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Landmarks Preservation Commission
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BETH HAMEDRASH HAGODOL SYNAGOGUE (originally the Norfolk Street Baptist Church)
60-64 Norfolk Street, Borough of Manhattan. Completed 1850.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 351, Lot 37.

On January 31, 1967 the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Beth Hamedrash Hagodol Synagogue and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site. (Item No. 7). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Four witnesses spoke in favor of designation, including State Senator Paul P. E. Bookson, a speaker representing Congressman Leonard Farbstein, and the rabbi and legal counsel of the congregation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Striking in profile, this smooth-faced stone Synagogue is an interesting example of modified Gothic Revival architecture. Raised on a platform of steps above the street, the recessed center section of the symmetrical facade is flanked by square towers pierced by coupled pointed arched windows that light the side vestibules. The dominant feature of this structure is the main, double entrance door with over-door panel joining it to the tall tripartite arched window, surmounted by a pedimented roof, affixed with the Star of David. A handsome horizontal band of Gothic quatrafoil design meets the spring of the arch of the large central Gothic window and enriches the rather plain facade. At the top of each tower is a square decorative panel of Gothic quatrefoil design.

This great Synagogue has long been considered a landmark by the Greater New York Board of Rabbis, by the Union of Orthodox Congregations of the United States representing three thousand congregations and by the citizens of the community. The Synagogue is noted especially for the services it has rendered to the many orthodox Jews from eastern European countries who migrated to the United States during the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries.

Congregation Beth Hamedrash Hagodol is the oldest Russian Orthodox Synagogue in the country. Founded in 1852, its first building was on Allen Street. The present Synagogue was acquired June 17, 1885 from the Methodist Church and remodeled that year. The congregation has an enrollment of 1400 members and serves more than 250,000 worshippers annually from the entire country. The earliest rabbi was the Russian-trained Abraham Joseph Ash, a successful manufacturer who served without pay until 1873.

The building, now occupied by Beth Hamedrash Hagodol Synagogue, was dedicated in January 1850 as the Norfolk Street Baptist Church. As the neighborhood changed and the city moved uptown so did the Baptists. In 1860 the Methodists purchased the church and kept possession of the property until 1885. An early print published in the New York Almanac of 1851 shows that the towers of the church originally had battlements or crenelations, which were removed from the building when it was remodeled.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

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 Beth Hamedrash Hagodol Synagogue has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Beth Hamedrash Hagodol Synagogue is a striking example of Gothic Revival architecture, that its austere simplicity has dignity and character and that it houses the congregation of the oldest Russian Orthodox Synagogue in America, founded in 1852.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 8-A of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Beth Hamedrash Hagodol Synagogue, 60-64 Norfolk Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 351, Lot 37, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.