

# THREE TRENT TILE COMPANY INSTALLATIONS IN NEW YORK CITY

Michael Padwee



A framed 6" Trent portrait tile designed by Isaac Broome (author's collection)

## I. Trent Crystal Glaze Tiles: The Bronx Theatre

In a September 7, 1909 article in the *Trenton Evening Times* (p. 1) three new Trent Tile Company installations in New York City were described. Although the installation locations were noted, of the three, only one location still exists.

<https://sites.google.com/site/tileinstallationdb/where-are-they-now>

The tile installations were manufactured by the Trent Tile Company of Trenton, N.J., which was one of the major producers of art tiles in the United States in the late 19th-early 20th centuries. "The Trent Tile Company was first organized as the Harris Manufacturing Company, c. 1882, but soon changed its name to Trent. By 1892 Trent operated 20 kilns...and by 1910 employed 300 workers. By 1912 Trent ran into difficulty and was placed in receivership. ...The company...was closed...[in 1939]. ...The years prior to World War I, and especially the 1880s and 1890s, were the heyday of Trent's production of art tile. Isaac Broome, who had worked for the Etruria Pottery of Trenton and for the Ott & Brewer Pottery, was Trent's designer and modeler from about 1883 to 1885, when he left Trent to help organize the Providential Tile Works.



Another 6" portrait tile designed by Isaac Broome (author's collection)

According to Edwin Atlee Barber [*Pottery and Porcelain of the United States*, Century House Americana, Watkins Glen, NY, 1971 reprint of the 1893 edition, p. 363], Isaac Broome left enough art tile designs at Trent that many were still being made into the 1890s. Another major artistic influence at Trent was William Wood Gallimore..., an English modeler of portrait busts and vases, [who] came to work at Trent in 1886 and stayed for six years. ...Also, about 1905 Charles Babcock Upjohn, who had worked for Weller Pottery [in Zanesville, Ohio] and the Cambridge Art Pottery as a designer and modeler..., joined the Trent Tile Company." (Michael Padwee, "The Manufacture of Ceramic Tiles in Trenton-Part 2: The Trent Tile Company (1882-1939)", in *Trenton Potteries, the Newsletter of the Potteries of Trenton Society*, Vol. 4, Issue 4, December 2003, pp. 1-2; <http://potteriesoftrentonsociety.org/publish/Vol%204%20Iss%204%20December%202003.pdf>)



"The facade of the Bronx Theatre under construction" by the Byron Company (New York, NY). From the Collections of the Museum of the City of New York; [http://collections.mcny.org/C.aspx?VP3=SearchResult\\_VPage&VBID=24UP1G75YD08&SMLS=1&RW=1276&RH=664](http://collections.mcny.org/C.aspx?VP3=SearchResult_VPage&VBID=24UP1G75YD08&SMLS=1&RW=1276&RH=664)

The first of the Trent tile installations mentioned was the foyer of the Bronx Theatre built in 1909 on Melrose Avenue near 150th Street. (This theater should not be confused with the Bronx Opera House built in 1913 on 149th Street near Melrose Avenue and later re-named the Bronx Theatre!) The 1909 Bronx Theatre was designed by William H. McElfatrick (1854-1922), who designed many theaters in the United States and Canada, including the Manhattan and Lexington Opera Houses in New York and the Philadelphia Opera House. ([http://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/ar\\_display.cfm/22518](http://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/ar_display.cfm/22518)) William McElfatrick was a principal in the firm of J.B. McElfatrick and Sons, a firm renowned for its theater architecture. "During the firm's existence (until 1922) it designed about three hundred theaters..., including almost forty in New York." (Marilyn Dee Casto, *Actors, Audiences, and Historic Theaters of Kentucky*, The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, KY, ©2000, p. 75)



(A photo from *Architects' and Builders' Magazine*, Vol. XLII, No. 2, November 1909)

*The Trent Evening Times* stated that "[following]...a lengthy series of experiments...[the Trent Tile Company]...has completed one of the first orders in the country for tile in red crystal glazes. ...In the Bronx Theatre the panels [of tiles] of red crystal glazes are to supplant the imported tapestries formerly employed almost exclusively in decorating theatre foyers. The glazes will be fancifully set off with narrow rims of buff and a margin of tile... . The panels in crystal will be three by six feet." Unfortunately, no photos of the tiled interior of this theater could be found.



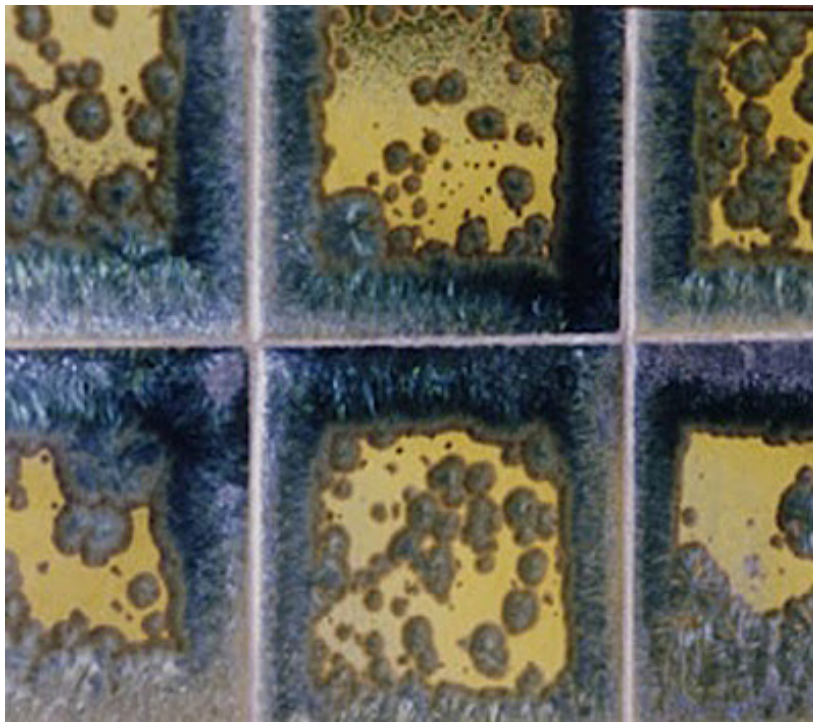
Charles P. Lawshe (public domain image from "An Interesting Interview", *The Mantel Tile and Grate Monthly*, Vol. IV, No. 12, June 1910, pp. 28+)

A more recent and informative article about Trent's crystal glaze tiles was written by [Riley Doty](#). ("Trent Tile's Crystal Glazes", *Flash Point the Newsletter of the Tile Heritage Foundation*, Vol. 12, No. 3 & 4, July-Dec. 1999, pp. 5-6) While restoring two fireplaces in a 1911 house in Berkeley, California, Mr. Doty discovered the crystal glazed fireplace tiles had been made by the Trent Tile Company.

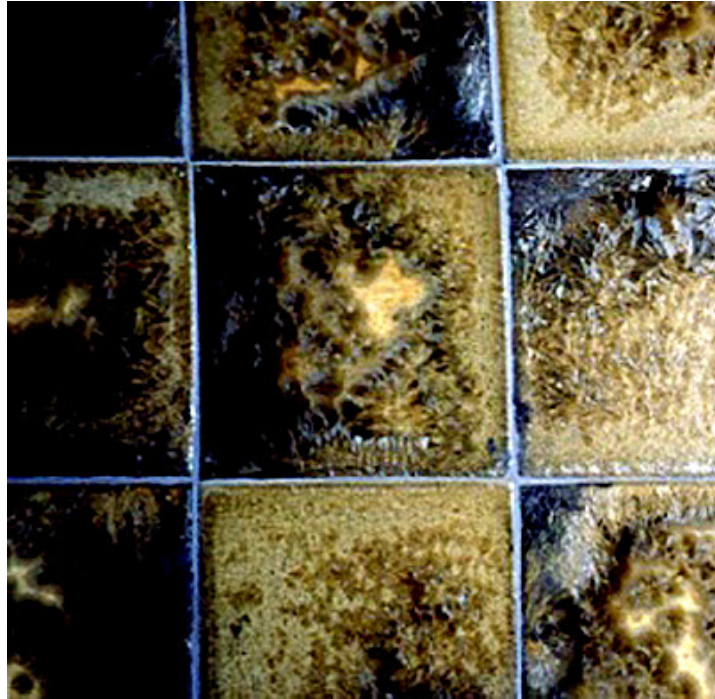




Mr. Doty researched the tiles and has quoted articles and ads from *The Mantel Tile and Grate Monthly* from 1910-1915 which illustrated the attempts of Charles P. Lawshe, the general manager of Trent and a ceramicist, to develop a new iridescent glaze similar to Tiffany's Favrite glass. Lawshe states that the "Crystal Glazes are of many tones, some showing weird, swirling reflections as a moonlight on water with clear, transparent patches among the crystals; others showing hoarfrost as on window panes; and still others, the surface effect of galvanized iron." Mr. Doty concludes "...that Trent, under Lawshe, introduces Crystal Glaze tiles and tries to market them as a 'higher art' line. ...The evidence suggests that Trent's Crystal Glaze tiles were not entirely successful in the marketplace and hence were made for only a few years." The original color photos from this restoration were located by Joe Taylor, the head of the Tile Heritage Foundation, and Mr. Doty remembered that the main colors were blue and yellow/gold, and the colors were a large part of their visual impact. (6-11-2012 email to the author from Riley Doty)

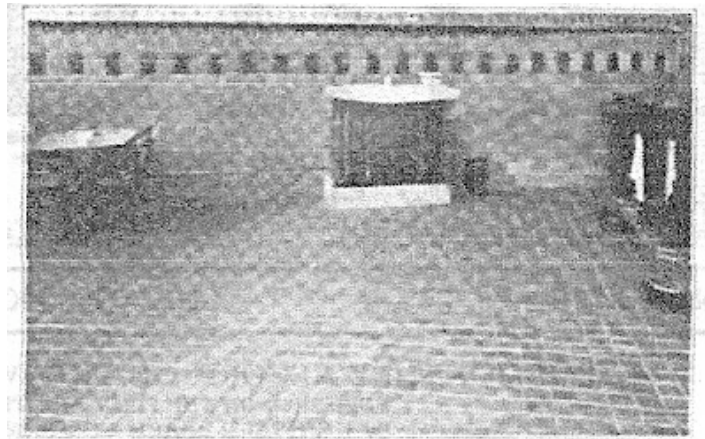


Crystal glaze tiles from the Dining Room--close-up



Crystal glaze tiles from the Living Room--close-up

Another installation in Trenton, NJ used Trent's experimental crystal glaze tiles-- Gaertner's Restaurant, 101-103 W. Hanover Street (no longer in existence). "The wainscoting is 'Jugendstyle' [sic.] in design and is 5 ft. 10 ins. in height. The body is composed of 6x6 tiles, set straight joint in a dense semi-matte sap green glaze: cap, base and liners are in olive green, while the relief 6x9 insert is hand-painted in colors. Alternating with this is a 6x9 plain in a green crystal glaze. ...the frieze runs entirely around the room." ("Floor and Wall Tile", *Brick and Clay Record*, Vol. XLIII, No. 7, Oct. 7, 1913, p. 704)



A poor-quality, edited image from the *Brick and Clay Record* of the tiling in Gaertner's Restaurant. (public domain)



A 3 1/2" diameter Trent stove tile (author's collection)

## II. A Dey Street Restaurant

Today, Dey Street west of Broadway is a one block remnant of what it used to be--a busy conduit to the Hudson River and its shipping, and, as one contemporary architectural journal wrote, "...the most artistic buildings that one sees are the cafe restaurants" on Dey and Fulton Streets. (*Architecture*, Vol. XXVI, No. 4, Oct. 15, 1912, p. 187) It is unfortunate that we no longer have proof of this.



"Construction, West on Dey Street from Broadway" by F. Savastano, 1934. Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia collection, City of New York Municipal Archives, No. fh1\_1650-01. Photo courtesy of the Municipal Archives. The Hudson Terminal Buildings and pedestrian bridge are in the background.



In 1908/09 the massive Hudson Terminal Buildings and the H&M Railway Terminal were built on both sides of and under Dey Street on the West side of Church Street. "The main purpose of the H & M was to connect railroad and streetcar terminals on the New Jersey waterfront with points in Manhattan. ...Hudson Terminal was a marvel written up in engineering and architectural journals... . The property occupied the length of two city blocks along the west side of Church St from Cortlandt St to Fulton St., bisected by Dey St. Above the station, the H & M then built two office towers, the Hudson Terminal Buildings, which brought in rental income. The two buildings matched but were not identical, because the more southerly block was larger." (quoted from "Abandoned Stations" by Joseph Brennan, <http://www.columbia.edu/~brennan/abandoned/hudterm.html>) "The Hudson & Manhattan Railroad Company erected this complex as an investment and as its signature development. ...Narrow Dey Street separated the towers and was transversed with a pedestrian bridge high above and by tunnels below." (Joseph J. Korom, *The American Skyscraper, 1850-1940: A Celebration of Height*, Brandon Books, Wellesley, MA, 2008, p. 270)

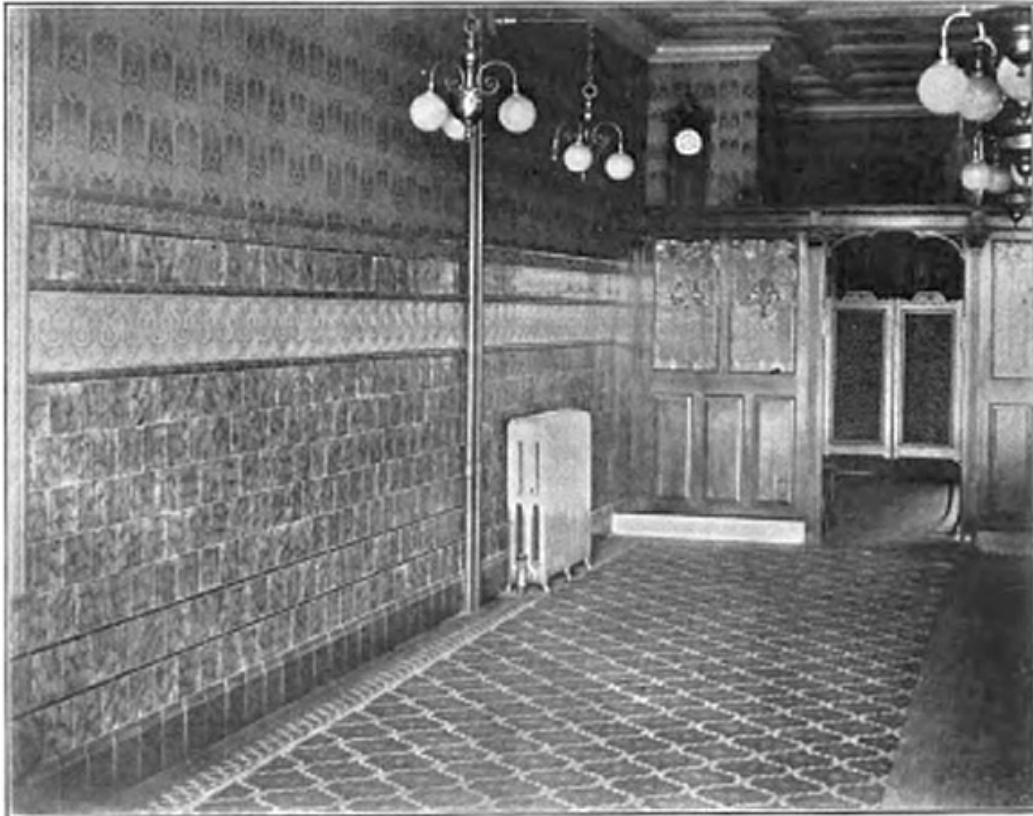
The terminal was in use from 1909-1971 when construction on the World Trade Center was begun. The restaurant did not survive the construction of the original World Trade Center.



Hudson Terminal Buildings (right) in a 1909 photo. (United States Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, digital ID cph.3c25895.) Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress. Dey Street is between the two buildings.

According to a *Trenton Evening Times* article (September 7, 1909, p. 1), Trent tiles "...will go into the main dining room of a new Dye [sic] Street restaurant immediately opposite the Hudson Terminal Building... . The dining room in the Dye Street restaurant is decorated with a wainscoting of tile six feet from the floor. It is all colored in buff matt glaze, and painted in pinks and greens, harmonizing perfectly with the floor design, also of tile. This general style of the decorations, here, including the walls and panel effects, is all l'art nouveau [a tile line of the Trent Tile Company]... ."

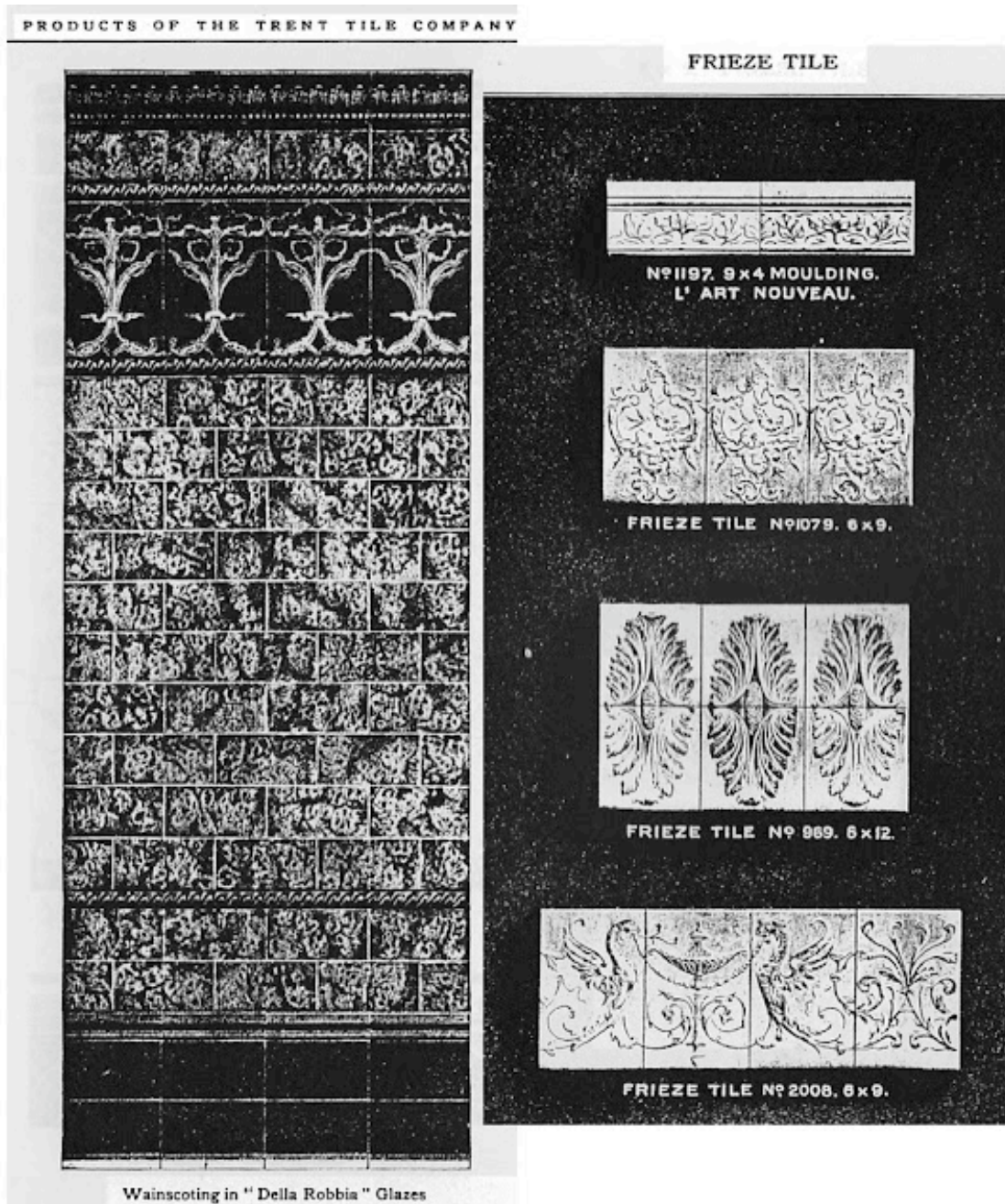




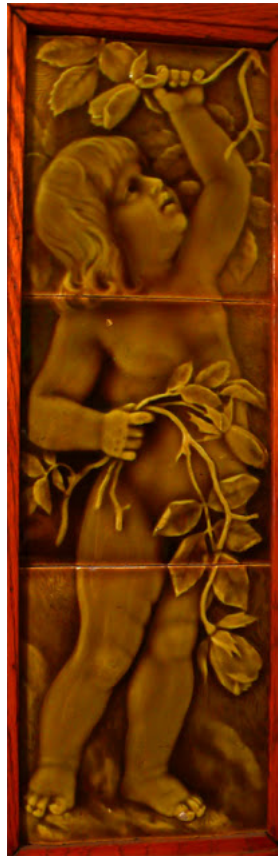
Main bar room of Diehl's Tavern. (*The Architectural Record*, Vol. XVIII, No. 6, Dec. 1905, p. 68)

Although we have not been able to locate images of the tiled interior of this restaurant, and we are not even sure of the exact name or address of it, we have located an image of another restaurant from this period tiled with Trent tiles: Diehl's Tavern in Trenton, NJ, designed by the architect Abram Swan, Sr. The Trent ad accompanying the image describes the tiles: "The body of the wainscoting is composed of 6x6 'DELLA ROBBIA' glazed tile in a soft shade of varigated Moss Green. The Frieze is in 6x9 tile Majolica painted in three colors, outlined in enamel black. The 9x4 Cap, and 6x9 Frieze as well as the tile used for the string courses are all in 'L'Art Nouveau.' The Cap and Base Tile are colored in a deep Myrtle Green glaze; string courses are in a brilliant Ox Blood glaze. The floor is laid by 1/4x1/4 square vitreous Ceramic Mosaic in a rich red color broken by an all-over design in white interspersed with rosettes in Dark Green and Silver Gray. The border to the floor is in round Ceramic Mosaic, in design and color to harmonize with the body of the floor." (*The Architectural Record*, Vol. XVIII, No. 6, Dec. 1905, p. 68)

In a circa 1905 catalog of the Trent Tile Company Alfred W. Lawshe describes Trent's "Della Robbia" glazes as "Stanniferous enamels, [...that] are non-crazing; the colorings are rich reds, greens, browns, oranges, yellows, blues and pinks, as also the most delicate tones and shades of these colors." (*Catalog of the Trent Tile Company*, Trenton, NJ, c. 1905, original printed by Edw. Stern & Co., Inc., Philadelphia; reprinted by the Tile Heritage Foundation, Healdsburg, CA, 1990s)



Some Trent "Della Robbia" and "L'Art Nouveau" tiles.



A 6" x 18" Trent art tile panel (3-6" tiles) from a fireplace.  
(Author's collection)

### III. Historic Hall Apartments

To me the most interesting and tantalizing Trent tile installation mentioned in the September 7, 1909 *Trenton Evening Times* article was the tiled panels and floor in the "Historic Hall" apartment house in Manhattan. The newspaper article describes these murals as follows: the first tile mural "...produce[d] a picture of New York City...as it appeared in 1407, true to nature and within a space of five feet six inches by four feet six inches... ." The second tile mural "...reproduce[d] an old print showing Harlem, from Morrisania, in 1647, in a panel of three feet six inches by two feet six inches... ." The third tile panel "...present[ed] an accurate likeness of the trees planted in New York by Alexander Hamilton in 1802, inside [a border] of two feet six inches by nine feet... ." Further, "The floor of Historic Hall, in the main corridor, is to be covered with tile, in the design of a damask rug, in 24 colors, embracing a space of ten feet...six inches by eleven feet. The fine, old-fashioned fireplace, too, is to be of tile, and the words Historic Hall in superior ceramic mosaics are to be placed beneath the...mantel." Architect Albert P. Morris designed Manhattan's "Historic Hall" apartment house. The interior, main floor decoration was conceived by Charles B. Upjohn, chief of the design staff at the Trent Tile Company, and the matt-glazed murals were painted by the artist Norman E. Rulon. Ceramist Charles Lawshe oversaw the production of the tiles.



When I first read of this apartment house, I began searching for it on the internet. I only knew the name, not the address. I found one newspaper article that mentioned the Historic Hall apartments: "Activity Shown In West Side Districts", *New York Daily Tribune*, May 1, 1910, p. 12, column 2, placed the building "in St. Nicholas avenue opposite 156th street." I then went to Christopher Gray's excellent website, "[Office for Metropolitan History](#)", and read his article, "[A Guide to Researching the History of a New York City Building](#)".

Since the building was designed by the architect Albert P. Morris and built in 1909, I next searched for the architect's new buildings (NBs) for 1909 and the surrounding years in the "[Manhattan NB Database 1900-1986](#)", accessed through Christopher Gray's website. Three new buildings were listed for Albert Morris. The most promising result out of these three buildings was one built in 1909 on the East side of St. Nicholas Avenue, approximately 248 feet North of 155th Street.

I then took a trip to St. Nicholas Avenue and 155th Street and roughly measured 248 feet from 155th Street. I found myself in the middle of 156th Street. The building I focused on was at the NE corner of West 156th Street and St. Nicholas Avenue--940 St. Nicholas Avenue. Another building on the SE corner became my second choice--936-938 St. Nicholas Avenue. I managed to gain entry to the ground floors of both buildings, and decided that the three tile murals, "rug" and mantel would have fit better in 940 St. Nicholas Avenue.

It was only after I returned home with my photos of the interiors of these buildings that I discovered another article that mentioned the "Historic Hall" apartment building and gave its address. According to the *Real Estate Record and Builders' Guide* (Vol. 92, No. 2374, September 13, 1913, p. 496), 928-930 St. Nicholas Avenue is a "6-sty elevator apartment house, [called the] "Historic Hall," on [an irregular] plot 124.9 x 126 [feet]... ."



928-930 St. Nicholas Avenue, the "Historic Hall" Apartment Building





The entry hall/foyer of 928-930 St. Nicholas Avenue

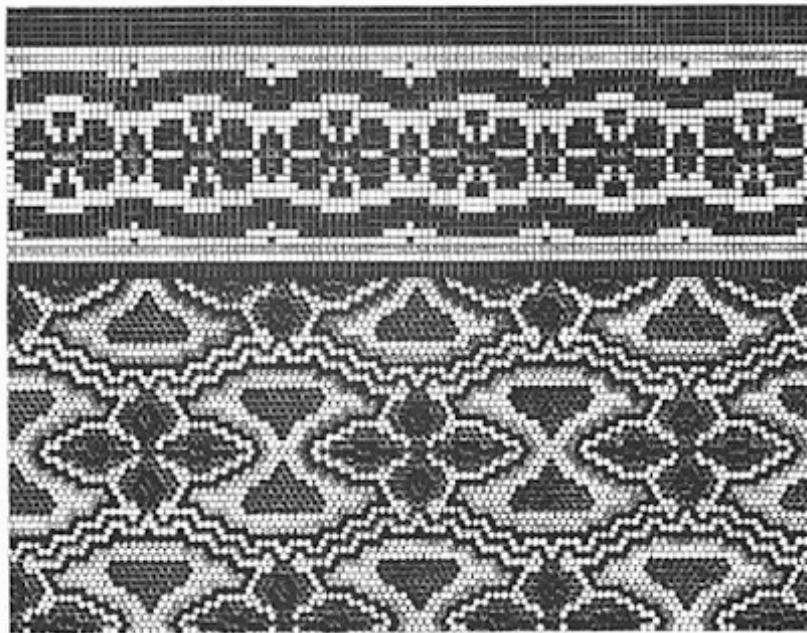
When I entered this building, which is now a co-op, there was a foyer which could have held three tile murals and a fireplace as described in the September 7, 1909 *Trenton Evening Times*. Although there are no tile murals on the walls, nor a tiled mantel with "Historic Hall" in mosaic tiles on the floor, the floor tiles are rug-shaped with patterns consisting of many colors. Could this have been the original tiled floor patterned like a damask rug?



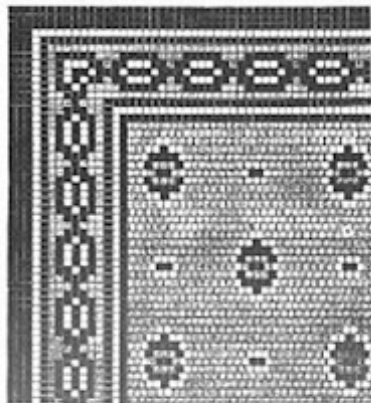


In 1906 the Trent Tile Company had a four page ad published in ***Sweet's Indexed Catalogue of Building Construction***, a to-the-trade publication, which pictured types of ceramic mosaic floors that Trent could design.

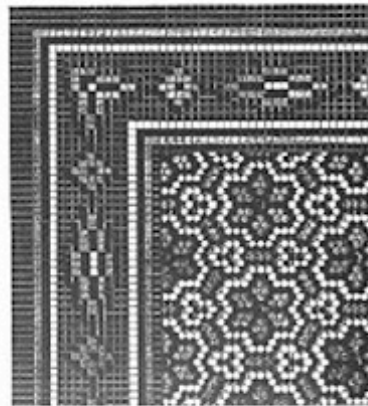




Ceramic Mosaic Floor. Circle Ceramic Body, Square Ceramic Border



Ceramic Mosaic Floor. Square Ceramic

Ceramic Mosaic Floor  
Circle Ceramic Body, Square Ceramic Border

("Trent Tile Company", *Sweet's Indexed Catalogue of Building Construction for the Year 1906*, The Architectural Record Co., New York City, 1906, p. 374)

Trent created at least one other pictorial tile rug that has been described in print, although no photos are known to exist. An undated and unpagged article, "Curious Indian Legend Designed in the 'Mat'" in a *Trenton Sunday Advertiser*, states:

## CURIOUS INDIAN LEGEND DESIGNED IN THE "MAT."

(From Trenton Sunday Advertiser).

The peculiar and mystifying Indian blanket design of ceramic mosaic tiling on the floor of the Kline barber shop on North Warren Street laid by John C. Hills, "The Tile Man," has aroused the curiosity of the patrons of that establishment to such an extent that the attaches and proprietor are compelled to relate the legend in connection with this curious Indian pattern. The "mat," as it is known to tile men, was conceived at the Trent Tile Company's plant.

The design shows a blanket of many hues and is copied from a Navajo Indian blanket or "mat." The legend of the blanket has to do with the red man's idea of the evil one. In the centre of the "mat" is a large figure in red mosaic, which is supposed to signify lightning. Six small figures represent the Navajo devil. The influence of the evil one is controlled and counteracted by the four Swastika crosses in the corners of the "mat." Even the colors tell a story. Black symbolizes authority; red, delight; buff, deceit; green, jealousy; blue, moroseness.

The design is the work of Miss Anna Thomas and Robert Harris, of the Trent Tile Company. The ceramic mosaic was made by Charles P. Lawshe, of the same concern. The laying of the mosaic Indian tiling by John C. Hills and his workmen is pronounced an artistic bit of workmanship and has been favorably commented upon by hundreds.



I have asked both the [Potteries of Trenton Society](#), which has an excellent database of the ceramic companies operating in Trenton, NJ, and the [Tile Heritage Foundation](#) for information about the Kline Barber Shop and the Historic Hall building, but neither had any new information.





A Trent fireplace surround recently seen on eBay



A cast iron stove with Trent tiles.