

FORT TOMPKINS, Hudson Road, Fort Wadsworth Reservation, Borough of Richmond.
Built 1847-1861.

Landmark Site: Borough of Richmond Tax Map Block 3128, Lot 1 in part, consisting of the land on which the described improvement is situated.

On September 25, 1973, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of Fort Tompkins and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 6). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. One witness spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. A representative of the United States Army testified as to the current status of the Fort.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Fort Tompkins is one of the major fortifications in the Fort Wadsworth Reservation which is the oldest continuously manned military installation in the United States. Completed in 1861, Fort Tompkins is built into the crest of the hill above Battery Weed overlooking the Narrows.

As early as 1636 a simple blockhouse was built by the Dutch, which was destroyed by the Indians during the so-called "Peach" War. A larger blockhouse replaced it in 1663. In 1703, during the Queen Anne's War, the colonial legislature passed a bill to raise £1500 to fortify the Narrows. The money was to be raised by means of a special tax on the different classes of citizens in New York, including a tax of five shillings, six pence on "Every person wearing a Peruwig". But the fortifications were never completed. Lord Cornbury, who was governor of the colony at the time, was accused of spending the £1500 to build a house for himself on Governors Island.

At the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, Washington sent men to occupy the site overlooking the Narrows to keep watch for General Howe's fleet. The site fell under British control in June of 1776 and did not come under American authority again until Evacuation Day, November 25, 1783.

When war with Britain broke out again in 1812, all sea access to the City was fortified. In 1814, construction of a sandstone fort on the site of Fort Tompkins was begun. This fort stood until 1847 when the Federal Government began the construction of the present granite fort.

Fort Tompkins was built as part of the Third or Totten System of United States seacoast fortifications constructed between 1817 and 1864. The First System started in 1794 when it seemed that the United States might be drawn into the European wars that followed the French Revolution. The second System started in 1807 under the threat of war with Britain and ended with the War of 1812.

Unlike the first two systems which had been built in response to external threats, the Third System of seacoast fortifications was begun in 1817 during a period of peace. Late in 1816, the Acting Secretary of War, George Graham, formed a board of military engineers to plan and build a permanent and systematic series of seacoast fortifications. It was headed by a Frenchman, Simon Bernard (1779-1836) who had been the head of the French topographical bureau and aide-de-champ to Napoleon. Another member of the board who was to remain deeply involved in the project and after whom the System was named, was General Joseph Gilbert Totten (1788-1864). In the course of his lifetime, Totten became an internationally known expert in the development of 19th-century seacoast fortifications and one of the leading military engineers in American history.

Fort Tompkins is a long, low, polygonal fort constructed of granite, standing on a platform cut from the eastern side of the hill. Casemates for gun emplacements were burrowed into the hill, and its cut face was covered with rough-hewn granite and some of the sandstone from the previous fort. Fort Tompkins was built

immediately in front of this cut, creating a deep dry-moat between the hill and the rear or western facade of the fort. The guns within these casemates were to provide cross-fire in the moat in the event that an enemy force might attack the fort from the landward side and attempt to storm it from the rear.

The eastern facade, facing the Narrows, is of smooth-faced granite that has been given a variety of textures by time and the weather. The long, dramatic sweep of this facade is uninterrupted except for a series of narrow window slits and the symmetrically placed entrance and exit openings that are crowned by shallow pediments. A slightly projecting coping enforces the horizontality of the facade and visually terminates it, giving the appearance that it is much lower than it actually is. This is further emphasized by the existing shrubbery and plantings along the top so that, seen from the water, the fort must seem invisible. Near the northern end, the top of the wall slopes back indicating the northeastern end of the moat.

The interior courtyard of the fort is faced with smooth-hewn granite. The eastern side is lined by casemates with low, broad segmental arches. These casemates were used for storage, stables and a smithy. The remaining sides are pierced by two stories of square-headed windows and doors behind which were barracks and offices. An iron gallery encircles the interior.

Today, the fort is used as the school to train chaplains for the Army, and some of the casemates in the eastern wall are used as a military museum that is open to the public.

Fort Tompkins and Battery Weed, situated along the steep hill at the Narrows, comprise one of the most impressive military installations on the East Coast.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that Fort Tompkins has a 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, Fort Tompkins--one of the major fortifications of the Fort Wadsworth Reservation--is part of the oldest continually manned military installation in the United States, that it is an excellent example of the Third or Totten System of seacoast fortifications, that its granite construction is one of the finest in this country, and that Fort Tompkins is part of one of the most impressive military installations on the East Coast.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of 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 Fort Tompkins, Hudson Road, Fort Wadsworth Reservation, Borough of Richmond and designates as its related Landmark Site that part of Borough of Richmond Tax Map Block 3128, Lot 1 which contains the land on which the described improvement is situated.