

AUSTIN, NICHOLS & CO. WAREHOUSE, 184 Kent Avenue (aka 184-98 Kent Avenue and 1-41 North 3rd Street). Built 1914-15; Cass Gilbert, architect; Turner Construction Company, general contractor.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 2348, Lot 1.

On July 26, 2005 the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the former Austin, Nichols & Co. Warehouse, and the proposed designation of the related landmark site. The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Twenty-seven people spoke in favor of designation, including representatives of the Brooklyn Heights Association, DUMBO Neighborhood Association, Friends of the Upper East Side, Cass Gilbert Society, Greenpoint Waterfront Association, Historic Districts Council, Institute of Classical Architecture in America, McCarren Park Conservancy, Modern Architecture Working Group, Municipal Art Society, New York Landmarks Conservancy, North Brooklyn Alliance, Preservation League of New York State, Metropolitan Chapter of the Victorian Society in America, Society for the Architecture of the City, Roebling Chapter of the Society for Industrial Archeology, Vinegar Hill Neighborhood Association, and the Williamsburg Waterfront Preservation Alliance. Six representatives of the property's owner, 184 Kent Avenue Associates, testified in opposition to designation. City Council member David Yassky and State Senator Martin Connor also spoke in opposition to designation. The Commission has received numerous letters on this issue, including more than five hundred postcards from mostly Williamsburg residents and letters from the architectural historians Andrew S. Dolkart, Sharon Irish, Sarah Bradford Landau, and Robert A. M. Stern in support of designation, as well as a letter in opposition from Congressman Edolphus Towns. Brooklyn Community Board No. 1 took no action on the proposed designation.



Summary

The Austin, Nichols & Co. Warehouse is one of the largest and most significant structures on the Brooklyn waterfront. Financed by Havemeyer & Elder, it was designed and built to serve Austin, Nichols & Co., the world's largest wholesale grocery business. Established by James E. Nichols and five former associates of Fitts & Austin in 1879, the company grew to occupy nine buildings in Manhattan before moving to the Eastern District Terminal. To realize his first architectural venture, Horace Havemeyer (1886-1957) assembled a team of seasoned professionals, including Cass Gilbert (1859-1934), architect of the U. S. Custom House and Woolworth Building. Construction of the warehouse began in January 1914 and the plant was fully operational by March 1915. Measuring 179 by 440 feet, the plant was described by a contemporary writer as a "Model of Modern Construction and Efficiency," integrating piers, railway tracks, freight

elevators, conveyor belts, and pneumatic tubes. Under the Sunbeam Foods label, all types of products were prepared, processed and packaged in the building, from dried fruit and coffee, to cheese, olives, and peanut butter. In 1934 Austin Nichols entered the liquor business and the building remained its headquarters until the late 1950s. The project's engineer was Gunvald Aus and Turner Construction Company served as general contractor. Founded in 1902, Turner erected numerous industrial buildings in the metropolitan area and had a reputation for being both reliable and innovative. The exposed concrete exterior is austere and monumental. Six stories tall, the simply-treated elevations are unusual in that they slope inward or batten and are crowned by a coved or flared cornice, features that led critic Arthur S. McEntee to describe the warehouse as "an excellent example of the modern adaptation of Egyptian architecture to present-requirements of commercialism." The Egyptian Revival style is rare in the United States and the warehouse is one of the only examples in New York City. The windows, grouped in pairs and threes, are arranged to create a subtle and insistent rhythm. Narrow in width and connected by rounded mullions, the fenestration has a gentle vertical thrust. European architects, such as Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius, identified this type of industrial building as inspiration for the development of European modernism. The Austin, Nichols & Co. Warehouse remains one of the most impressive structures on the East River; not only is it a superb and high visible example of early twentieth century engineering, but it is also one of the earliest reinforced concrete warehouses in the United States designed by a nationally prominent architect.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Brooklyn's Working Waterfront

The Austin, Nichols & Co. Warehouse is one of the largest and most impressive structures on the Brooklyn waterfront. Located beside the East River in Williamsburg, between North 3rd and 4th Streets, this six-story concrete building was financed by Havemeyer & Elder, owners of the adjoining Eastern District Terminal. New York City established itself as a major port during the first half of the nineteenth century, with ship-building facilities, cargo terminals, and piers. Though John Jackson's shipyard (later known as the Brooklyn Navy Yard) was located on Wallabout Bay by the 1790s, it was not until the 1850s that a substantial number of these businesses had moved to, or were established in, Brooklyn. Most were located close to Brooklyn Heights (opposite Lower Manhattan), or in Red Hook where the Atlantic Basin was built between 1836 and 1849. In subsequent years, activity spread south to Sunset Park, where businessman Irving T. Bush began construction of a 21-building complex in 1890, and north toward Williamsburg and Greenpoint.

Founded as part of the town of Bushwick in the mid-seventeenth century, Williamsburg was incorporated in 1827.¹ At this time, a gridiron plan was adopted, with streets generally running perpendicular from the waterfront. Most commercial activity was concentrated here, with residential blocks to the east. Williamsburg grew quickly and by 1852 it was the twentieth largest city in the United States. Three years later, it became part of the city of Brooklyn and was commonly referred to as the Eastern District. Though ferry service, from Manhattan to Grand Street and South 7th Street, was important to the area's economic development, it was the planning and construction of the second East River crossing, the Williamsburg Bridge (Leffert L. Buck and Henry Hornbostel), that caused a dramatic surge in population. Proposed in 1883, the bridge was opened with considerable fanfare in 1903, serving all forms of transportation. Many immigrants would move from the Lower East Side to tenements in the area, making Williamsburg, especially the blocks immediately north of the bridge, some of the most crowded in the nation.

Williamsburg and the Havemeyers

By the last decades of the nineteenth century, most of the Williamsburg waterfront was controlled by the Havemeyer family. Following a brief apprenticeship in London, brothers William (c. 1770-1851) and Frederick C. Havemeyer (1774-1841) immigrated to Manhattan in 1803. For nearly a half century, the family operated a sugar refinery on Van Dam Street, relocating to Williamsburg in 1856.² In partnership with Dwight Townsend, Frederick C. Havemeyer, Jr. established a facility on South 3rd Street. At this site, raw sugar was unloaded and processed for sale. By the early 1870s, a thousand men were employed here and daily capacity had more than tripled, to a million

pounds per day. Many rival plants were active in the area and a reporter for the *Brooklyn Eagle* described it as “the greatest sugar refining center in the world.”³ Under Henry O. Havemeyer (1847-1907), Havemeyer & Elder dominated the field and in 1887 they established the Sugar Refineries Company, commonly called the “Sugar Trust,” including seven Brooklyn firms.⁴

Horace Havemeyer (1886-1957), son of Henry, began to work for the American Sugar Refining Company in 1905 and served as director from 1907-10.⁵ The Havemeyers also operated the Eastern District Terminal, a waterfront rail facility that extended from North 3rd to 10th Streets. Established in 1867, for nearly one hundred years it provided an aqueous link between New Jersey (and points west) and Brooklyn. Served by tugs, floats, lighters and locomotives, the terminal was the ideal location for a large warehouse.

Austin, Nichols & Co.⁶

Austin, Nichols & Co. was formed in 1879, consisting of James E. Nichols and five former associates of Fitts & Austin, a Manhattan grocer founded by Friend P. Fitts (1822-1899) in 1855. The company occupied a series of increasingly large buildings in the wholesale food district, now called Tribeca. From 1890 to 1914 the headquarters was located at 55-61 Hudson Street (part of Tribeca West Historic District), a ten-story fireproof structure designed by Edward Kendall of McKim, Mead & White. Though the building contained nearly three acres of floor space, the company occupied eight other structures, with about fifty departments spread throughout lower Manhattan, Greenwich Village, and Harlem. Canned goods was the largest department, sold chiefly under the Sunbeam Foods label. Many products were imported from Europe, but others were prepared on site or packaged for distribution, such as coffee, tea, and olives.

Harry Balfe (b. 1865), vice president and general manager of Austin, Nichols & Co., told the *New York Times* in June 1912:

It only takes half any eye . . . to see under what conditions the wholesale grocery business is conducted in this congested district. There is no longer room for the handling of our goods, and for three years we have been on the outlook for a better location. We have 100 trucks and 40 automobile trucks carrying 3 to 4 tons of goods. Conditions have become so bad that some firms have had to turn business away . . .⁷

Several sites in Brooklyn were considered, including waterfront locations near the Fulton Ferry terminal, at Bush Terminal in Sunset Park, and in Williamsburg. Though all of these facilities were new or soon to be constructed, the Eastern District Terminal was chosen for various reasons, especially its proximity to the new Williamsburg Bridge and a large pool of potential employees. The move was officially confirmed in April 1913 and a long term lease was signed in late November 1913. The *Real Estate Record and Guide* called Austin Nichols the terminal’s “first notable acquisition from Manhattan” and reported “that it was believed that other wholesale grocer firms are likely to follow.”⁸

Cass Gilbert (1859-1934)

Horace Havemeyer resigned from the American Sugar Refining Company in November 1910. As head of Havemeyer & Elder, he sought to expand activity at the Eastern District Terminal. One of his first architectural ventures was the Austin, Nichols & Co. Warehouse, a colossal structure that was built to house one, if not the largest, wholesale grocer in the world. To design the \$1 million facility, he hired an architect of considerable renown. Cass Gilbert was a logical choice; as architect of the Woolworth Building he had proven his ability to both design impressive commercial structures and incorporate modern construction techniques. While many warehouses were built in the metropolitan area during the early twentieth century, few, if any, were designed by such a highly regarded architect. *The Real Estate Record and Guide* observed:

. . . it is interesting to note that an architect of Mr. Gilbert’s professional standing is furnishing the design, concrete warehouses heretofore erected in New York are generally without distinction, having for the most part been planned exclusively from the point of view of the engineer.”⁹

Trained at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the mid-1870s, Gilbert enjoyed a successful practice in his hometown of St. Paul, Minnesota, before moving to New York City in 1899. He gained national prominence by

winning successive commissions to design the Minnesota State Capital (1895-1905) and the U. S. Custom House (1899-1907, a designated New York City Landmark and Interior). In subsequent years, Gilbert became a leading skyscraper designer, responsible for such acclaimed works as the West Street Building (1905-7, a designated New York City Landmark) and Woolworth Building (1910-13, a designated New York City Landmark and Interior).

Havemeyer certainly appreciated Gilbert's achievements. His parents, who built 1 East 66th Street (1889, demolished), a mansion with remarkable interiors designed by Louis Comfort Tiffany, had assembled one of the most important art collections in the United States. Many of the paintings were by late nineteenth-century French painters, including Edgar Degas, Edouard Manet, and Paul Cezanne. When his mother, Louisine Elder Havemeyer, passed away in 1929, Horace oversaw the donation of his parent's collection, as well as additional works, totaling nearly two thousand pieces, to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Elected a "benefactor" of the museum, he also served as a trustee of the Frick Collection.¹⁰

Gilbert, in contrast to many contemporary firms, such as the architects McKim, Mead & White and Delano & Aldrich, never developed a signature style. In 1908 he wrote:

My friends have sometimes wondered why I do not always work in one style, but my response to this is that I find beauty in so many different things that I like to develop a subject in the style which seems best adapted to the purpose.¹¹

During his prolific career, he incorporated Beaux Arts, Italian Renaissance, French Gothic, and even Assyrian forms, into his designs. Stylistic choices, Gilbert later claimed, were the "outcome of a condition not the result of theory. It is logical and not creative in idea"¹²

Though Gilbert was responsible for a great number of important civic structures and skyscrapers, he also designed many fine utilitarian buildings. In St. Paul, Minnesota, he built several warehouses: the Northwest Realty Company Warehouse (1893-94), the Paul H. Gotzian Building (1894-95), and the Fireproof Storage Warehouse for the U. S. Realty Company (c. 1895-99, now Theatre de la Jeune Lune). Like many late nineteenth century warehouses in New York City, the first two were designed in the Romanesque Revival style, with large round-arched windows. The U. S. Realty project, however, was approached differently. Faced in red brick, the street façade has small windows set within monumental pointed arches that give the warehouse its distinctive neo-Gothic character. This solution not only anticipates the style of the Woolworth Building, but the Austin Nichols Warehouse as well, in which prominent abstract forms, rather than three-dimensional detail, are used to create visual interest. He also designed rail facilities, including major depots and passenger stations in Minnesota, Connecticut and New York. Though the chief purpose of these buildings was to provide transportation, many of the elements -- multiple train tracks, platforms, elevators and loading docks -- would also be used in the Williamsburg warehouse.

Gilbert's office began work on the Austin Nichols project in 1912 or early 1913. With the tenant's lease on Hudson Street set to expire at the end of 1914, there was great pressure to proceed. Throughout the process, numerous meetings were held, attended by Havemeyer, Gilbert, Balfe, and others. Despite pressure to cut costs, Havemeyer asserted that he wanted the warehouse to be "a first-class first-class building and not a first-class second class building."¹³ Gilbert shared these sentiments, claiming that a well-designed commercial structure provides more than utility. He used H. H. Richardson's Marshall Field Warehouse (Chicago, 1885-88, demolished) as an example, saying said that "a building of dignity commensurate with the standing of such a company was a valuable and advertising and business asset."¹⁴

Turner Construction Company¹⁵

By mid-1913, specifications for the warehouse had been determined and several buildings on the site were demolished. Gunvald Aus (1861-1950) was hired as structural engineer and Gilbert asked him to prepare separate plans for reinforced concrete and steel. Aus collaborated with Gilbert on many projects, beginning with the dome of the Minnesota State Capital. Most of these projects were steel framed but Aus told Havemeyer that he felt comfortable with either material. Though concrete was used widely by 1910 and acknowledged to be less expensive than steel, Gilbert hoped that "suggestions from contractors" could be used to their advantage. The warehouse was put out to bid in October 1913 and by late November, the Turner Construction Company, specializing in reinforced concrete construction, had been selected.

Founded by Henry Chandlee Turner in 1902, the firm was responsible for many of the largest and most important industrial buildings in New York and New Jersey. Trained as a civil engineer, after college he worked with Ernest L. Ransome, the first major American builder to use reinforced concrete. Through an agreement with his former employer, Turner enjoyed exclusive patent rights to the Ransome system in the metropolitan area. This arrangement greatly benefited Turner, who following minor jobs for the new IRT subway system, built numerous structures for J. B. King & Co., Robert Gair, Irving Bush, and the Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company. To highlight the company's record, frequent letters and postcards were sent to Gilbert, including images of the recently completed A&P warehouse in Jersey City, which received an award from the art and architectural committee of the National Association of Cement Users in 1913. In subsequent years, Turner was responsible for many important structures, in both reinforced concrete and steel. Notable examples include the Breakers Hotel (Schultz & Weaver, 1926) in Palm Beach, Florida; Bloomingdale's Department Store (Starrett & Van Vleck, 1930); the General Motors Pavilion (Norman Bel Geddes) at the 1939 New York World's Fair; the Chase Manhattan Bank Building (Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, 1955-60); Lincoln Center (various architects, begun 1960), and the Hearst Headquarters (Norman Foster), currently under construction. The firm celebrated its centennial in 2002.

Gilbert worked closely with Aus and Turner to meet the deadline. Plans, filed with the Brooklyn Bureau of Buildings on January 12, 1914, after some adjustments, were approved on April 22, 1914. Two mixing plants were installed at the site and the concreting began in March 1914. The number of workers gradually increased during the year, reaching a height of 672 men by June 1914. Construction was substantially complete in September 1914 and by March 1915 the plant was fully operational.¹⁶ The rapid pace of construction did not go unnoticed. *Engineering News* reported that "records in concrete construction were made . . . the remarkable progress made in its construction is indicative of what can be done in reinforced concrete with proper organization and supervision."¹⁷

The Design

Gilbert's completed design is austere and monumental, relying on scale and proportion, rather than three-dimensional ornament, to create one of the most visually prominent structures on the Brooklyn waterfront. A building's silhouette, meaning the relationship between the width and height, length and width, was extremely important to Gilbert. In 1929 he explained that:

. . . the greatest element of monumental architecture is good proportion. No matter how ornate or how simple and plain a structure may be, in the last analysis, its principal claim to beauty lies in its proportion, not in its adornment.¹⁸

In early discussions, Havemeyer directed Gilbert to make the Manhattan (west) façade as "massive in appearance as possible."¹⁹ Located close to the routes of various ferries, the 180 by 90 foot facade (and the electric sign that later was installed above) would serve to publicize the warehouse, tenant, and expanding rail terminal.

An early rendering by Gilbert's associate Thomas R. Jackson featured at least three types of fenestration and a large, round arched loading bay. As built, however, the pattern was greatly simplified and each façade is almost identical. This change may have been done for economic reasons, or to create a more coherent composition. Above the ground story, most of the windows are grouped in threes, creating a subtle and yet insistent rhythm across the concrete facades. The depth of the window reveals, much to Gilbert's dismay, was reduced as a cost-cutting measure, but Havemeyer did agree to "rounding" the mullions and "furnishing caps in lieu of square edged mullions."²⁰ This decision, made after the building plans were filed, greatly improved the design. By threading the various levels of fenestration together, the façade is better integrated and the vertical thrust accentuated. The rest of the fenestration is grouped in pairs. These windows are less wide than the others -- they gently interrupt the constant vertical rhythm, and according to Gilbert were deliberately placed at the corners to "accent the ends" of each façade.²¹

At the top of each elevation is a prominent, continuous, coved cornice. This flared element functions as both crown and parapet. There was considerable back and forth between the various parties and Gilbert did not determine the final shape until the building was nearly complete. In June 1914, Havemeyer accompanied him to the site:

... to see the model of the cove cornice ... Mr. Gilbert finally decided to reduce the height of the cornice by 20" at the bottom and the fascia by 5 ½" and the projection by 6."²²

Havemeyer "thoroughly agreed," pointing out that "it would improve the looks of the building."²³

The Egyptian Revival Style

In 1921 the critic Arthur S. McEntee described the Williamsburg warehouse as "an excellent example of the modern adaptation of Egyptian architecture to the present-requirements of commercialism."²⁴ This stylistic identification was based on several factors; in addition to the coved cornice that crowns the elevations, the upper walls slope inward or batten, and there are wide expanses of unbroken walling, recalling such New Kingdom temples as the Temple of Isis, originally located on the island of Philae. Architect and historian Russell Sturgis wrote in 1902, "this solemn and massive architecture is marked by qualities of simplicity, repose, grandeur of scale, and a certain sublimity of general effect."²⁵

Examples of Egyptian Revival architecture are relatively rare in the United States and most date from the first half of nineteenth century, when it was viewed as an alternative to the more popular Greek Revival style. In most cases, these buildings were associated with death or religious worship, including funerary monuments, churches and synagogues. Though the style never regained equal popularity, after 1900 there was renewed interest in Egyptian art and culture. During this period, not only were important Egyptian artifacts acquired by cultural institutions, but in 1902 the legendary Hall of Justice or "Tombs" (1835-40), an Egyptian Revival-style jail on Centre Street in Manhattan was demolished. The Metropolitan Museum of Art established a department devoted to the subject in 1906 and over the next three decades it funded numerous archeological digs. It is difficult to determine how much involvement the Havemeyers had in these activities. Horace's parents and sister, Elecktra, traveled in Egypt during early 1906 and collected a small number of pieces, including two stone sculptures. In 1913, the year that the warehouse was designed, the *New York Times* reported that J. P. Morgan was accompanying the museum's curator to Egypt and that the Tomb of Perneb had been acquired from the Egyptian government. This massive stone tomb has stood guard over the entrance to the Egyptian galleries since 1916.²⁶

Unique in the architect's oeuvre, the Austin, Nichols & Co. Warehouse reflects Gilbert's broad knowledge of architectural history. Whether designing a mansion, skyscraper, or warehouse, he always looked to the past for inspiration, blending tradition with modern technology to create new solutions. Though Gilbert did not generally consider concrete to be a plastic material, in this instance, the flared cornice became structure's most distinctive feature.²⁷ In subsequent reinforced concrete warehouses, however, he followed a more severe approach, omitting the cornice entirely. While the majority of buildings designed by Gilbert were indeed inspired by European sources, he did show occasional interest in Middle Eastern traditions. A drawing, dated 1915, juxtaposes images of some of his best-known buildings beside the Parthenon and the pyramids, and in 1927-28 he embellished 130 West 30th Street (a designated New York City Landmark) with terra-cotta panels depicting Assyrian hunting scenes and guardian figures.²⁸

Reception

As the building neared completion in September 1914, Harry Balfe commented: "The work of the architects, contractors and all connected with it, has in our opinion simply been wonderful, and the builders must be highly complemented – and they have just cause to feel that way."²⁹ In the months that followed, advertisements and articles addressed the building's design and construction.³⁰ The *Engineering News* of November 1914 called the aesthetic "somewhat unique." The unidentified author was especially impressed by the fenestration, commenting that it "gives a different appearance to the building than is common in reinforced-concrete buildings."³¹ The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* proudly wrote that the "mammoth" plant was a "Model of Modern Construction and Efficiency, Ready to Supply the Entire Country with Pure Food Products."³²

By the early 1920s, the benefits of reinforced concrete were widely known and critics began broaden the discussion to consider aesthetics issues. McEntee, mentioned earlier in conjunction with the Egyptian Revival style, recognized that concrete structures required cooperation between architects and engineers. As an advocate for "uncomplicated" designs, two buildings by Gilbert were singled out for praise, most notably Austin Nichols,

which he described as “an excellent example . . . the simplicity of these buildings is most interesting and shows what satisfactory results can be obtained by the use of this one material – concrete.”³³ McEntee, like his European contemporaries, Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius, recognized that concrete had a great, but under-valued potential, not only to reduce costs and the threat of fire, but to design in entirely new ways. Europeans, it is interesting to note, saw clear parallels between the aesthetics of recent American architecture and ancient Egyptian buildings. For instance, in *Vers une Architecture* (1923), Le Corbusier compared images of concrete grain elevators to the great pyramids, and the art historian Wilhelm Worringer – a major influence on Gropius – wrote in 1908 that “The beauty of these Egyptian works of art rests in the strict proportionality of the parts and in their domination by the unity of undivided and unbroken outlines.”³⁴ Ultimately, the Austin, Nichols & Co. Warehouse is a transitional work. While Gilbert does make reference to recognizable historical forms, the straight-forward treatment of the exposed concrete was entirely new.

Despite a remarkably prolific career, with numerous acclaimed structures in New York City, until 1999 no monograph was published on Gilbert and his work. *Cass Gilbert, Architect: Modern Traditionalist* (1999) and *Inventing the Skyline: The Architecture of Cass Gilbert* (2000) illustrate images of the Williamsburg warehouse and discuss its impact on subsequent projects. *Cass Gilbert, Life and Work* (2001) has numerous essays, including “The Aesthetics of an Eclectic Architect” and “Great Gray Buildings” that portray the Austin, Nichols & Co. Warehouse as a masterful example of how Gilbert successfully merged aesthetic, functional, and fiscal considerations.

Following the Williamsburg project, Gilbert designed or built several industrial buildings using reinforced concrete, including the U. S. Army Supply Base (1919-19) in Brooklyn.³⁵ Though the main building is almost twice the size of the Williamsburg warehouse, both waterfront projects were built by the Turner Construction Company and integrate piers, tracks, and elevators. The earlier warehouse prepared Gilbert for this extremely important government assignment and when, in 1928, he prepared a composite drawing of what he believed to be his most significant works -- both structures were counted as worthy. Located at the lower right corner of the page, the Austin, Nichols & Co. Warehouse is outlined between the Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church (begun 1886) in St. Paul and the Palace of Fine Arts (later the St. Louis Art Museum, 1904).

Subsequent History³⁶

For a brief period, Austin Nichols remained an extremely successful company and annual sales reached \$40 million in 1920. Following the purchase of Acker, Merrill & Condict in 1923, the company was sued by the Federal Trade Commission for monopolistic practices. These charges were dropped, yet sales began to decline. All other facilities were closed or sold by the late 1920s and the Brooklyn plant began to focus solely on the “manufacture and importation of their own products.” Following the repeal of prohibition, Austin Nichols entered the liquor business. After renewing their lease in 1934, a rectifying plant was installed in the building to distill liquor and the grocery business was purchased by Francis H. Leggett & Co. in December 1938. The company prospered, selling both domestic and imported labels, including such products as Grant’s Scotch Whiskey, Metaxa, Charles Hiedsieck Champagne and Wild Turkey.³⁷ The Brooklyn building remained the company’s “principal” location until the late 1950s, with executive and import offices, as well as warehouse and production facilities. The building was acquired by the current owner, 184 Kent Avenue Associates, in 1986 and is now leased to commercial and residential tenants.

Description

The Austin, Nichols & Co. Warehouse fills an entire block, bounded to the east by Kent Avenue, the west by the East River, and the south by North 3rd Street. Constructed with reinforced concrete, the building is six stories tall. The concrete, patched liberally, is painted various shades of white. In general, the base of the building is a different shade from the floors above. Each wall is crowned by a coved cornice that also serves as a parapet. At the sixth story, above every other window bay, a small water spout is visible. From a distance, various low rectangular structures are visible on the roof, as well as a pair of unused flagpoles, standing at the northeast and southeast corners.

The west façade is divided into eight bays. All of the windows are grouped in threes, except the south bay, which has two narrow windows. Most of the windows are non-historic. At the base, there are seven raised loading bays, all of which are sealed. The gridded glass above the 4th and 5th bay (from the south) is historic. The concrete marquee above the 6th and 7th bays is also historic. The **Kent Avenue** or east façade is divided into nine bays. All of the windows are grouped in threes, except those at the north and south ends, which have two narrow windows. There is a concrete marquee above the two loading bays, close to the north end. The gridded metal windows, above the non-historic security gates, are historic. There are three gated entrances to the south and one to the north. The rest of the original bays have been sealed. The south façade, along **North 3rd Street**, has a continuous concrete marquis that shades that various raised loading docks, some of which remain in use. A non-historic metal fence, painted white, has been installed atop the marquee. All of the windows are grouped in threes, except those at the east and west ends, which incorporate two narrow windows. All of the windows that are grouped in threes, except those immediately above the marquee, are linked by continuous rounded mullions. The **north façade** adjoins a large, mostly vacant, lot. An elevated metal structure is set perpendicular to the center of the façade. A metal fence along Kent Avenue makes the lower portion of the façade difficult to view. Most of the loading bays are sealed.

Researched and written by
Matthew A. Postal
Research Department

NOTES

1. According to Eugene Armbuster, Williamsburg was named for Col. Jonathan Williams who surveyed the former Charles Titus farm for Richard M. Woodhull in 1802. See Eugene Armbuster, *Brooklyn's Eastern District*, (1942), 1.
2. The Havemeyers were never residents of Williamsburg. See Harry Havemeyer, *Merchants of Williamsburg* (1989), 39.
3. *Ibid.*, 38.
4. Henry Osborne (Harry or H.O) Havemeyer was married to Louisine Waldron Elder (1855-1929). The Sugar Refineries Company became known as the American Sugar Refining Company in 1891. Though the company was accused of unfair business practices numerous times, it wasn't until 1922 that a settlement with the Federal government was reached. Also see *A Splendid Legacy* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1993) and Frances Weitzenhoffer, *The Havemeyers: Impressionism Comes to America* (New York, 1966).
- ⁵ "Horace Havemeyer Dead at 70, Sugar Executive and Yachtsman," *New York Times*, October 26, 1956, 28; Daniel Caitlin, Jr., *Good Work Well Done: The Sugar Business Career of Horace Havemeyer, 1903-1956* (New York, privately printed, 1988).
- ⁸ Frederick Walter, *The History of Austin, Nichols & Co., Inc. 1855-1955* (1955).
- ⁷ "Plan Big Terminal for Grocery Houses," *New York Times*, June 27, 1912. "Important Trade Movement to the Waterfront of the Boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens," *New York Times*, November 8, 1914, XX1.
- ⁸ "Austin, Nichols & Co. To Leave Manhattan," *Real Estate Record and Guide*, November 29, 1913, 984.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ "Havemeyer Gift Approved By Son," *New York Times*, January 17, 1929, 21; "Havemeyer Gives More Art To Public," *New York Times*, January 24, 1930, 13.
- ¹¹ See Mary Beth Betts, "The Aesthetics of an Eclectic Architect," in *Cass Gilbert: Life and Work*, edited by Barbara S. Christen and Steven Flanders (W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 76.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 77.
- ¹³ Minutes, October 27, 1913, Cass Gilbert papers, New York Historical Society, box 45.
- ¹⁴ Minutes, December 16, 1913, CG papers, NYHS, box 45.
- ¹⁵ This section is based on Donald E. Wolfe, *Turner's First Century: A History of the Turner Construction*

-
- Company* (Greenwich Pub. Group, 2002) and “Special Centennial Issue,” *Turner News*, March 2002.
- ¹⁶ “Big Grocery Concern Formally Opened at Kent Ave. & N. Third St.,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 25, 1915; “World’s Greatest Grocery Business is Located Here,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 4, 1915.
- ¹⁷ *Engineering News*, Vol. 72, No. 20, 966.
- ¹⁸ Cass Gilbert, “The Greatest Element of Monumental Architecture,” *American Architect*, August 5, 1929, 141.
- ¹⁹ Memo, CG Papers, NYHS, box 45.
- ²⁰ Memo, CG Papers, NYHS, box 45.
- ²¹ Memo, August 12, 1913, CG Papers, NYHS, box 45.
- ²² Memo, June 18, 1914, CG Papers, NYHS, box 45.
- ²³ Memo, June 22, 1914, CG Papers, NYHS, box 45.
- ²⁴ Arthur S. McEntee, “Recent Developments in the Architectural Treatment of Concrete Industrial Buildings,” *Architecture* 43 (1921).
- ²⁵ “Architecture of Egypt” in Russell Sturgis, *A Dictionary of Architecture and Building* (The Macmillan Company, 1902), 854. It is also worth noting that there were brief revivals of interest expressed in local buildings during the mid-1920s, following the opening of King Tut’s Tomb, and during the 1980s. Examples include the red mosaic reception hall of Irving Trust Bank (1930, interior by Hildreth Meier) and the exterior and lobby of 40 West 53rd Street (1985, Roche & Dinkeloo)
- ²⁶ “Morgan Now Bound for Egyptian Fields,” *New York Times*, January 11, 1913. For information on the Havemeyers and Egypt, see *A Splendid Legacy*.
- ²⁷ See Cass Gilbert, “Industrial Architecture in Concrete,” *Architectural Forum* 39 (September 1923).
- ²⁸ *130 West 30th Street Designation report*, written by Ginny Kurshan, New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, November 13, 2001.
- ²⁹ Balfe to Havemeyer, September 13, 1914, CG Papers, NYHS, box 42.
- ³⁰ Several related advertisements appear in October 1914 issue of *Architecture and Building*. These include ads for the Turner Construction Company, Peelle Doors, Herrman & Grace Co., and Knickerbocker Cement. The last ad (p. 29) described the building as “the most modern and representative of its kind in the world.”
- ³¹ *Engineering News*.
- ³² *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 25, 1915, 6, clipping, Brooklyn Collection, Central Building, Brooklyn Public Library.
- ³³ McEntee, 20.
- ³⁴ Cited in Reyner Banham, *A Concrete Atlantis* (MIT Press, 1986), 205; footnote 25, 258.
- ³⁵ Sharon Irish, “Great Gray Buildings: The United States Supply Base,” in *Cass Gilbert, Life and Work* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 163.
- ³⁶ Walter, *The History of Austin Nichols*, 42-75.
- ³⁷ In 1941 it was reported that Austin Nichols was the largest of 26 liquor firms in the borough. The Williamsburg plant was described as a “Brooklyn landmark” and (incorrectly) as the first “poured concrete building in America, possibly the world.” See “26 Liquor Firms,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, August 26, 1941, clipping, Brooklyn Collection, Brooklyn Public Library,

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Austin, Nichols & Co. Warehouse 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 the Austin, Nichols & Co. Warehouse is one of the largest and most impressive buildings in Williamsburg, that this reinforced concrete structure was designed by Cass Gilbert, architect of the U. S. Custom House and Woolworth Building in Manhattan during 1913 and that the plant was fully operational by March 1915; that the warehouse was leased to Austin, Nichols & Co., one of the largest wholesale grocers in the world; that it was described as a “model of modern construction and efficiency,” integrating piers, railway tracks, freight elevators, conveyor belts, and pneumatic tubes; that under the Sunbeam Food label, all types of products were prepared, processed, and packaged in the building; that Gilbert collaborated with the Turner Construction Company, specialists in reinforced concrete; that the exposed concrete exterior is austere and monumental and crowned by an unusual coved or flared cornice which was likely to have been modeled on ancient Egyptian sources; that structures of this type were admired by European architects Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius and may have served as inspiration in the development of European modernism in the decade that followed; and that this warehouse remains one of the most remarkable structures on the East River waterfront and one of the first major reinforced concrete buildings in New York City designed by a nationally prominent architect.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 (formerly Section 534 of Chapter 21) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Austin, Nichols & Co. Warehouse at 184 Kent Avenue, aka 184-98 Kent Avenue and 1-41 North 3rd Street, and designates Borough of Brooklyn Tax Block 2348, Lot 1, as its Landmark Site.

Commissioners:

Robert B. Tierney, Chair; Pablo Vengoechea, Vice- Chair
Joan Gerner, Roberta Brandes Gratz, Christopher Moore,
Richard Olcott, Thomas Pike, Elizabeth Ryan



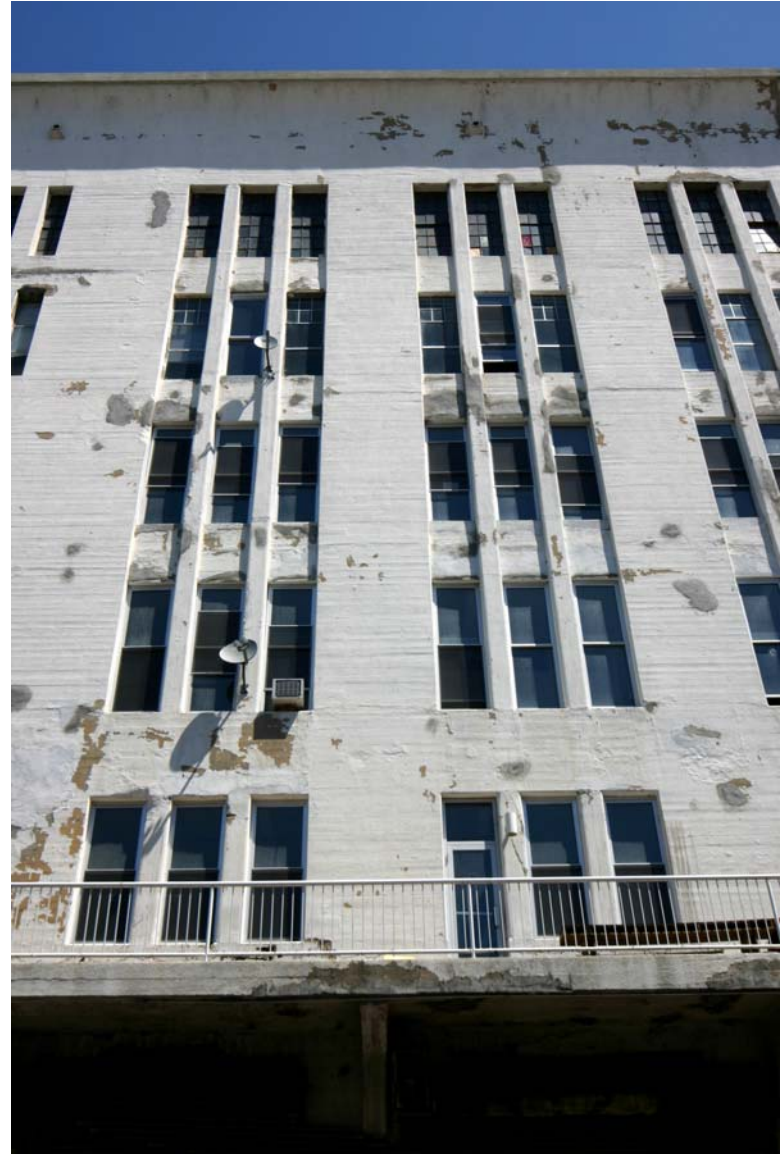
Austin, Nichols & Co. Warehouse
184 Kent Avenue, Brooklyn
Views from Kent Avenue
Photos: Carl Forster



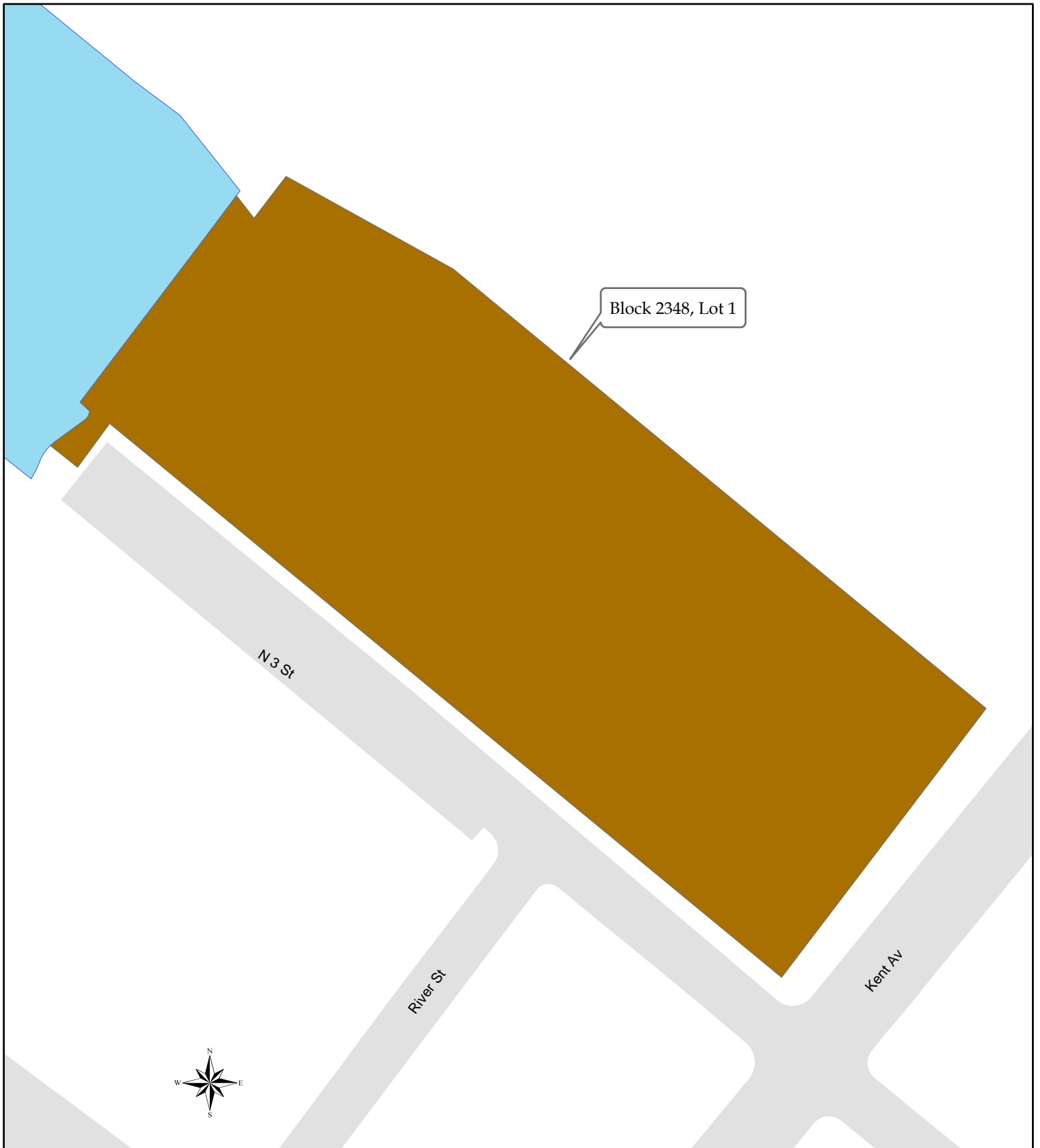
Austin, Nichols & Co. Warehouse
184 Kent Avenue
View from Manhattan and along North 3rd Street
Photos: Carl Forster



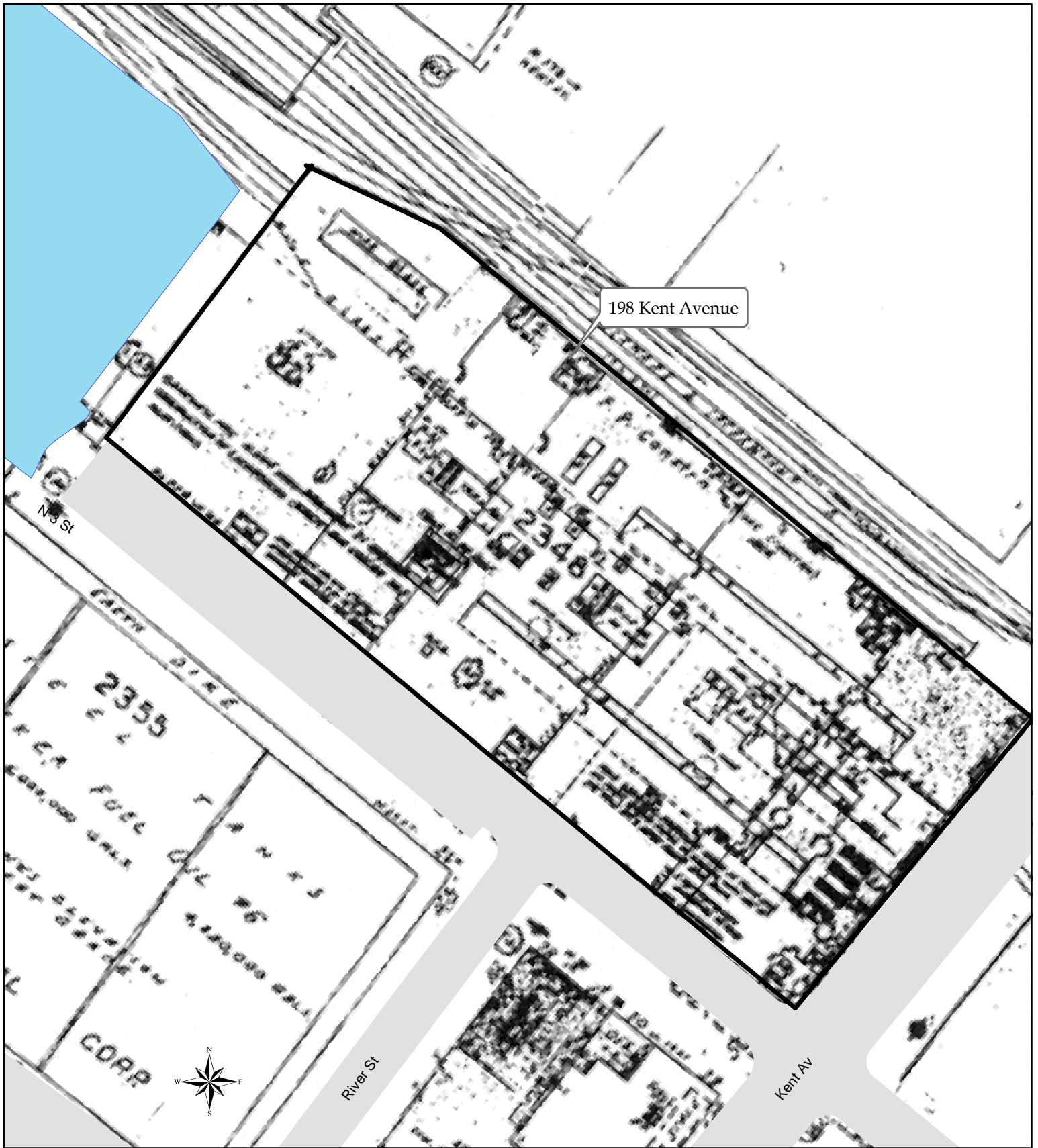
Austin, Nichols & Co. Warehouse
Details: southeast corner and north end Kent Avenue
Photos: Carl Forster



Austin, Nichols & Co. Warehouse
Details: North 3rd Street
Photos: Carl Forster



Austin, Nichols and Company Warehouse, 184-198 Kent Avenue (aka 1-41 North 3rd Street)
Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 2348, Lot 1
Graphic Source: New York City Department of City Planning, MapPLUTO, Edition 03C, December 2003



Austin, Nichols and Company Warehouse, 184-198 Kent Avenue (aka 1-41 North 3rd Street)
Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 2348, Lot 1
Graphic Source: Sanborn, Brooklyn Building and Property Atlas, (2005) Volume 4, Plate 1