

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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DATE ENTERED	

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

1 NAME

HISTORIC
United States Custom House

AND/OR COMMON

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER
Bowling Green

___ NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN
New York

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

___ VICINITY OF

17th

STATE
New York

CODE

COUNTY

CODE

3 CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY

- ___ DISTRICT
- BUILDING(S)
- ___ STRUCTURE
- ___ SITE
- ___ OBJECT

OWNERSHIP

- PUBLIC
- ___ PRIVATE
- ___ BOTH
- PUBLIC ACQUISITION**
- ___ IN PROCESS
- ___ BEING CONSIDERED

STATUS

- ___ OCCUPIED
- UNOCCUPIED
- ___ WORK IN PROGRESS
- ACCESSIBLE**
- YES: RESTRICTED
- ___ YES: UNRESTRICTED
- ___ NO

PRESENT USE

- ___ AGRICULTURE
- ___ MUSEUM
- ___ COMMERCIAL
- ___ PARK
- ___ EDUCATIONAL
- ___ PRIVATE RESIDENCE
- ___ ENTERTAINMENT
- ___ RELIGIOUS
- GOVERNMENT
- ___ SCIENTIFIC
- ___ INDUSTRIAL
- ___ TRANSPORTATION
- ___ MILITARY
- OTHER:

4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME United States Government/General Services Administration

STREET & NUMBER Mr. Steinman, Director, General Services Administration of Public Buildings Service, 24th Floor, 26 Federal Plaza

CITY, TOWN
New York

___ VICINITY OF

STATE
New York

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE,
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC. New York County Hall of Records

STREET & NUMBER
31 Chambers Street

CITY, TOWN
New York

STATE
New York

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE
New York City Landmarks Commission

DATE

___ FEDERAL ___ STATE COUNTY ___ LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR
SURVEY RECORDS 305 Broadway

CITY, TOWN
New York

STATE
New York

7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED DATE _____
<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

An enormously elaborate structure both on its exterior and its interior with a complex iconography, the U.S. Custom House can be briefly described:

Number of stories: Seven stories including a rusticated base with five stories above it and an additional floor under the mansard roof.

Number of bays: The north facade is seven bays wide. The east, west and south facades are each thirteen bays wide.

Layout and/or shape of plan: The building is trapezoidal in plan.

Wall construction: There are ashlar masonry walls with semi-engaged columns separating the windows between end bays.

Structural system: This is a steel-framed building.

Roof, cornice: A slate-covered mansard roof is crowned by copper crestings. A stone parapet, which alternates solid sections with a balustrade, encircles the building above the fourth floor. An elaborate entablature, which extends the full height of the fifth floor, extends around three sides of the building.

Dormers: Dormer windows in the mansard roof are segmental-arched, and are surmounted by baroque-type frames.

Art and industry joined to produce one of the splendid buildings of its period. This is a truly monumental structure, and the decorations proclaim that this is the chief building of New York as a seaport. On pedestals advanced from the base of the building are four sculptured groups, heroic in size, representing the Four Continents. The keystones of the main windows are carved with heads typifying the eight races of mankind. Over each of the columns of the main facade are heroic statues representing the twelve commercial centers of the ancient and modern worlds. The principle facade is crowned by a giant cartouche bearing the arms of the United States. A head of Mercury, the ancient God of Commerce, appears on each of the capitals of the forty-four columns which encircle the building.

"The main entrance to the Custom House leads to a grand, two-story-high hall, finished in marbles of a variety of textures and colors, quarried in Switzerland, Italy, Georgia, Maryland, Alaska, and Vermont. At either end of the great hall are spiral staircases rising through the full seven stories of the building. Off the hall is one of the most splendid rooms in New York, paneled from floor to ceiling in oak and with a richly worked ceiling; the room was intended to be used by the Secretary of State of the United States on the occasion of ceremonial visits to New York, but it has rarely been called upon to serve that purpose. The chief

8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW				
<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGION	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)	
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION			

SPECIFIC DATES 1900-1907 BUILDER/ARCHITECT Cass Gilbert (1858-1934)

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

One of the outstanding examples of style with Beaux Arts elements, the New York Custom House is one of Cass Gilbert's finest buildings--located not far from the Woolworth Building in lower Manhattan. Rich in detail of ornament both inside and out, the imposing structure is further enhanced by four great seated figures of the Continents by the great 19th century sculptor, Daniel Chester French.

"It happens that the Custom House is built at the lowest point of land in Manhattan, facing Bowling Green and on what was once the shore of the Battery. The Custom House is only seven stories high, but what lofty stories they are! The building is, in fact, a vast one, enclosing a volume of space said to be fully a quarter of that of the Empire State building. Because its design is as simple as its scale is grand, the building is comparatively easy to "read." It is a presence formidable but not frightening; we march round it and pay our respects to it without intimidation. Agreed that it takes no playful chances and that its densely composed surfaces might have been the better for giving us some hint of the ample open court within, which provides the building with light and air. Still, its sheer bulk and almost crushing weight of stone promise a permanence that few New York buildings have ever been able to attain.

"The architect of the Custom House was Cass Gilbert (1859-1934). For a couple of years in the eighteen-eighties, he was one of the army of gifted young men working in the offices of McKim, Mead & White, then the leading architectural firm in the country. Temperamentally, Gilbert was more in sympathy with the reserved and fastidious McKim than he was with the flamboyant White."¹

After ten years in Minnesota where he designed the State Capitol building in St. Paul, Gilbert returned to New York to make his reputation designing the Woolworth Building (1913), still one of the most beautifully finished structures in America.

"The site of Gilbert's Custom House embraces the site of a much earlier Custom House. In the 1780's the City of New York, assuming that it would become the capital of the new Nation, undertook to erect at Bowling Green a so-called "Government House," which would serve as the official residence of the President."²

1. Gill, Brendan, The U.S. Custom House on Bowling Green, New York Landmarks Conservancy; New York, 1976, pp. 2-3
2. Ibid., p. 5

9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Burnham, Alan, New York Landmarks, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, Conn., 1963
 Gill, Brendan, The U.S. Custom House on Bowling Green, New York Landmarks Conservancy, New York, 1976
 Files: New York Landmarks Commission

10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY less than two acres

UTM REFERENCES

A	1,7	6	5,8	1,9,0	4	7	7,4	6	1,0	B						
	ZONE		EASTING			NORTHING					ZONE		EASTING		NORTHING	
C										D						

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

Manhattan Tax Map, block 12, lot 1. Entire block bounded by State Street, 287 feet to Battery Place on the north 191.1 feet, to Whitehall Street on the east for 280.1 feet Bridge Street on the south for 268 feet.

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE

Carolyn Pitts, Architectural Historian

ORGANIZATION

Historic Sites Survey, National Park Service

DATE

August 1976

STREET & NUMBER

1100 L Street, NW.

TELEPHONE

523-5464

CITY OR TOWN

Washington

STATE

D.C.

12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL STATE LOCAL

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

FEDERAL REPRESENTATIVE SIGNATURE

TITLE

DATE

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

ATTEST:

DATE

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

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United States Custom House

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feature of the ground floor is the rotunda, which is one hundred and thirty-five feet long, eighty-five feet wide, and forty-eight feet high. The ceiling of the rotunda is, in fact, a skylight, unfortunately tarred over on the exterior and painted on the interior during the Second World War, in compliance with a supposed need for blackouts in our infinitesimally threatened city. The skylight, which warrants restoration, is one of the curious tile-and-plaster vaulted masterpieces of the Spanish engineer Guastavino; it weighs one hundred and forty tons and contains not an ounce of steel. In the rotunda are the celebrated frescoes by Reginald Marsh, executed with phenomenal speed over a period of weeks in the fall of 1937. They fill eight large horizontal spaces and eight small vertical spaces; the difficulty for the artist was to render his realistic subject matter without optical distortion in spite of the fact that the surfaces upon which he was obliged to work were concave and the shapes trapezoidal. The smaller areas depict great early explorers of America; in the larger areas, Marsh traces the course of a ship as it enters New York harbor, passes Ambrose Light, takes on a pilot, is met by a Coast Guard cutter, is boarded by government officials, passes the Statue of Liberty, provides the occasion for a press interview with a movie star (Greta Garbo), is warped to a pier by tugs, and unloads its cargo onto the pier. In order to carry out this project at government expense, Marsh accepted a position in the Treasury Department, as an assistant in the Procurement Division; he was paid approximately ninety dollars a month. The frescoes cost the government \$1560; a few years ago, they were appraised at \$750,000.

"There are four hundred and fifty thousand square feet of space within its seven floors and two basements. Museums, theatres, studios for artists and sculptors, retail shops, restaurants, libraries, hotels--there is scarcely anything required in a great city that cannot be accommodated in the Custom House. Within the limits of its budget, the General Services Administration has kept the building in excellent order."¹

1. Gill, Brendan, The U.S. Custom House on Bowling Green, New York Landmarks Conservancy, New York, 1976, pp. 13-16

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Philadelphia became the capital in 1787 and the New York building became the governor's residence--by 1799 it was converted into the U.S. Custom House. Destroyed by fire 15 years later, the Custom House was moved to Federal Hall and later still to 55 Wall Street.

"In 1892, the U.S. Treasury sponsored an architectural competition for the design of a new Custom House--one that in size and richness would be emblematic of the greatness of New York in particular and of the United States in general. We were on our way to becoming one of the leading commercial nations of the world and a portion of the wealth that streamed into the Custom House deserved to be spent upon a conspicuous celebration of that fact.

"Twenty prominent architects were invited to take part in the competition, and the guerdon was won by one of the least prominent members of the group--the still comparatively youthful Cass Gilbert (he was in his middle thirties), working in the comparative obscurity of St. Paul. Gilbert envisioned his building as a triumphal monument to trade and to the seas that bring trade to our shores. In a gesture of courtesy to Bowling Green and landlubberly Broadway, the building was designed to turn its back upon the harbor, but its symbolic ornament is irrepressibly marine; shells, snails, dolphins, and other sea creatures and sea signs embellish the walls.

"As for trade, on the capital of each of the forty-four stout columns that encircle the building is carved a head of Mercury, the Roman god of commerce; masks of different races decorate the keystones over the windows and a head of Columbus stares out benignly from above the cavernous main entrance, seemingly well pleased with the consequences of his accidental discovery of America.

"On the broad stone sill of the sixth-story cornice stand twelve immense figures in white Tennessee marble, representing twelve of the most successful commercial nations and city-states in history: Greece, Rome, Phoenicia, Genoa, Venice, Spain, Holland, Portugal, Denmark, Germany, England, and France. (During the First World War, anti-German feeling caused the figure representing that country to be pruned of any telltale Teutonic symbols; the figure was then proclaimed to represent Belgium, Germany's first victim in the war.) The central cartouche at the top of the facade is the shield of the United States, supported by two winged figures; one of them holds a sheathed sword, symbolizing a great nation at peace, and the other holds a bundle of reeds, symbolizing the strength of perfect union.

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CONTINUATION SHEET

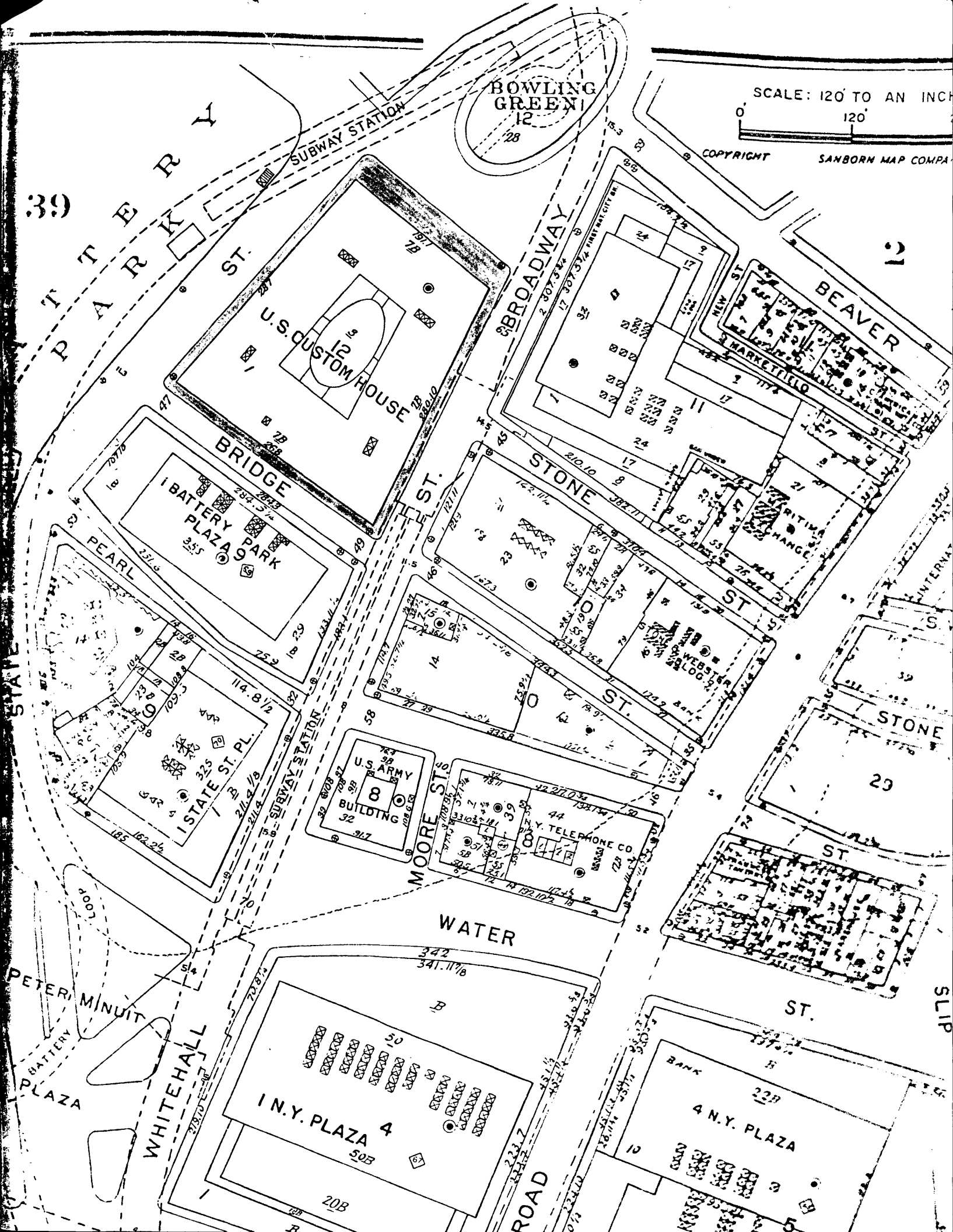
ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE 3

"The four enormous white limestone sculptures that rest on pedestals emerging from the ground-floor level of the building are the work of Daniel Chester French, best known for his even more enormous statue of Lincoln, in the Lincoln Memorial, in Washington, D.C. The sculptures, known collectively as "The Continents," represent Asia, North America, Europe, and Africa, and a spokesman for the National Trust for Historic Preservation has described them as 'unquestionably the finest examples of Beaux-Arts sculpture produced by an American artist.' French, working in close collaboration with Gilbert, chose to see Asia as a figure backed by crouching masses of oppressed peoples; North America--really only the United States, of course--as a figure holding aloft the torch of progress; Europe as a figure resting one arm upon an open volume of laws, standing for accomplishment; and Africa as a robust, naked figure slumbering between a lion and a sphinx. All four figures are female and all are seated.

"Cass Gilbert said that the ideal for a public building like the Custom House was that it serve as an inspiration toward patriotism and good citizenship. It should encourage 'just pride in the state, and (be) an education to oncoming generations to see these things, imponderable elements of life and character, set before the people for their enjoyment and betterment. The educational value alone is worth to the state far more than it cost--it supplements the education furnished by the public school and the university (and) is a symbol of the civilization, culture, and ideals of our country.'"³

The U.S. Custom House is currently GSA surplus property and is currently being cleaned and restored.

3. Gill, Brendan, The U.S. Custom House on Bowling Green, New York Landmarks Conservancy, New York, 1976, pp. 6-12



SCALE: 120 TO AN INCH



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39

PARKY

BOWLING GREEN

SUBWAY STATION

ST.

U.S. CUSTOM HOUSE

BROADWAY

BEAVER

BRIDGE

BATTERY PARK
PLAZA

STONE

PEARL

ST.

STONE

STONE

ISTATE ST. PL.

U.S. ARMY
BUILDING

MOORE STS.

TELEPHONE CO.

WATER

ST.

PETER MINUIT
PLAZA

WHITEHALL

I N.Y. PLAZA 4

ST.

BANK
4 N.Y. PLAZA

ROAD