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**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

New York Life Building

AND/OR COMMON

New York Life Building

**2 LOCATION**

STREET & NUMBER

51 Madison Avenue

\_\_NOT FOR PUBLICATION

18

CITY, TOWN

New York

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

STATE

New York

\_\_ VICINITY OF  
CODE

36

COUNTY

New York

CODE

061

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

**4 OWNER OF PROPERTY**

NAME

New York Life Insurance Company

STREET & NUMBER

51 Madison Avenue

CITY, TOWN

New York

\_\_ VICINITY OF

STATE

New York

Contact: Marshall P. Bissell, Pres  
Donald C. Tiedeman, V.P.  
General Counsel  
Ernest Pawel, Sr. Writer,  
Public Relations

**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

None

DATE

\_\_FEDERAL \_\_STATE \_\_COUNTY \_\_LOCAL

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DEPOSITORY FOR  
SURVEY RECORDS

CITY, TOWN

STATE

## 7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> _EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> _DETERIORATED	<input type="checkbox"/> _UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> _ORIGINAL SITE
<input type="checkbox"/> _GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> _RUINS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> _ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> _MOVED DATE_____
<input type="checkbox"/> _FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> _UNEXPOSED		

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### DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

After briefly occupying a succession of small offices, mostly on lower Broadway, New York Life erected its first home office building in 1870. Designed by Stephen D. Hatch, the structure underwent remodeling by McKim, Mead, and White in 1895-96 and served as company headquarters until 1928. The city of New York owns the deteriorating building at present and uses it primarily for office space and traffic courts. The 13-story edifice was the setting for New York Life's rise to the top of the life insurance industry, and it remains an architecturally interesting structure. It does not, however, represent the best work of McKim, Mead, and White, and moreover, due to lack of proper maintenance and the alteration of both the Broadway and Leonard Street entrances, the building has lost most of its original grandeur as well as its identification with New York Life. The present company headquarters, on the other hand, is an excellently maintained example of Cass Gilbert's work, and its plan best represents the large, well-structured organization of the New York Life Insurance Company during both its peak years around the turn of the century and the 50-year period just passed.

Erected in Gilbert's design by Starrett Brothers, Inc., with Gunvald Aus Company as structural engineers, the steel-framed, granite-and-limestone-sheathed New York Life Building rises 34 stories on the site of the old Madison Square Garden, measures 617 feet high from ground level to lantern top, and covers an entire 200-by-425-foot block. The land cost Nylic \$2.35 million; the construction \$21 million. Company officials laid the cornerstone in June 1927, and the firm moved into the building the following year.

New York Life historian Abbott describes the home office as "American Perpendicular, clothed in Gothic," and architectural historian Arthur Tappan North maintains that the building's "observance of the accepted criteria of correct designing, harmonious proportions of its mass, cultured restraint and refinement of its ornamentation, general fitness, and inspiring beauty and dignity cause it to assume its rightfully preeminent position in the never ending pageant of the world's architecture."<sup>17</sup> Stories

(continued)

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<sup>17</sup>Abbott, Story of Nylic, 230; Arthur Tappan North, "An Appreciation of the New York Life Insurance Company Building," The American Architect, CXXV (March 20, 1929), 354.

# 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 type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input checked="" 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 Bldg: 1928 to present BUILDER/ARCHITECT Starrett Bros., Inc.  
 Firm: 1845 to present Cass Gilbert

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

From the mid-1880's through the 1930's, the New York Life Insurance Company was a constant member of the "Big Three" firms that led the industry in amount of insurance in force, and as late as the mid-1970's the company continued to rank among the top four life firms in total assets. As distinguished institutional historian Morton Keller has pointed out, New York Life "moved to the top of the industry during the 1890's" and retained the number one position through the first decade of the 20th century while participating in international underwriting and investment activities and contributing several significant innovations to life insurance marketing.<sup>1</sup>

During the nineties New York Life, in the words of noted insurance scholar J. Owen Stalson, "made a revolutionary change" in the industry by abandoning the general agency system and installing in its place salaried managers, "an organizational plan which has come to be known as the branch office system."<sup>2</sup> In this same period the firm made what company historian Lawrence F. Abbott calls its "most notable achievement:" it pioneered a widely copied "scientific method of insuring impaired or substandard lives." In 1896 the company's assistant medical director and several of its actuaries devised for such insurance a table that "is now known, not only in the New York Life but in life insurance companies generally, as 'The Numerical System.'"<sup>3</sup> Three years later York Life became, says Abbott, "the first American life insurance company to publish in detail a financial report of the Company for the policy-holder and the general public."<sup>4</sup> The company official--James A. McCall, president from 1892 to 1905--most

(continued)

<sup>1</sup>Morton Keller, The Life Insurance Enterprise, 1885-1910: A Study in the Limits of Corporate Power (Cambridge, 1963), 69; Moody's Bank and Finance Manual, Vol. I (New York, 1976), A15.

<sup>2</sup>J. Owen Stalson, Marketing Life Insurance: Its History in America (Cambridge, 1942), 599.

<sup>3</sup>Lawrence F. Abbott, The Story of Nylic: A History of the Origin and Development of the New York Life Insurance Company from 1845 to 1929 (New York, 1930), 277, 283.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 271.

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## 9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Abbott, Lawrence, F., The Story of Nylic: A History of the Origin and Development of the New York Life Insurance Company from 1845 to 1929 (New York: The New York Life Insurance Company, 1930)

(continued)

## 10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY circa 2 1/2 acres

UTM REFERENCES

A	<u>18</u>	<u>585630</u>	<u>4510490</u>	B			
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING		ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING
C				D			

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The boundary of the nominated property coincides with the legal lot known as 51 Madison Avenue, New York City, and bounded on the west by Madison Avenue, on the east by Fourth Avenue, on the north by 27th Street, and on the south by 26th Street.

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

George R. Adams, Director, Historic Landmarks Project

ORGANIZATION

DATE

American Association for State and Local History

February 1977

STREET & NUMBER

TELEPHONE

1400 8th Avenue South

615-242-5583

CITY OR TOWN

STATE

Nashville,

Tennessee 37203

## 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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1 through 4 fill the entire block; 5 through 13 are uniformly reduced on all sides; 14 through 25 are further reduced; and 26 through 34 form a 100-foot-square tower capped by a golden pyramidal roof with lantern. Granite faces the ground story, and Indiana limestone covers the remaining stories. Large rounded arches dominate the street-level facades, while almost all the structure's approximately 2,100 remaining windows, most of which are plate glass, rest in rigid, bronze, rectangular frames. Ornamented spandrels grace the facades of the top three floors of the base and next two vertical sections, and as North aptly points out, "the more elaborate ornamentation of the traceried screen and turrets at the top of the structure, along with the slope of its mass, gives an impression of continuing growth" that extends through the tower roof.<sup>18</sup> Below ground, extending down some 87 feet, are five basement levels, which house service facilities, extensive company files, a 32-ton vault, employee restaurants, shops, and a still-used subway entrance. The latter is situated at the Fourth Avenue end of the first basement level.

At ground level an arcade passes through the west-facing building from Madison to Fourth Avenue and is crossed by two shorter passageways that extend north to south through the structure to provide four side entrances. Glass and bronze revolving doors serve all six accesses from the street. The main entrance, in the west facade, is further served by a set of four bronze gates that, when closed, fill the entrance's large, coffered, rounded archway. Inside, travertine forms the ground-floor walls and information desk, bronze grillwork ornaments elevator gates and doors, and gold-and-white-painted plaster forms the coffered ceiling, which displays, in the center of the east-west arcade, barrel vaulting 38 feet above the floor.

When the company moved into the building, officials removed the old English-brown-oak-paneled boardroom from 346 Broadway and installed it here complete with its tapestries and windows. Since then, the room has been remodeled, but it continues to furnish a direct link with the old home office. Except for a marble floor in the premium deposit room and wood paneling or wainscoting in the executive offices, the interior has always been rather plain.

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<sup>18</sup>North, "An Appreciation of the New York Life Insurance Company Building," 354.

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Subsequent remodeling has tended to make it even plainer on all but the ground floor. In addition to changes in decor, other modernization projects over the years have included substitution of alternating for direct current, and installation of air conditioning, fluorescent lighting, and automatic elevators.

In 1928 New York Life occupied about 65 percent of the structure and rented the rest to other users. This situation continues, but the insurance firm retains a larger percentage of space for its own use. Shops and banks occupy part of the ground floor, while physicians, attorneys, architects, and business and professional organizations rent offices above. Tenants include the American Kennel Club, Belam Export Corporation, and U.S. Billards, Inc.

Continuation Sheet New York Life Item Number 9 Page one

Buley, R. Carlyle, The American Life Convention, 1906-1952: A Study in the History of Life Insurance, 2 vols. (New York: Appleton-Century-Croft, Inc., 1953).

Keller, Morton, The Life Insurance Enterprise, 1885-1910: A Study in the Limits of Corporate Power (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1963).

Moody's Bank and Finance Manual, Vol. I (New York: Moody's Investors' Service, Inc., 1976).

"New York Life Insurance Company's Building, New York City," Architecture and Building, LXI (March 1929), 71-72, 99.

North, Arthur Tappan, "An Appreciation of the New York Life Insurance Company Building," The American Architect, CXXXV (March 20, 1929), 351-54.

Stalson, J. Owen, Marketing Life Insurance: Its History in America (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942).

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responsible for these developments "was regarded," according to insurance historian R. Carlyle Buley, "as the statesman of the life insurance world."<sup>5</sup>

An earlier New York Life innovation has also proved highly important to the industry and its policyholders. In 1860 the company, says Stalson, "initiated its plan of granting paid-up insurance after two premiums had been received on a ten payment life policy." This established one of three customary nonforfeiture features that today form "a part of all life contracts having reserve values for the policyholder."<sup>6</sup>

The 34-story, masonry and steel New York Life Building has been the home office of the firm since 1928. Designed by Cass Gilbert and erected by Starrett Brothers, Inc., its harmoniously proportioned plan represents well the large, well-structured organization of the company both during its peak years around the turn of the century and the 50-year period just passed. Although interior office space has undergone considerable alteration over the years, the ground floor arcade and the external facades remained unchanged.

History

In his detailed study of the American life insurance industry in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, historian Morton Keller points out that in the early 1800's "insurance companies joined with banks to play a leading role in gathering and applying the capital necessary for the rapid development of the American economy."<sup>7</sup> Still, only 29 life insurance firms were founded in the United States before 1840, and only 37 more were started in the next decade. Of these, 12 lasted into the 20th century. Among this select group, New York Life was the largest and one of the oldest.

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<sup>5</sup>R. Carlyle Buley, The American Life Convention, 1906-1952: A Study in the History of Life Insurance, Vol. I (New York, 1953), 213.

<sup>6</sup>Stalson, Marketing Life Insurance, 319.

<sup>7</sup>Keller, Life Insurance enterprise, 6.

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The firm originated with a charter granted by the New York Legislature in 1841 to the Nautilus Insurance Company. A stock company authorized to write marine and fire policies, the firm secured permission to offer life insurance after 1843. Within 2 years Nautilus accumulated sufficient policy applications to organize formally on the mutual plan. A board of trustees, which included James Brown of the Brown Brothers banking firm and Panama Railroad builder William H. Aspinwall, elected James De Peyster Ogden president and A. M. Merchant vice president. That same year, 1845, Nautilus decided to concentrate solely on life insurance, and in 1849 it changed its name to New York Life Insurance Company, shortened popularly after the 1890's to Nyllic.

During its first decade, New York Life struggled through many problems of the kind that might confront any new business trying to get established, plus one or two difficulties peculiar to the insurance industry. The company occupied a succession of temporary offices--58, 29, and 68 Wall Street and 106 Broadway--and had two quick changes of chief executive officers. A. M. Merchant became president in 1847, and Morris Franklin succeeded him in 1848. New York Life also experimented briefly with the highly risky business of selling slaveholders insurance on the lives of their slaves.

By 1854 the company seemed on sound footing. It had almost 3,500 policies, totaling \$10 million, in force. The Civil War disrupted the firm's southern business, but company officials responded by expanding their efforts in the North, Midwest, and West. In 1863 New York Life wrote, according to company historian Lawrence F. Abbott, more than half of all new policies put in effect by the 11 life firms then operating in New York City.<sup>8</sup>

When the Civil War ended, the company reorganized its business in the South and pushed its operations to the Pacific coast. By the mid-1870's, New York Life had written more than 100,000 policies; had almost 43,500 of them, totaling more than \$100 million, in force; ranked fifth in size among the Nation's life insurance companies; and was enjoying a magnificent new home office building at 346 Broadway. During the next decade the firm continued its remarkable growth, and by 1885 it had achieved a solid position as one of the industry's "Big Three."

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<sup>8</sup>Abbott, Story of Nyllic, 64.



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The company's achievements during its early years were not limited to growth. A major issue among U.S. life insurance firms in the mid-19th century centered around forfeited policies. Most companies defended them as essential to maintenance of funds needed to pay death losses. Elizur Wright, noted actuary and Commissioner of Insurance for Massachusetts, led an apparently small but effective opposition that called for legislation to prohibit forfeited policies. In 1861 he secured enactment of a Massachusetts law that required companies to grant, in lieu of each lapsed policy, single-premium term insurance for the amount of the lapsed policy for as long a period as the value of that policy would pay. Several months before this law went into force and 20 years before New York enacted similar legislation, New York Life adopted a plan to grant paid-up insurance after two premiums had been rendered on a ten-payment life policy. The value of the lapsed policy was used as a single premium to purchase, for the holder, a proportionate amount of paid-up insurance. Eventually competition forced all life firms to adopt both these plans. "Two of the customary three non-forfeiture features, today made a part of all life contracts having reserve values for the policyholder, were established," says distinguished insurance historian J. Owen Stalson, "in 1860 by a farsighted company and in 1861 by a farsighted commissioner."<sup>9</sup>

Not long after this historic accomplishment, New York Life entered the foreign insurance market. Franklin discussed the matter with his board of directors as early as 1863, and in 1870 vice president William H. Beers traveled to Europe to prepare for the opening of agencies both in England and on the Continent. During the 19th century, New York Life's foreign business never matched that of Equitable, which operated in some 100 countries, but Nyllic surpassed all other American life firms abroad. After 1900, according to Keller, "the New York Life alone conducted its overseas business aggressively." The company, says Keller, "became a prime American investor in European securities" and "smoothed the way for the first substantial German and Russian flotations [of bonds] in the United States. These activities attested to the truly international character of the company's investment program."<sup>10</sup> New York Life curtailed its foreign  
(continued)

<sup>9</sup>Stalson, Marketing Life Insurance, 319.

<sup>10</sup>Keller, Life Insurance Enterprise, 92, 97.

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business only after the famous 1905 Armstrong investigation of life insurance firms operating in New York.

Strong leadership from its various executives accounted for much of New York Life's success. The highly competitive Beers succeeded Franklin in the president's chair in 1885 and was followed by John A. McCall in 1892. Under the latter's guidance Nylic contributed a number of significant innovations to life insurance marketing and became the largest life company, in terms of insurance in force, in the Nation.

In his monumental Marketing Life Insurance, Stalson notes that "the general agency was the dominant if not the sole system of representation in life insurance down to the 1890's." Then "one company, the New York Life, made a revolutionary change" in its methods of organizing local offices and compensating agents. First, the firm junked its general agency system and in its place installed salaried managers, "an organizational plan which has come to be known as the branch office system."<sup>11</sup> Next, vice president George W. Perkins and superintendent of agencies Darwin P. Kingsley created the "Nylic" Association of company agents. It sought to elevate underwriting to a profession, encourage steady sales, and promote company loyalty by awarding additional commissions to agents who maintained stipulated sales levels over 5-year periods. As late as 1935 most life companies still used the general agency system, but five of the six leading firms utilized the branch office system exclusively.

New York Life's next significant innovation represents, in Abbott's opinion, the company's "most notable achievement." In the mid-1890's and early 1900's the firm pioneered a widely copied "scientific method of insuring impaired or substandard lives."<sup>12</sup> An agent's complaints about the firm's rejecting applications from some of his potential clients prompted Nylic's Assistant Medical Director Oscar H. Rogers to tackle the heretofore unsolved industry-wide problem of accumulating sufficient data to determine the risk of insuring individuals who suffered from various physical impairments. Rogers studied every application that the firm had denied

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<sup>11</sup>Stalson, Marketing Life Insurance, 599.

<sup>12</sup>Abbott, Story of Nylic, 277.

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during the previous 15 years and questioned all surviving principals--applicants, family members, physicians, and agents-- of each application. After examining more than 25,000 cases, Rogers worked with company actuaries to compile "The Numerical System," which eventually became a standard, industry-wide actuarial table for so-called substandard life insurance. Nyllic issued its first substandard policy in 1896, and by 1928 such policies accounted for 10 percent of the company's insurance in force.

Also in the 1890's, New York Life, according to Abbott, became the first life firm "to write a policy in plain language, free from technicalities," and the first "to publish in detail a financial report of the Company for the policy-holder and the general public."<sup>13</sup> The firm instituted the latter practice in 1899, 7 years before New York law required it.

In addition to becoming what Keller describes as "the company most committed to a sophisticated business technique and investment structure," New York Life also developed during McCall's presidency the industry's "most complex system of political representation."<sup>14</sup> Probably vice president Perkins did most to establish both a State and a national lobbying network, but he had able assistance from other company officials who gave Nyllic close personal contact with several U.S. Senators and at least a speaking acquaintance with some key cabinet members and Presidents McKinley and Roosevelt. These contacts, together with the company's close investment ties with J. P. Morgan and Company and McCall's widely publicized testimony at the 1905 Armstrong hearings--where he became known as "the statesman of the life insurance world"--all drew considerable national attention to the firm.<sup>15</sup>

The New York Legislature's Armstrong investigation produced a formal report declaring that the "Big Three" life firms were too large and not properly responsible to their policyholders.

(continued)

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 270-71.

<sup>14</sup>Keller, Life Insurance Enterprise, 217.

<sup>15</sup>Buley, American Life Convention, I, 213.

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Operational changes within the various companies corrected some of the enumerated problems, and reform legislation solved others. Still, most large life firms, particularly New York Life, suffered a decline in business due to adverse public reaction. The task of restoring confidence in the company fell to Darwin P. Kingsley, who was elevated to the presidency in 1907 following Alexander E. Orr's brief term in the office. In addition to earning a reputation as "the militant knight of federal supervision" because he advocated, unsuccessfully, a constitutional amendment to bring insurance companies under congressional regulation, Kingsley kept Nylc near the top in the industry.<sup>16</sup> Within a decade the firm's invested assets approached \$1 billion, and in the late twenties the company moved into an attractive new home office building. During the next 35 years, New York Life continued to grow and never ranked lower than fourth in total insurance in force.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 430.

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