

CASTLE WILLIAMS, Governors Island, Borough of Manhattan. Begun 1807, completed 1811; architect Lt. Col. Jonathan Williams.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1, Lot 10 in part, consisting of the land on which the described improvement is situated.

On December 27, 1966, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of Castle Williams, Governors Island and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 32). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. In a letter to the Commission, the Coast Guard questioned the proposal to designate the building, saying that Federally-owned property is not subject to regulation by local law.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Impressive in appearance, imposing in size, this red stone bastion, when completed in 1811, was an armed gauntlet bristling with over one hundred cannon. Originally called "The Tower" and nick-named "The Cheesebox" because of its circular shape, it was one of the reasons the British Fleet did not attempt an assault on New York during the War of 1812. Situated on the Northwest point of the Island, with its solid masonry foundation laid on rocks at the edge of the channel, Castle Williams, with its twin fort Castle Clinton in the Battery, was put up to guard the waterway between Governors Island and New York City.

The walls of the Castle form three-fifths of a circle two hundred feet in outer diameter. Built of hammered Newark red sandstone, the walls are forty feet high and eight feet thick at the bottom and seven feet thick above, casemated with arches to support three tiers of guns. The outer layer of the wall is laid with the stones dovetailed so that no stone can be removed without first being broken to pieces. The double row of bomb-proof arches in the wall once contained two tiers of heavy cannon. There were 27 French 35-pounders on the lower tier and 39 20-pounders on the second tier. The terrace over the bomb-proof area formed a barbette battery for 45 Columbiads carrying 50 pound balls. Access to the tiers was had by two interior stone turret staircases. The two straight walls completing the enclosure are lower than the circular wall. These face to the East on the land side of the fort. A space for sentry duty was provided for in the thickness of the crenellated wall above the rusticated main gate, and a very picturesque stone sentry box at the angle augments the compositional interest of this unique fort.

The interior of the Castle is open to the sky. At one time there were two brick buildings and a well inside the fort. The Castle was repaired in 1833 and 1836, and again in 1912 when the buildings inside the walls were torn down and the fort was converted to a military prison. During the Civil War there were over a thousand Confederate prisoners contained in the Castle.

Castle Williams was designed and built by Lieutenant Colonel Jonathan Williams, Engineer Corps. At that time he was Superintendent of the Military Academy at West Point and Chief Engineer of the U. S. Army. He had been put in charge of the defenses of New York in 1805.

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 Castle Williams 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, Castle Williams is a unique military fortification that once played an important part in the defense system of New York harbor, that it is noteworthy as an example of a massive masonry bastion, that it is picturesque in appearance, that it has served as a useful building up to the present time and that in the future planning of the United States Coast Guard, under whose supervision the interiors are now being renovated, it will serve a new and useful purpose.

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 Castle Williams, Governors Island, Borough of Manhattan and designates as its related Landmark Site that part of Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1, Lot 10 which contains the land on which the described improvement is situated.