

Gowanus Flushing Tunnel Pumping Station and Gate House

196 Butler Street, Brooklyn
Tax Map Block 411 Lot 14 (in part)

Built: 1910-11

Architect: Edwin J. Fort, Chief Engineer, Brooklyn Bureau of Sewers

Style: Colonial Revival with Secessionist details

Proposed Action: Proposed for Calendaring June 25, 2019



Gowanus Flushing Tunnel Pumping Station and Gate House, 2017, LPC

Completed in 1911, the Gowanus Flushing Tunnel Pumping Station and Gate House were part of a major infrastructure project intended to cleanse the polluted waters of the Gowanus Canal. At the time of the flushing tunnel's opening it represented one of the most ambitious efforts ever attempted to clean a polluted American waterway.

First proposed in the 1840s to provide water access to businesses in South Brooklyn, work on the Gowanus Canal was started in 1853 and continued into the 1860s. The original plan to maintain the water quality of the canal relied on the ebb and flow of the tides but it was insufficient from the beginning and increasing amounts of waste and sewer runoff from industrial and residential development in the area worsened the already polluted conditions. Brooklyn's sewer engineers decided in 1904 to construct a mile-long tunnel under Brooklyn's streets linking the Gowanus Canal with Buttermilk Channel in Upper New York Bay. A nine-foot propeller near the head of the canal would draw dirty water into the tunnel and initiate a constant flushing action that was expected to permanently clean the canal. When construction began, only two similar projects, in Milwaukee and Chicago, had been completed in the United States.

The larger of the two buildings, the Pumping Station, housed the tunnel's pumping and electric motor equipment. Executed in red brick with large round arches and a high gambrel roof, it is primarily Colonial Revival in style, although its abstracted classical details exhibit Secessionist influences. The much-smaller Gate House contained the tunnel's southern gate valve. Sharing the Pumping Station's intricate brickwork and robust corbelled cornice, it is crowned by a hipped roof with square monitor. The tunnel's opening on June 21, 1911 was a cause for celebration, as both buildings were draped in bunting and American flags and the surrounding community observed "South Brooklyn Day."

The tunnel operated until 1960, when its propeller mechanism broke. New York City's fiscal crisis prevented the necessary repairs, allowing the canal to become increasingly stagnant. The city's Department of Environmental Protection reactivated the flushing tunnel in 1999 at which time it reversed the tunnel's flow to bring aerated water from Buttermilk Channel into the canal in an effort to create the conditions necessary to sustain marine life in the Gowanus Canal. In 2014, the tunnel was again reactivated after a four-year upgrade. Today, the Pumping Station and Gate House remain in active use as part of the tunnel system, which pumps more than 250 million gallons of bay water into the Gowanus Canal each day. Both buildings are little-changed from the time of their original construction and remain well-preserved.

