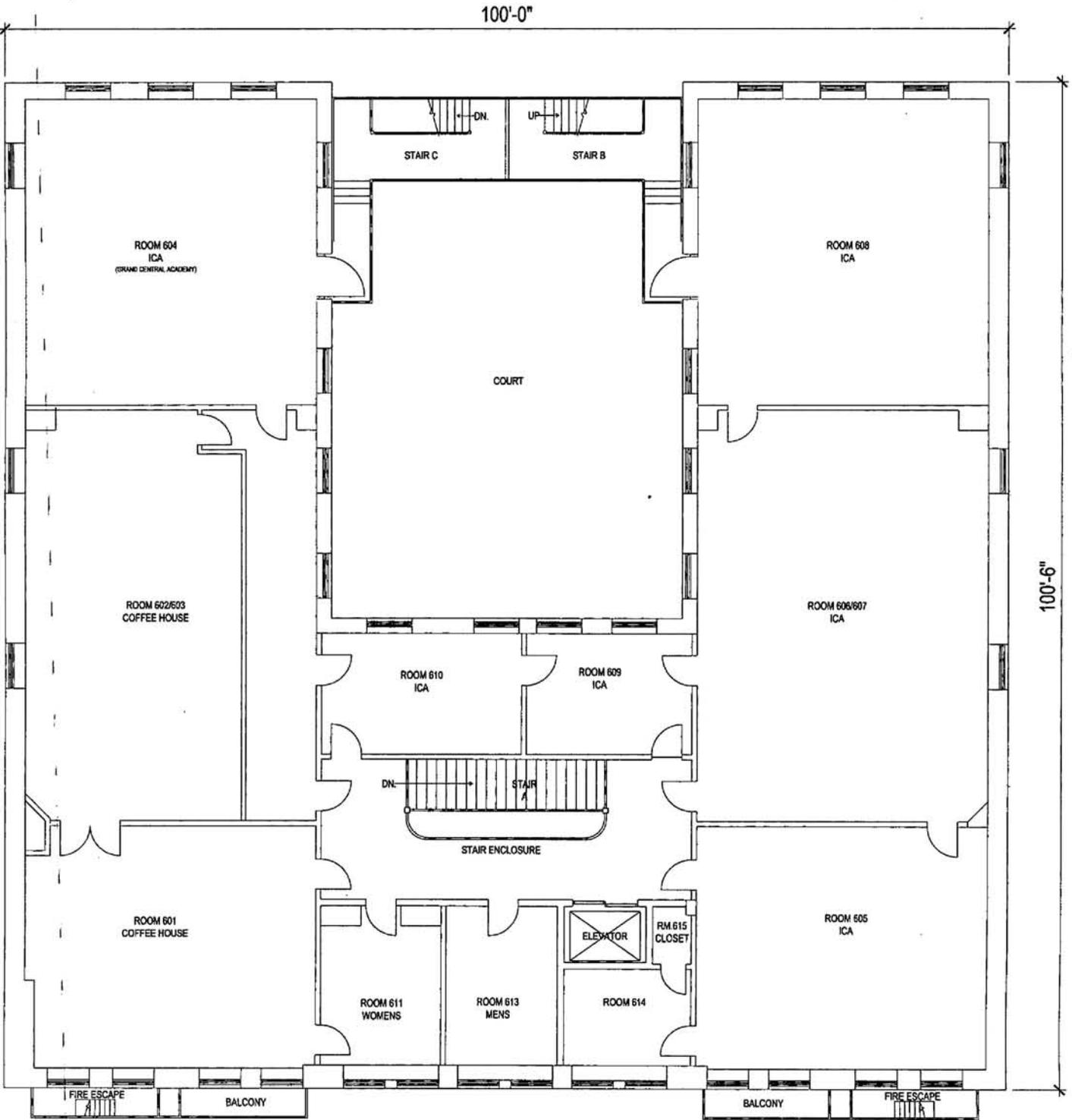
5th FLOOR - PLAN VIEW

THE GENERAL SOCIETY
OF
MECHANICS AND TRADESMEN

TITLE:
20 WEST 44th STREET
NEW YORK, NY - 10036
5th FLOOR - SPACE DEFINITION

REVISION	DRAWN BY	DATE
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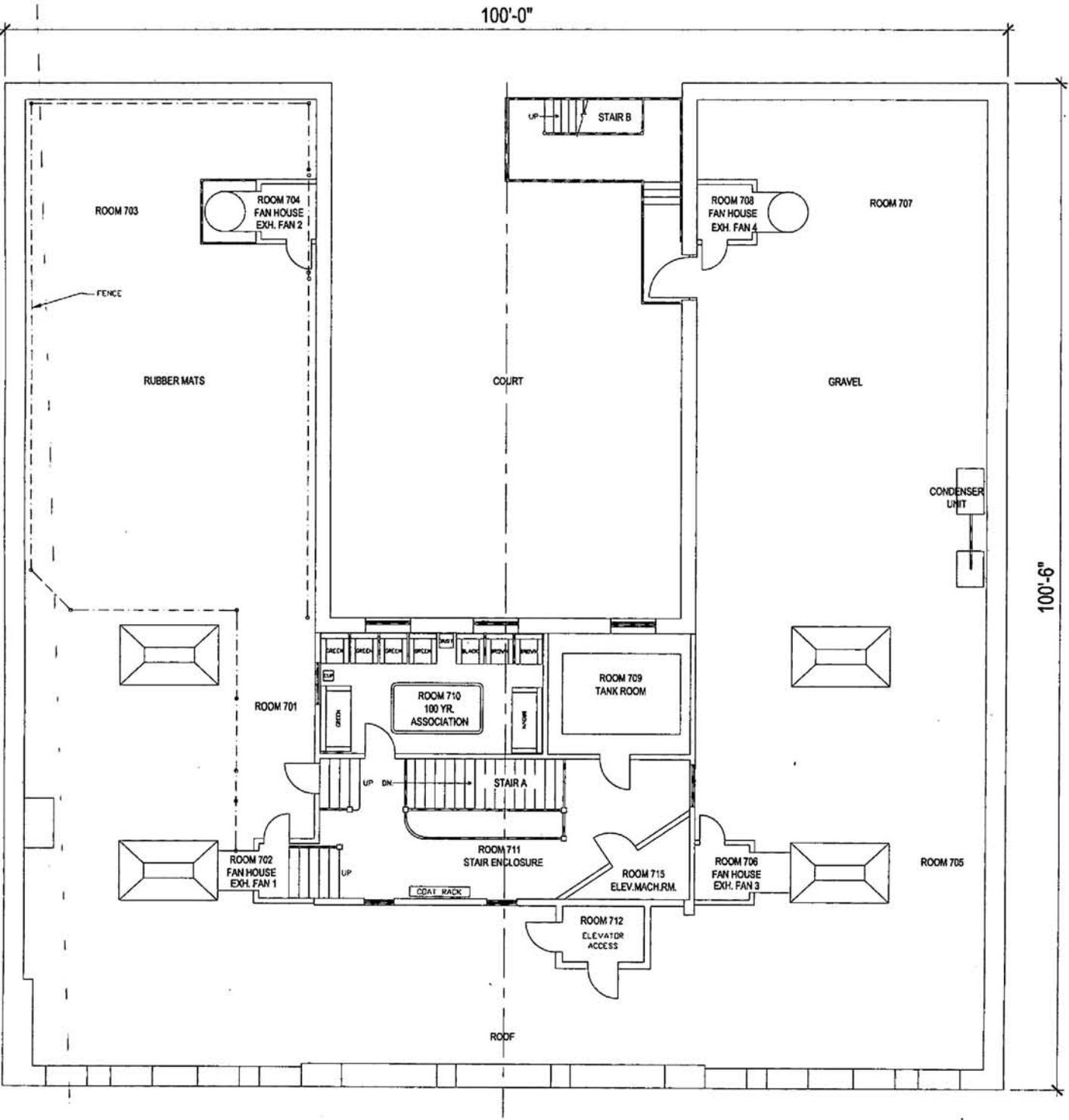
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6th FLOOR - PLAN VIEW

THE GENERAL SOCIETY OF MECHANICS AND TRADESMEN	TITLE: 20 WEST 44th STREET NEW YORK, NY - 10036 6th FLOOR - SPACE DEFINITION	REVISION	DRAWN BY	DATE
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		SCALE: NTS		

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7th FLOOR (ROOF) - PLAN VIEW

THE GENERAL SOCIETY OF MECHANICS AND TRADESMEN	TITLE: 20 WEST 44th STREET NEW YORK, NY - 10036 7th FLOOR - SPACE DEFINITION	REVISION	DRAWN BY	DATE
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100'-0"

100'-6"

UNUSABLE SPACE

PIPE
RISER
ACCESS
ROOM V08

ELEVATOR
ABOVE

SUMP PUMP PIT
ROOM V03

ROOM V10

ROOM V07

ROOM V02

DE-COMMISSIONED FURNACE
ROOM V01

ROOM V04

DE-COMMISSIONED FURNACE
ROOM V05

DE-COMMISSIONED OIL TANK
ROOM V06

VAULT LEVEL - PLAN VIEW

THE GENERAL SOCIETY
OF
MECHANICS AND TRADESMEN

TITLE: 20 WEST 44th STREET
NEW YORK, NY - 10036
VAULT LEVEL- SPACE DEFINITION

REVISION	DRAWN BY	DATE
ISSUED FOR INFORMATION	...	09-29-99
SCALE: NTS		













