

American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) Rogers Memorial Building

233 Butler Street (aka 231-237 Butler Street), Brooklyn
Tax Map Block 405 Lot 51 in part, and a portion of the Butler
Street sidewalk in front of said lot

Built: 1913; expanded 1922

Architect: Renwick, Aspinwall & Tucker (1913 and 1922)

Style: Neo-Romanesque

Action: Proposed for the Commission's Calendar, June 25, 2019



ASPCA Rogers Memorial Building, LPC, 2017

Upon its opening in 1913, this building was hailed as “the largest, most complete animal shelter in the world.” Largely funded by members of the Bowdoin and Schermerhorn families, it was constructed as the Brooklyn dog and cat shelter of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) and is the finest surviving ASPCA building in New York City. Originally, it was just a single story in height, occupying only the western portion of its lot; renovations in 1922 enlarged it to its current size, expanding its capacity and transforming it into the ASPCA’s Brooklyn headquarters and ambulance house.

The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has been headquartered in New York City since its founding by Henry Bergh in 1866. It has been crucial in revolutionizing Americans’ attitudes toward animals and in establishing New York as a national leader in the humane movement. Before its founding, animals enjoyed few protections; horses, which performed the bulk of heavy labor in New York City, were freely abused, neglected, and abandoned by their owners. With support from prominent citizens including Peter Cooper, William Cullen Bryant, A. T. Stewart, and Horace Greeley, Bergh convinced New York State to charter the ASPCA as the country’s first animal-welfare organization—second only in the world to Britain’s Royal Society—and to pass pioneering, comprehensive anti-cruelty legislation. This led other states to charter similar organizations and pass laws modeled on New York’s, taking the humane movement nationwide. Bergh, who remained the movement’s public face for the rest of his life, is buried in Brooklyn’s Green-Wood Cemetery.

The elegant design of the Butler Street shelter, by the firm of Renwick, Aspinwall & Tucker, is a testament to the ASPCA’s civic and social importance and its support from some of the city’s leading philanthropists. Two large arches dominate a facade enlivened by molded and patterned brickwork, limestone trim, and an arched corbel table punctuated by colorful tiles. Its restrained classical entrance features a relief of the ASPCA seal, which depicts the Angel of Mercy intervening to protect a horse from its abusive driver. The building is remarkably well-preserved, with changes on its main facade essentially limited to sash and door replacement.

The ASPCA was a leader in hiring female ambulance drivers, who were thought to be more tactful than men in dealing with the delicate situations often faced by ASPCA staff. Bronze medals were awarded here to heroic Brooklyn animals including Micky the Irish setter, who saved his family from a fire in 1940. In the early 1960s, the shelter was said to “handle more animals than any shelter in the country,” and thousands of Brooklynites adopted pets here before its closure in 1979.

The sidewalk in front of the building retains a granite watering trough dating from its opening. Funded by Edith Bowdoin and inscribed with her name, this rare surviving trough was one of hundreds installed by anti-cruelty advocates throughout New York City to provide horses and smaller animals with fresh drinking water. The intact ASPCA Rogers Memorial Building and its extant watering trough remain salient reminders of a time when working animals were once a common site on the streets of New York City, and of the leading role played by city residents in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in advancing the humane movement throughout the United States.

