

SOHMER & COMPANY PIANO FACTORY BUILDING
31-01 VERNON BOULEVARD, BOROUGH OF QUEENS

The Sohmer & Co. Piano Factory Building, located in Long Island City, is one of the most prominent structures along the Queens side of the East River due to its monumental scale and prominent mansard-roofed clock tower. Built around 1886 as the piano factory for Sohmer & Co., the building was designed by the architectural firm Berger & Baylies, which designed commercial and residential buildings throughout New York City, including several warehouses and store-and-loft buildings in the Tribeca Historic Districts. The Sohmer building is an excellent example of a late 19th century factory constructed in the American round-arched style—which was influenced by German Romanesque Revival style. The building is constructed of brick with segmentally-arched windows with brick lintels. The first, second, and fifth stories are surmounted by bandcourses. An 1887 article in the *New York Times* reported: “No expense has been spared by the firm in any detail of their new buildings, and they are without doubt one of the finest and best equipped pianoforte factories in this country. Standing six stories in height, with large entrances to the yards, offices, &c., they present an imposing appearance and will help to draw special attention to this portion of Long Island.” The factory was expanded to the south around 1913. This new wing, which fronts on Vernon Boulevard, was designed to match the earlier section.

Sohmer & Co. was founded in 1872 in Manhattan by the German immigrant Hugo Sohmer (1845-1931). The firm has always specialized in the making of “verticals” or upright pianos that were more popular for domestic usage, and the company’s product was one of the finest pianos made in the United States. Sohmer was part of the booming nineteenth-century New York City piano industry. The fabrication of pianos and other musical instruments was one of New York City’s top ten manufactured products. In 1872, there were 171 piano manufacturers in New York City, now there are around ten nationally. While Sohmer never achieved the celebrity of its more famous counterpart, Steinway, the company did have notable fans. Composer Victor Herbert owned several Sohmer pianos and the noted American songwriter Irving Berlin had three Sohmers with transposing keyboards that he used that he used to write his music. The company remained at the plant until 1982, when it acquired by the Pratt, Read & Co., America’s leading manufacturer of piano keyboards and actions, which moved the factory to Ivoryton, Connecticut. At that time, the former Sohmer factory in Queens was acquired by the Adirondack Chair Company for use as a factory.

The New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission held previous public hearings on the Sohmer & Co. Piano Factory Building in 1983, 1984, and 1990. The Sohmer Building is one of the few extant survivors of the once-thriving piano-manufacturing industry in New York City.