

Low Memorial Library

Individual Landmark

West 116th Street between Amsterdam Avenue and Broadway

Designation Date: September 20, 1966



Low Memorial Library. Photo: Lorraine Colbert

Low Memorial Library is a majestic building of truly monumental proportions. It is situated on a slight rise overlooking the south campus of Columbia University. This Roman stone building, designed in the form of a Greek cross, displays great classic grandeur. One of its chief features is an imposing Ionic portico (porch), consisting of 10 superb, fluted columns, supporting a simple cornice and high attic story, inscribed with references to the original King's College charter. An octagonal shaped drum, containing large semi-circular (lunette) windows, rises above the central portion of the building. Crowning the whole is a round low dome. Modeled on the Pantheon in Rome, the library building exhibits little ornamental decoration, and relies for its beauty on the strength of its pure classic form.

This remarkable building occupies an important site on the Columbia campus, and in this setting plays a major role in the academic life of the University. Centrally located on the long axis of the campus, north of College Walk (West 116th Street), the building is separated from the street by several flights of steps, two landings and a wide esplanade which terminates in landscaped areas. Located midway up the steps is the world-renowned statue of Alma Mater, by Daniel Chester French, her outstretched arms welcoming all who come on campus. At the annual commencement ceremonies, weather permitting, the impressive graduation ceremony is held in this dramatic setting, with the library in the background.

Columbia University, chartered by George II in 1754 as Kings College, is the oldest college in New York State. Columbia came to Morningside Heights in 1897, and Low Library was the first major building erected on the present University site. The gift of Columbia president Seth Low, it was dedicated to the memory of his father, Abiel A. Low. Once the main library of the University, it now serves as the administrative center where major academic gatherings and convocations are held. The interior rotunda, surrounded with magnificent Ionic columns, is especially well adapted to receptions. Among the noted guests that the University has received under the domed rotunda have been King George VI of England and his wife, Queen Elizabeth, Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill of England, President Vincent Auriol of France, and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru of India.

[Read the full NYC LPC designation report here.](#)