

BATTERY WEED, Fort Wadsworth Reservation, Staten Island. Built 1847-1861.

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

On September 13, 1966, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of Battery Weed and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site. (Item No. 68). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. In a letter to the Commission, a representative of the Federal Government questioned the proposal to designate the building, saying that Federally-owned property is not subject to regulation by local law.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Battery Weed is an extraordinary example of military architecture of the second half of the Nineteenth Century. Located at the water's edge on the Narrows, this massive masonry fortification was built between the years 1847 and 1861. Constructed of solid slabs of granite, the sea wall of the Battery is six feet thick. Before the Civil War, granite was considered to be the most permanent building material, and more than a hundred years of use has proven this to be so. Very little mortar was used in constructing this fort because the skill of the masons employed in cutting, trimming, and setting up the stone blocks made this possible.

The fort is laid out in the form of an irregular shaped trapezoid with the shorter side facing the water. On the land side there is a low wall with a pedimented doorway in the center opening into the two-story gate house. At each end of the wall, inside the courtyard, there is a four-story block house or storage house, and the north and south corners of the fort on this land side terminate in the form of points or ravelins.

On the three sides facing the Narrows, the design of the walls is very simple, with evenly spaced rectangular openings marking the placement of the casemates behind them. Two plain band courses extend around the upper wall, and a large half-round coping crowns the wall. The open inner courtyard is framed on three sides by tiers of segmental arches resting on heavy piers, forming a series of galleries. Carried on three levels, these arcades create an interesting pattern as one looks down at them from the adjacent hill. In each corner of the courtyard an octagonal tower, containing stairs, gave the troops access to the casemate levels.

At the height of its glory Battery Weed was one of the most powerful forts on the eastern seaboard. In 1862, it mounted between 140 and 150 cannon and was manned by a large force from the Fifth Regiment, New York Volunteers Artillery. The Battery was named after Brigadier General Stephen H. Weed of the United States Volunteers, who was killed in the Battle of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, July 2, 1863. In 1902, the War Department applied the name Fort Wadsworth to all the fortifications located on the military reservation on the west side of the Narrows. Brigadier General James S. Wadsworth for whom the reservation was named was killed in the Battle of the Wilderness in 1864.

Historical Significance

Battery Weed (formerly Fort Richmond) and Fort Wadsworth (formerly Fort Tompkins), located high on wooded bluffs overlooking the Narrows, together form the oldest continually manned military positions in the United States. A small wooden blockhouse was built by the Dutch in 1663 near the present site of Fort Wadsworth. In 1707, the justices of Richmond County were assessed three thousand pounds to defray the cost of fortifying British New York. Records show that fortifications, including a blockhouse, were built on the western shore of the Narrows. After the Revolutionary War the Islanders levied taxes for the restoration of those parts of the installation that had been heavily damaged. In 1814, fifty thousand dollars was allocated for the completion of the newly constructed Fort Tompkins and Richmond. The structures were built of red stone and designed in the manner of old Castle Williams on Governor's Island. By 1835, the two forts were declared unfit for use by the State of New York. In 1847, the reservation passed from state to Federal control. Construction of the present fort and Battery was begun that same year. The work was completed in fourteen years and the first troops were garrisoned there on August 8, 1861.

The question has been raised by the Federal Government as to whether this building should be designated by New York City as a Landmark. The Commission wishes to honor a building of which New Yorkers are proud. The Commission is cognizant of the jurisdictional question. Nevertheless, it is very important for the Government of New York City to state officially its deep concern that this building be preserved. There should be no uncertainty about this in anyone's mind.

The Commission would be negligent if it failed to act in this situation. At some time in the future this building may be in jeopardy. Our designation will be especially helpful in alerting New York City's elected representatives in Washington of the importance of saving this building. At present the Commission's specialists can be of service in providing advice so that the architectural integrity of this building is maintained. Indeed a fine relationship already exists with many local representatives of the Federal Government.

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 Battery Weed 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, Battery Weed is a magnificent example of Nineteenth Century military architecture, that it is a superb masonry structure, that it is an integral part of the oldest continually manned military establishment in the United States, and that the historical associations attached with the site are national in scope.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 8-A 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 Battery Weed, Fort Wadsworth Reservation, Staten Island 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 building is situated.