

Landmarks Preservation Commission
Designation List #178 LP-1395
April 9, 1985

SEAMAN'S RETREAT: MAIN BUILDING, 131 Bay Street, Borough of Staten Island.
Built 1834 - 1853; builder Abraham P. Maybie

Landmark Site: Borough of Staten Island Tax Map Block 534, Lot 1 in part
consisting of the land on which the described building is situated.

On October 12, 1982, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public
hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Seaman's Retreat:
Main Building and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item
No. 2). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions
of law. Ten witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in
opposition to designation. A letter was received in favor of designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The main building of Seaman's Retreat, the third building constructed for
the newly founded hospital, dates from 1834-1853. An imposing granite ashlar
structure, built by Abraham P. Maybie, the main building displays Greek
Revival elements while evoking characteristics of the earlier Georgian tradi-
tion. In its plan, massing, and details, the main building offers an instruc-
tive contrast to another contemporary institution for seamen, Sailors' Snug
Harbor. For most of its history, Seaman's Retreat was the only hospital of
the Port of New York devoted solely to the care of merchant seaman. In 1903,
Seaman's Retreat was acquired by the federal government and converted to a U.S.
Marine Hospital. Early 20th-century alterations retain and elaborate the Greek
Revival character of the original building which continues to evoke the important
role it has played in medical research and in providing health care to thousands
of seamen.

Development of Seaman's Retreat

Opened on October 1, 1831, the hospital originally known as the Seaman's
Retreat was the first of two major institutions for merchant seamen to select
Staten Island's north shore as a location particularly suited to its purpose.
Convenient access to New York City and panoramic views of the harbor were also
important factors determining the north shore location of Sailors' Snug Harbor,
the home for aged seamen which began operations just two years later.

Established by "An Act to Provide for Sick and Disabled Seamen," passed
by the New York State Legislature on April 22, 1831, the Seaman's Retreat was
conceived in response to long-pressed demands for sorely needed hospital facili-
ties made by the Seaman's Association, the Nautical Society, and related advo-
cacy groups. It was to be supported by the head-tax imposed on seamen arriving
at the Port of New York. This tax, instituted in 1797, had earlier been used to
fund the port's Quarantine Station originally located on Bedloe's Island but
transferred to Staten Island in 1799. The Seaman's Retreat was operated as a
state institution until the port-entry tax was revoked in 1882: it was immediately
acquired by the New York Marine Society which leased it to the federal government
the following year for use as a U.S. Marine Hospital.

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Funds for the marine hospital system founded in 1798 were obtained from the monthly twenty-cent head-tax imposed on all seamen; this system was in effect the country's first pre-paid health-care plan. For reasons that are not entirely clear, a U.S. Marine Hospital had never been established at the Port of New York.¹ Instead, federally funded hospital care for seamen was provided by a number of institutions in the metropolitan area. Demand was always far in excess of the amount of care available and many entitled to receive it did not.² Utilization of the funds obtained from the state-imposed tax for the Seaman's Retreat helped meet that demand and mitigated the injustice of the double taxation to which seaman entering the Port of New York were subject.

Beginning in 1883 the Supervising Surgeon, chief officer of the U.S. Marine Hospital Service, urged annually that the former Seamen's Retreat be formally acquired by the federal government. This goal was not achieved until 1903. By then the hospital was, in terms of annual admissions, the largest of the more than twenty U.S. Marine Hospitals then in operation, a status it retained for the duration of its existence. In 1951 the marine hospitals were renamed; known after that date as U.S. Public Health Service Hospitals, they received additional classes of beneficiaries but continued to serve large numbers of merchant seamen, a function they performed until the hospital system was disbanded in 1981.³

The Main Building

The Seaman's Retreat main building was actually the third structure constructed for the newly founded hospital. The hospital started out in a converted and enlarged farmhouse standing on the 36 acres of land which had been acquired in 1831 by the Retreat's Board of Trustees from the Cornelius Corson family: the land was part of a large farm which had been in the family's possession since the 18th century. Like many of Staten Island's colonial period farms, it fronted the water and offered an eminently suitable location for the new marine hospital; choice of this site followed the tradition established by the earlier English marine hospitals at Plymouth, Greenwich, and Chelsea. Patients would often be transported by boat and a new dock opposite the Corson farmhouse was quickly readied to receive them. As described by the Retreat's Chief Physician in 1862, another advantage of the waterfront location was that "the weary invalid...can breathe the bracing air of the sea...the sight of his chosen element, covered with the white-winged messengers of a world-wide commerce fills his mind with gladsome hope and cheer."⁴

A second building, a three-story structure of brick with an equal number of porches on the front and rear elevations was constructed in 1832 at the top of the long slope leading up from the water, but additional space was still required. Plans to add extensions to the 1832 building were abandoned and a far more imposing structure of granite ashlar -- the existing main building -- was begun in 1834. The "Superintendent of Building" was Abraham P. Maybie who is listed in New York City business directories as a mason from 1811 to 1842. Maybie was also involved in construction at Sailors' Snug Harbor in 1836 and 1840. Harbor documents record masonry and carpentry work performed by him and there are references to drawings and plans provided by Maybie as well. Maybie's architectural role at the Seaman's Retreat is not clear. A Building

Committee which included Dr. John C. Westervelt, a member of the Retreat's Board of Trustees and Health Officer of New York City at the time of construction (he was later to become the Retreat's Chief Physician), may also have made a significant contribution to the design.

The new hospital building, completed in 1837, consisted of a three-story center pavilion which housed administrative offices, treatment rooms, services and staff residential quarters and lower wings which contained the patient wards. Two-and-one-half stories high, the wings were provided with two-story porches on the three exposed sides. This arrangement is very similar to the designs employed for the large hospital buildings constructed c. 1819 and c. 1823 at the Quarantine Station once located just south of today's St. George Ferry Terminal. In his capacity as Health Officer Dr. Westervelt was certainly quite familiar with the Quarantine hospitals, one of which is said to have been designed by Dr. Emanuel DeWitt, the physician who headed that institution. The design of the Retreat's main building may very well reflect Dr. Westervelt's participation as well as the influence of the earlier hospitals at the Quarantine.⁵

The Retreat's new hospital provides an interesting contrast to the contemporary Greek Revival main building (Building C) at Sailors' Snug Harbor. No less monumental than the Harbor building completed in 1833, the Retreat hospital demonstrates a classicizing approach which is more eclectic. The general form and proportions of its center pavilion, its emphasis on a center axis, and the prominent quoining all seem more Georgian than Greek Revival. Yet the Greek Revival style is clearly evoked by such elements as the projecting portico carried on Doric columns and the eared surrounds of the windows directly above the portico. Perhaps these motifs were selected as a substitute for a temple-front building, an arrangement less easily combined with wings fronted by two-story porches. Since the porches were considered a necessary feature related to the building's function, usage would appear to have been a greater design determinant than it was at Snug Harbor.

Ever-increasing admissions required additional ward space, a need which was met by the construction of end-pavilions which endowed the original building with increased monumentality. The north pavilion was completed in 1848 and the south in 1853. Both repeat the forms and materials of the center pavilion; the unified result would suggest the hospital had been planned from the beginning to take this form, although that was not the case.

No major alterations to the building were undertaken until the years following federal acquisition. In 1912 additional space was provided by raising the wing attics to a full story; standard-sized windows replaced the original small square windows at this level. The new attic story was covered by a dormered gable roof. The increased height of the wing roofs required removal of the four large chimneys which rose above the center pavilion eaves; the imposing square tower capped by a pyramidal roof and weather vane set on the ridge of the center pavilion roof was removed as well. The existing attic spaces of the end pavilions were made usable by inserting small rectangular windows through the fascia; the abundant copper facings in this area date from this renovation as well.

The normal capacity of the renovated hospital was 143 beds; emergency use of all available space could expand that capacity to 200. The hospital's annual report for 1914 and the years thereafter urged that new facilities be constructed; this goal was not achieved until the early 1930s when the large complex of buildings facing Vanderbilt Avenue was completed. The number of patients served in the Retreat main building during the intervening years -- no other U.S. Marine Hospital equaled its rate of annual admissions -- seems little short of astonishing. Had the new complex been completed as designed, one of its wings would have displaced the old main building. That wing was never built and the Seaman's Retreat main building was converted to other uses which over the years have included the out-patient clinic, administrative offices, laboratories, the dental clinic, and officers' club.

Care at Seaman's Retreat

An appreciation of the needs met by the Seaman's Retreat may be gained by reading the case histories recorded by the hospital's first Chief Physician, Dr. Peter Townsend. The following from 1832 is typical:

Jacob Schultze - Scorbutus - age 32 - born in Bremen - arrived last night on brig from round Cape Horn. Has been to sea 118 days and had had nothing but indifferent salt food to feed upon; and rice once a week only and a short allowance of water - was the carpenter on board. Twenty days after sailing his gums became sore and spongy and bled very freely...the ankles and insteps and so around the small of each leg caked hard and over the instep of a deep blue almost black color...during the whole time especially at first suffered universal pain, especially in the muscles of the thorax...very much prostrated and emaciated and was brought into the Retreat. Had no lime juice on board nor any other antiscorbutic so effectual in preventing as well as curing scurvy...it is in this shameful manner vessels are provided to the destruction of seamen...an object of pity to behold...

Hundreds of thousands of similarly "sick and disabled seamen" were provided with care over the 150-year existence of the hospital which had opened in 1831 as the Seaman's Retreat. Beginning in the mid-19th century the hospital's physicians were among the first to address the etiology of the diseases they treated. The pioneering advocacy of the Retreat's early physicians for improved living and working conditions -- both in port and aboard ship -- was later acknowledged by the U.S. Marine Hospital Service's Surgeon General. Dr. Charles King, the Retreat's last Chief Physician, continued this tradition with his investigations of the wretched living conditions endured by seamen in New York City's waterfront boarding houses. Dr. King was also one of the first proponents of mandatory medical examinations for seamen, a requirement which ascertained a crew's seaworthiness prior to shipping out. The list of shipboard provisions and medications to which seamen were legally entitled, an accomplishment of the late 19th century, was formulated by physicians at this hospital.

The hospital also gained recognition as an important center for medical research, a tradition initiated in 1887 with the opening of the Hygienic Laboratory in the Seaman's Retreat main building. Headed by Dr. Joseph Kinyoun, a student of Robert Koch, this laboratory for bacteriological research was later described as laying the groundwork for the present program of medical and public health research carried on by the National Institutes of Health. The main building also housed the U.S. Public Health Service's Venereal Disease Laboratory established in 1927. In 1945 the effectiveness of penicillin in treating these diseases was discovered by the laboratory's director, Dr. John Mahoney, an achievement for which he received the American Public Health Association's prestigious Lasker Award.

Federal ownership of the hospital was terminated in 1981 and the property was transferred to the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul. Known today as Bayley-Seton Hospital, its name honors this country's first native-born saint, Elizabeth Ann Seton. Born Elizabeth Bayley in 1774, she was recognized for her charitable and educational contributions. Her father, Dr. Richard Bayley, served as New York City's Health Officer and was Chief Physician at the Quarantine Station. Today's hospital is thus linked with the history of its origin in 1831.

Description

Today the Seaman's Retreat main building looks much as it did during the early years of this century. The center pavilion is a five-bay wide, three-story high structure with a full basement and attic. The principal building material employed for his structure -- and for the wings and end-pavilions -- is finely hammered, relatively dark granite ashlar; long rectangular blocks predominate. Quoining, sills, lintels, and surrounds of lighter colored granite contrast with the walls. The center bay is emphasized by wide window openings enframed by eared surrounds; these openings contain two-over-two sash flanked by narrower sidelights which also contain two-over-two sash. Early photographs show six-over-six sash used throughout the entire structure; the existing two-over-two sash used in the center bays and elsewhere (more modern sash has replaced it in only a few locations) probably dates from the 1912 renovation. The main axis of the center pavilion is further emphasized by the pediment fanlight and projecting portico. The portico consists of a tall granite-block podium and fluted Doric columns of granite which carry an entablature ornamented by nothing more than a dentil stringcourse. Aluminum frame doors replace the doorway installed in 1912. Like the end-pavilion doorways of the same date which are still in place, it consisted of wood doors with single-pane sash in the upper portion, a multi-paned transom, and sidelights also topped by transoms. The 1912 doorways clearly reflect the original Greek Revival arrangement; however, early prints suggest a solid rather than a partially glazed door. The 1912 renovators also accented and elaborated other Greek Revival features of the center pavilion. The attic-level frieze (early photographs suggest a material which matched the light-colored quoins) was faced with copper; copper panels embossed with low-relief coffering rest on heavy moldings and alternate with the attic windows let into the facade frieze

zone. The pediment soffit is ornamented by copper-clad mutules with large guttae. The pediment eaves are clad with copper as well. The end-pavilions are essentially identical to the center; their somewhat narrower and shallower projecting porticos provide the only striking difference.

The wings linking the pavilions are eight bays wide and three-and-one-half stories high. Full basements are fronted by areaways. Four pedimented copper-clad dormers are located on the front and rear slopes of the gabled roofs. Below, the 1912 third-story windows lack the surround which characterizes the earlier openings; sills and lintels are emphasized, however, by lighter colored stone. Large stuccoed piers rise through two stories to support the double porches. Capitals and entablature are constructed of cast-stone; porch floors are cast concrete. The piers and porches appear to have undergone considerable alteration both during the 19th century and in 1912. The very early prints show far thinner supports; bases and capitals were employed in both stories. Giant piers appear in late 19th-century photographs but seem to be of smaller dimensions than the existing. The copper facings along the edge of second-story porch floors were added in 1912. The simple iron railings inserted between the piers could date either from 1912 or the 19th-century conversion of columns to piers.

Tall door openings on the second floor of the wings provided direct access from the wards to the porches. Large glazed areas in the upper portions of the doors were intended to provide the wards with ample illumination; the existing doors probably date from the 1912 renovation but suggest the essential features of the doors shown in early prints. The lower stories of the wings were more radically changed. Originally standard-sized windows and doors were arranged symmetrically in both wings; the pattern was A-BB-AA-BB-A. The openings were both reduced and enlarged in 1912 but replacement stones match the original. Today the doorway openings in the south wing are located in the first and fifth bay from south. The sole door opening in the opposite wing is located in the first bay north of the center pavilion.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Inter-hospital rivalry appears to have delayed establishment of a U.S. Marine Hospital at the Port of New York. New-York Hospital, originally located on Broadway between Duane and Worth Streets, was New York City's chief recipient of seamen funded under the federal act of 1798. Although a large portion of the hospital's revenues were obtained from this source, it resisted absorption by the U.S. Marine Hospital system. New-York Hospital was later able to thwart the efforts made by the Seaman's Retreat in the 1830s to be designated the Port of New York's U.S. Marine Hospital.
2. As described in sources of the 1820s, federally-funded hospital care at the Port of New York was limited annually to a total of four months of care provided to 100 persons. Although the number of individuals receiving care exceeded 100, care was not available to many who had been taxed. No one person was entitled to more than four months of care.
3. The U.S. Marine Hospitals were designated as the recipients of beneficiaries of the War Risk Insurance Act and, during World War I and in the years immediately thereafter, treated many military personnel. Coast Guard and Department of Defense employees were later determined eligible for care. In the 1960s the U.S. Public Health Service Hospitals began to receive patients funded by Medicaid and Medicare programs. Seamen accounted for less than half of the hospital's admissions beginning in 1965. When the system was disbanded in 1981, seamen constituted 21 percent of annual admissions.
4. Dr. Thomas Moffatt, A Brief History of the Seaman's Retreat, Staten Island, from its Origin in the Year 1831 to the Present Time by its Physician-in-Chief included as an appendix to Seaman's Retreat, Annual Report of the Physician-in-Chief for the Year 1862, (New York, 1863). Dr. Moffatt, a much revered figure in the hospital's history was Chief Physician from 1854 to 1869, the longest term served by any of the Retreat's head physicians.
5. In 1858 the Quarantine Station was burned to the ground by Staten Island citizens following many years of more peaceful attempts to remove what was regarded locally as the cause of ill-health among the surrounding population. The Seaman's Retreat main building provides the sole extant reflection of that major institution.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Much of the information contained in this Designation Report has been adapted from Shirley Zavin, The United States Public Health Service Hospital, Staten Island, New York: 1831-1981, New York: (Unpublished), 1981. Major sources include the following:

Furman, Bess. A Profile of the United States Public Health Service: 1798-1948. Washington, D.C.: Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1973.

Moffatt, Thomas. A Brief History of the Seaman's Retreat, Staten Island, from its Origin in the Year 1831 to the Present Time by its Physician-in-Chief. Included as an appendix to: Seaman's Retreat. Annual Report of the Physician-in-Chief for the Year 1862. New York, 1863.

New York State. Assembly and State Documents. See A. Hasse. Index of Economic Material in the Documents of the State of New York. New York: 1965. See "Seaman's Retreat." See especially: Assembly Documents: 1840, vol. 5, Document #214: includes floor plans and detailed description of building.

Richmond County. Office of the Register. Deeds.

Seaman's Retreat. Annual Report of the Physician-in-Chief. See New York State and Assembly documents cited above. See also reports published by order of the Board of Trustees for the years 1862, 1864, 1868, 1869, 1872, 1873 and 1881.

U.S. Marine Hospital Service. Annual Report of the Supervising Surgeon-General. Washington, D.C.; 1871-1901/02.

U.S. Public Health and Marine Hospital Service. Annual Report of the Supervising Surgeon-General. Washington, D.C.; 1902/03-1910/11.

U.S. Public Health Service. Annual Report of the Surgeon General. Washington, D.C.; 1911/12-1981.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architectural features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Seaman's Retreat: Main Building has special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Seaman's Retreat: Main Building is an imposing granite ashlar structure which displays Greek Revival elements while evoking characteristics of the Georgian tradition used for the early 19th century hospitals at Staten Island's Quarantine Station; that its design offers an instructive contrast to another contemporary Staten Island institution for seamen, Sailors' Snug Harbor; that it is a major work of its builder, Abraham P. Maybie, a New York City mason active from 1811 to 1842; that the early 20th-century alterations which converted the structure to a U.S. Marine Hospital retain and elaborate the Greek Revival character of the original building; that the hospital was for most of its history the only hospital at the Port of New York devoted solely to the care of merchant seamen; that the hospital has provided care for many thousands of seamen over a 150-year period; that its physicians played a major role in improving seamen's living and working conditions; and that the hospital has won recognition as an important center for medical research related to its maritime mission.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Seaman's Retreat: Main Building, 131 Bay Street, Borough of Staten Island and designates Tax Map Block 534, Lot 1 in part consisting of the land on which the described building is situated, Borough of Staten Island, as its Landmark Site.



Photo Credit: Carl Forster
Landmarks Preservation Commission

Main Building
Seaman's Retreat
131 Bay Street

Builder: Abraham P. Maybie
Built: 1834 - 1853



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