

Landmarks Preservation Commission
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LP-0548

BOWLING GREEN FENCE, Bowling Green Park, Borough of Manhattan. Erected 1771.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 12, Lot 28 in part, consisting of the land on which the described improvement is situated.

On March 3, 1970, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Bowling Green Fence and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 16). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Two witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The simple iron fence around Bowling Green Park is closely associated with the dramatic events of the American Revolution. It was erected in 1771 to protect the equestrian statue of George III, unveiled August 16, 1770, with the stated purpose of insuring that the Green not become "a Recipticle (sic) of all the filth and dirt of the neighborhood." The statue soon became the hated symbol of tyranny and was pulled down and hacked apart by a crowd of soldiers and civilians on July 9, 1776 -- the day the Declaration of Independence reached New York from Philadelphia and was read to the troops. The fence fared better than the statue, although it too was partially pulled down during the Revolution. The small ornaments, which originally capped the posts and were variously described as royal crowns or iron balls, were broken off by patriots and used for ammunition. The fence was repaired in 1786. Old views show that graceful lamps, set at intervals above the posts, were adorned it.

As late as 1850, E. Porter Belden was able to note: "one entire post, with its head upon its shoulders, still stands near the southern entrance to the Green, a memento of the former glory of its brethren." This is corroborated by David Johnson's painting of 1860 at the New York Historical Society, which, incidentally, possesses a small section of the fence itself.

The original construction contract, with Richard Sharpe, Peter T. Curtonius, Gilbert Forbes and Andrew Lyall, called for an iron fence set into a stone foundation, at a cost of 800 pounds. But, even in those days, costs exceeded estimates, and the City finally paid 843 pounds for the work.

In 1791, the fence and stonework, in which it was bedded, were raised two feet above the original level. A beautification program was inaugurated in 1819, when the Common Council granted the request of neighborhood residents that they be allowed to plant trees and shrubbery in the Green, and in 1825, it was "laid down in grass." In those days, Bowling Green was in the center of an elegant residential neighborhood, surrounded by handsome red brick Federal houses. Belden describes it as "an ellipso, whose diameters are respectively two hundred and twenty and one hundred and forty feet".

In the course of the later 19th century, the area became completely commercial, and in 1914, the fence was dismantled to allow construction of the subway beneath the Green. It was removed to Central Park -- and there lay forgotten until 1919 when the greater part of the fence was rediscovered and restored to Bowling Green.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this improvement, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Bowling Green Fence 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, this simply designed fence is a unique survivor of the period immediately preceding the American Revolution, that it was severely damaged during the Revolution and that in the early 20th century, it was first dismantled and later restored to Bowling Green in rightful recognition of its place in the history of the City.

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 the Bowling Green Fence, Bowling Green Park, Borough of Manhattan and designates as its related Landmark Site that part of Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 12, Lot 28 which contains the land on which the described improvement is situated.