

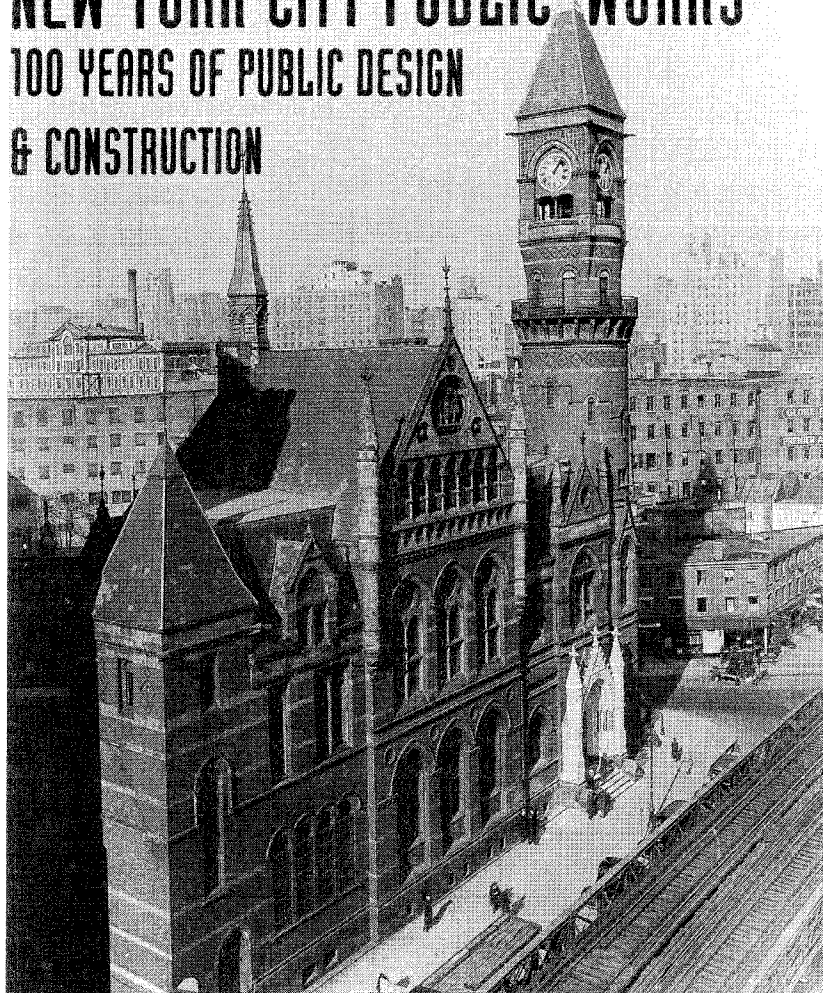
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"The particular business and object of the Society shall be to promote and advance the various engineering sciences which are employed in the government of the City of New York and to elevate the standard of efficiency of engineers employed in the various departments of the city."

—Constitution, Article 1

# Jefferson Market Library Restoration

*by Joseph Pell Lombardi, R. A.*

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***The following introduction was kindly provided by Adrienne Bresnan, FAIA***

In recognition of the beautiful exterior restoration of Jefferson Market Library, the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation awarded the architectural firm of Joseph P. Lombardi their Annual Village Award. They described the project in the following terms: "For a beautiful exterior restoration project which has improved and cared for the best loved of all Village Landmarks." The award is, for the project team, and DGS's, well earned acknowledgement of the dedication which render design and construction services to the citizens of New York City.

The Jefferson Market Courthouse was erected in 1877, was considered to be one of the most beautiful buildings in the U.S.A. at the end of the nineteenth century. Designed by two prominent architects Frederick C. Withers and Calvert Vaux, the majestic Gothic and Renaissance style building has a commanding presence on Sixth Ave.

In 1967, the courthouse was extensively remodeled to serve as a branch of the New York City Public Library. This renovation was, according to Christopher Gray in his recent "Streetscape" article in the New York Sunday Times, "the first real instance of a successful historic preservation project in New York City at a time when skepticism to such a novelty remained very high."

The New York Public Library with the support of the Manhattan Borough president saved the building from possible abandonment and ruin. "Old Jeff" is a unique cultural institution; it is both a symbol of literature and architecture. It is one of the great public work treasures in the City of New York being both a library and a landmark. It is a record of civilization which both in feeling and form gives us a sense of another age. It brings us to the 21st century as a splendid expression of design and construction.

***Following is the Speech by Joseph Pell Lombardi, R. A.***

As evidence of our contrariness, our beloved City is, in fact, becoming more and more livable each day. As continuing proof, here we are celebrating the exterior restoration and the reinstallation of the original slate roof on the lovable Jefferson Market Courthouse, or "Old Jeff" as it is affectionately called.

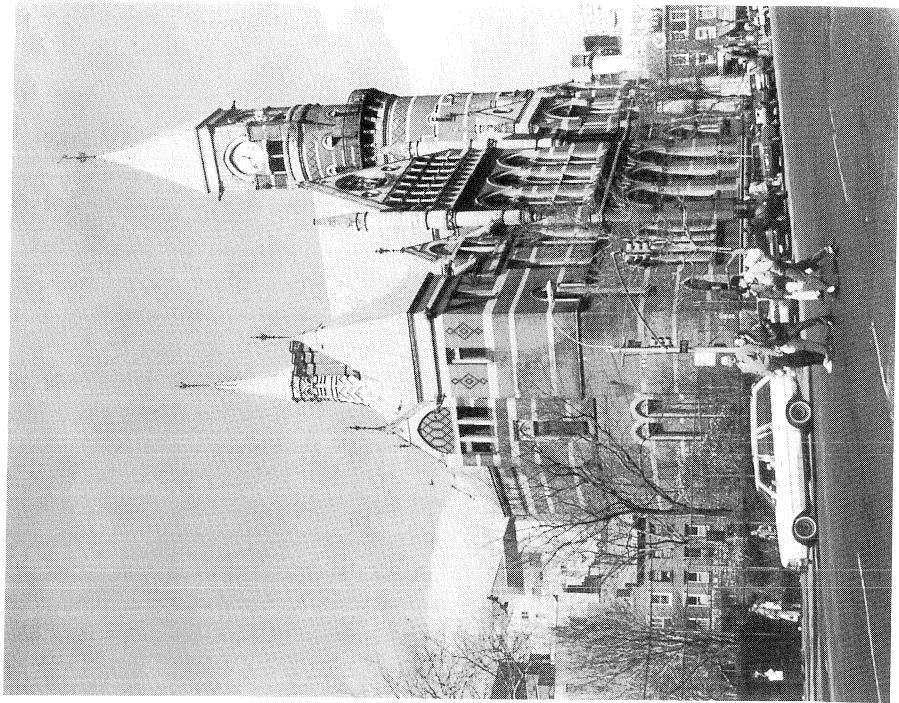
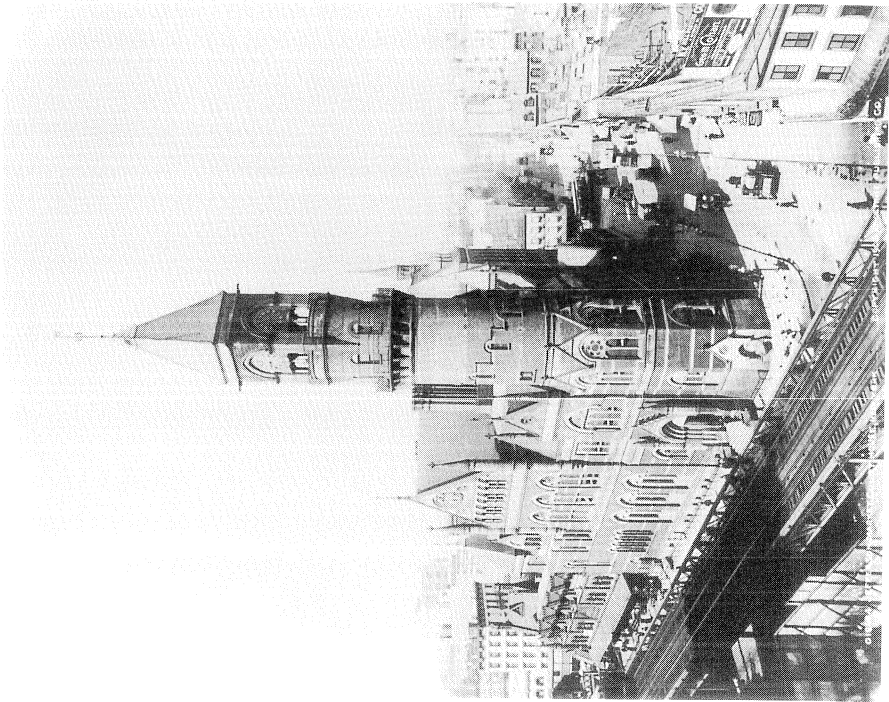


Photo prior to restoration showing sheet metal roof.



1906 photograph of Jefferson Market Courthouse with original slate roof.  
photo by Detroit Publishing Co., 1906

This small triangular block bounded by West 10th Street, Sixth Avenue and Greenwich Avenue became the center of Greenwich Village when a large market was built here in 1833. Named the Jefferson Market in honor of our third president, Thomas Jefferson, the site contained, in addition to the busy market, a police court, a prison and a volunteer fire station, all clustering around a central wooden watch tower from which fires could be spotted and the volunteer firemen summoned by the ringing of a bell.

By the 1870's the site had fallen into decline with The New York Times describing the site as "everything that is bad, mean and unsavory." In 1873, the New York City Board of Alderman directed the Commissioner of Public Works to clear the site "as the same is an obstruction to the streets, a nuisance to the neighborhood, and is detrimental to the public health."

In 1874 the City hired the architect, Frederick Clarke Withers, to redesign the site. Born in England in 1828, Withers had immigrated to New York in 1852 at the invitation of Andrew Jackson Downing, to assist Downing together with Calvert Vaux in the preparation of architectural designs. Withers soon distinguished himself as a church architect. In 1873, he was the author of the highly professional architectural book, *Church Architecture*. This sumptuous Victorian object, profusely illustrated with examples of his church designs, was among the first American works on architecture to be considered literature. In *Church Architecture*, Withers compiled a definitive summation of the principles of "correct ecclesiology" that helped to make Gothic the traditional style of American ecclesiastical architecture.

Withers' 1874 design for the Jefferson Market site incorporated its four functions as a police court, fire observatory, prison and a market in a tightly knit architectural scheme which would become one of the nations best-thought-through urban renewal projects. The complex Withers created consisted of three distinct architectural elements: the handsome Courthouse facing Sixth Avenue, its attached lyrical fire and bell tower at the corner of Sixth Avenue and West Tenth Street and, the now demolished, five story prison at the corner of Greenwich Avenue and West Tenth Street. The fourth element, the original market, remained at the corner of Sixth and Greenwich Avenues. The courthouse and tower, comprising the police court on the ground floor, the district court on the second floor and the 100' fire look-out with its alarm bell and four-faced clock in the tower, was Withers' masterpiece. It's flamboyant originality was in vivid contrast to the conservatism of his previous work and his book. Its romantic silhouette has endeared itself to New Yorkers since its completion.

An opulent profusion of ornament embellishes the elevations, especially the Sixth Avenue facade. Enshrined at the bottom of the bell tower is a water fountain with reliefs depicting the weary traveller and the life-giving pelican. The mighty City seal graces the main gable and a frieze, representing the trial from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, occurs in the tympanum over the window above the main entrance.

In 1885, when architectural design was moving away from mid-nineteenth century flamboyancy to the more stolid Richardsonian style, the Courthouse was

still voted, by a poll of architects, as the fifth finest work of architecture in the country following Trinity Church in Boston, the United States Capitol, the Vanderbilt Mansion and Trinity Church in New York, where Withers had added the Astor Memorial Altar and the Sacristy. But, the eyes of stylism, after the turn of the century, temporarily saw the Courthouse as old-fashioned. It re-entered the consciousness of architects in 1906 when Harry Thaw was arraigned here for the scandalous murder of the famous architect, Stanford White. But, by 1945, the building had ceased to be a Courthouse and began to house a succession of municipal agencies including Civil Defense organizations, the Police Academy and, for a while, HIP - the health insurance program. By the late 1950's, the building was shabby and neglected. A local bank had plans drawn for an apartment house on the site.

A campaign was begun by concerned Villagers to save the Courthouse. Under Margot Gayle and Judge Harold Birns, then City Commissioner for Housing and Buildings, the Village Neighborhood Committee for the Clock on the Jefferson Market Courthouse was formed in 1959, as a clever initial step. Its first act was to telephone Robert Wagner, the then-Mayor of New York, on Christmas

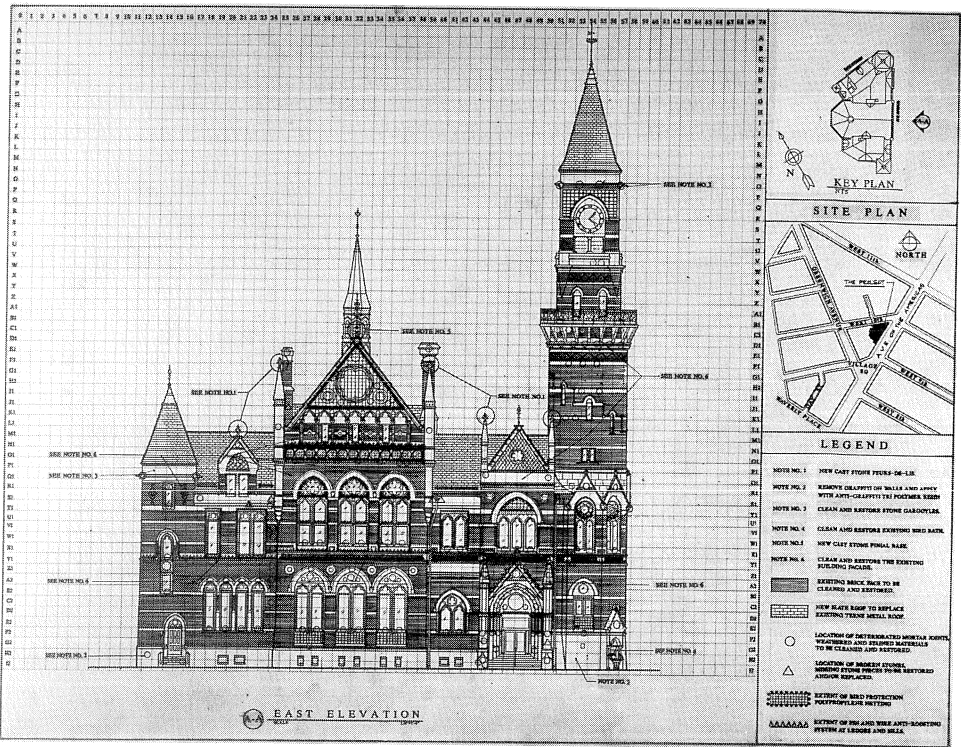


photo courtesy of the Office of Joseph Pell Lombardi  
East elevation of restoration construction drawings by the office of Joseph Pell Lombardi.

Eve, to request the rehabilitation of the clock as a present to Greenwich Village. On its own, the committee raised \$3,400, enough to install electrical clock machinery and have it in operation by September of 1961. This, of course, was the thin end of the wedge. Hearing that the New York Public Library wanted a new branch in the Village, and that the Jefferson Market area was a possible site, the Villagers formed a new committee, the Committee for a Library in the Jefferson Market Courthouse. It included such persons as Maurice Evans, Jane Jacobs, Lewis Mumford, Philip Wittenberg and e.e. cummings, who lived across Tenth Street in Patchin Place. Around this same time, Professor Harold Edelman and his architectural students at Pratt Institute constructed models showing possible ways in which the building could be used. The committee obtained the valuable moral support of Mayor Wagner,

James Felt, who was chairman of the City Planning Commission, and Edward Dudley, who was the Borough President of Manhattan. As a result, the Department of Public Works, in 1962, asked Giorgio Cavaglieri, an architect member of the committee, to do a feasibility study on the proposal. Cavaglieri concluded that rehabilitation as a library was feasible. In October 1964, the plans and working drawings were approved as designed and work was begun.

The main courtroom on the first floor became the Children's Reading Room and the Judge's chambers and courtroom on the second floor, with its 37 foot ceiling, became the Adult's Reading Room. The handsome vaulted ceilings and arches of the basement were turned into the Reference Room.

In November of 1967, when the New York Public Library Director, Edward G. Freehofer, declared the new library officially opened, Ms. Gayle shouted BRAVO!



photo by Lisa Clifford

Current photo of restored building with new slate roof to match roof as originally constructed in 1877.



In 1994, Joseph Pell Lombardi & Associates, Architects, in conjunction with the New York City Department of General Services and the New York Public Library, oversaw a complete exterior restoration financed by the Manhattan Borough President, Ruth Messinger and the Mayor's Office. Our first task was a thorough investigation of all visual and written records. Based upon early views, we were able to determine the exact configuration and size of the original slate roof and the missing elements. The work eventually included, as delineated in our plans and specifications, the reinstallation of the original slate material roof with its associated copper flashing, copper belfry roof and repair of the gutter system. The roof supporting structural truss system was analyzed, repaired and repainted. In addition, the entire facade was cleaned with all masonry work restored or, as needed, replaced with new cast stone elements. The masonry joints were repointed, the south chimney rebuilt and the decorative painting of the front redone. The wrought iron finials, windvane and railings were repaired with missing pieces fabricated and installed. Missing snow guards, bird protection and graffiti-proofing addressed the practical problems.

Finally the face of the clock, which had first led to "Old Jeff's" rescue, was cleaned and repainted. The 1967 words of Ada Louise Huxtable, the famed New York Times architectural critic, continue to be even more applicable now, after 30 years.

*"The Old Jeff gives more than twice as much to its users and the City. It is both a library and a Landmark. The atmosphere in which literature and knowledge are dispensed is part of a cultural package. At Old Jeff there is also the literature of architecture: cut stone faces and flowers, soaring stained glass windows, the feeling, form and sensibility of another age. This, too, is the record of civilization."*

All of us today can feel assured that we have done our best to pass "Old Jeff" on to the 21st century with all of that feeling, form and sensibility of another age, which is indeed the continuing record of civilization.