

FORT JAY, Governors Island, Borough of Manhattan. Completed 1798. Rebuilt 1806.

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 Fort Jay, Governors Island and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 33). 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

Reminiscent of an Eighteenth Century French fortification, with its dry moat and star-shaped plan, Fort Jay is a dramatic reminder of the early defenses erected in New York harbor to protect the City from invasion. Impressive in size and design, the pentagonal-shaped breastworks occupy a knoll and dominate the Northern end of the island. It was originally equipped with strong batteries of guns and well trained artillery men. In combination with other forts on the island, in the upper bay and at the narrows, it made invasion from the sea unlikely. During the War of 1812, the British fleet did not attempt an assault on the City. Fort Jay was never called into action against an enemy.

The imposing Federal style stone entrance gateway to Fort Jay shows considerable French influence, has great dignity and is architecturally impressive in design. Monumental in scale, a low-arched opening set within a tall blind arch is flanked by four large, Doric pilasters supporting a massive entablature. Surmounting the cornice is an extremely handsome carved sculptural composition. Military in character, it is composed of flags, cannon, small weapons, banded fasces with liberty cap, and a spread eagle. The chains at the entrance are the remains of a drawbridge which once spanned the moat in front of the gate.

In 1794, because of a threat of war with France, the first permanent fortification on Governors Island was begun, financed by Congressional defense appropriations. By 1797 the fear of invasion was intense and because of what were felt to be inadequate Federal appropriations, Governor Clinton of New York enlisted the support of students and professors from Columbia University, members of many trade groups and other organizations to join in voluntary manual labor constructing the earthworks at the site of the Fort. Completed in 1798, it was named Fort Jay in honor of the then Secretary of Foreign Affairs, John Jay. Defense preparations were intensified after February 15, 1800 when Governors Island was ceded to the United States, and additional appropriations were made in 1800 and 1801.

Fort Jay was extensively rebuilt in 1806. All of the works, except the walled counterscarps, the gate, the sally port, the powder magazine and two barracks were torn down and rebuilt with stronger materials. The new fortification consisted of an enclosed, pentagonal work with four bastions of masonry to hold 100 guns. Fourteen feet were added to three sides of the old Fort, and on the North wall a ravelin with two casemated flanks was added. Guns commanding the dry moat were located there. Completed in 1808, the new fortification was named Fort Columbus. In 1904 the War Department renamed the Fort, returning the original name Fort Jay. Within the Fort is a quadrangle of officers' dwellings.

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 Fort Jay 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 Jay is an outstanding example of military fortifications, that it stands historically as a reminder of New York City's early defense system, that it is picturesque in appearance, monumental in scale and architecturally noteworthy, and that it now serves a useful purpose containing a quadrangle of officers' dwellings.

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 Fort Jay, 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.