

Somers Brothers Tinware Factory (later American Can Company)

238-246 3rd Street (aka 232-236 3rd Street, 361-363 Third Avenue, 365-379 Third Avenue), Brooklyn
Tax Map Block 980 Lot 8 in part

Built: 1884; 1891

Architect: Daniel McLean Somers

Style: American Round Arch with Queen Anne and Neo-Grec details



View from 3rd Avenue at 3rd Street, 2017

A commanding presence on a prominent Gowanus corner, this former factory was constructed by Somers Brothers, a major manufacturer of decorated tinware boxes. The three Somers brothers—Joseph, Daniel, and Guy—were born in Virginia and moved to Brooklyn after the Civil War to make “brass novelties.” They entered the tinware business by 1874, and by 1884, their 275 employees, mostly girls and women, were turning out more than 15,000 boxes a day from their factory in Downtown Brooklyn. In that year, the *Brooklyn Eagle* described Somers Brothers as “the largest firm in the business in this country,” noting that it was “the first to take up the decorating of tin boxes by printing directly on the sheets,” a process originally developed and improved upon in France and England. Daniel Somers himself was said to have designed and fabricated the machinery for shaping and decorating the boxes.

The company’s rapid growth necessitated the construction of a much larger factory, and in May of 1884, Daniel Somers filed plans for a new plant at the southeast corner of Third Avenue and 3rd Street. As with the tin shaping and printing machinery, the inventive Somers designed the factory himself. Although the design of the building’s red-brick facades with projecting piers, and round and segmentally arched openings was functional, it was also expressive, incorporating channeled and corbelled brickwork and projecting pavilions that add texture and variety to the expansive facades. The building’s most unusual and distinctive feature is its corner parapet, which features channeled pilasters, a highly abstracted classical cornice, and four diamond-shaped openings, three of which retain their historic Queen Anne style multi-pane sashes.

Somers Brothers continued as an independent company until 1901, when it was acquired by the American Can Company as part of its campaign to dominate tin-container manufacturing in the United States. The American Can Company was responsible for a number of innovations in the fabrication, sealing, and lining of cans that were widely adopted for food safety.

Since the 1970s, the former Somers Brothers factory has housed artists’ studios. More than 300 artists, craftspeople, publishers, and filmmakers occupy the building today, and it serves as a venue for the annual Rooftop Films series.

