

Landmarks Preservation Commission
May 15, 1973, Calendar Number 6.
LP-0742

THE GATEHOUSE ON RICHMOND TERRACE, Sailors' Snug Harbor, Richmond Terrace,
New Brighton, Borough of Richmond. Third quarter, 19th century.

Landmark Site: Borough of Richmond Tax Map Block 76, Lot 1 in part consisting
of the land on which the described improvement is situated.

On June 23, 1970, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Gatehouse on Richmond Terrace at Sailors' Snug Harbor and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site. (Calendar No. 54). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. One witness spoke in favor of designation. The President of the Board of Trustees of Sailors' Snug Harbor, the owner, appeared in opposition to the proposed designations. On August 16, 1972 the City of New York acquired the proposed Landmark and Landmark Site.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

This delightful little structure is a good example of the way in which, in the third quarter of the 19th century, local builders freely combined elements of various styles to achieve some highly original designs. While individual details of this building could be labeled as "Italianate" and "Romanesque Revival" and "French Second Empire," the combination can best be described as quite typical of the vernacular architecture of the period. The architect, if there was one, and the builder have not been identified, nor the date of its construction definitely established. Certainly the main central portion of the structure was built before the short wings that project to the east and west and may date as far back as the 1860s.

Unlike the Western Gatehouse (built in 1880), through which the main carriage drive entered the Sailors' Snug Harbor property, the subject of this report was intended as a pedestrian entrance. It was constructed about 15 feet back of the much older iron fence (LP-0743), interrupted here by a narrow pair of gates, and directly on the central axis of the five great Greek Revival buildings behind it (LP-0022 through LP-0026 inclusive). Its high central archway frames a view of the obelisk erected in 1834 in memory of Robert Richard Randall (1750-1801), through whose bequest the Harbor was established, and of the octastyle portico of the main administration building. Except for a couple of small rooms for custodial use and equipment storage, the main function of this Gatehouse was to provide a formal approach to the row of monumental Sailors' Snug Harbor buildings. As one comes through the Gatehouse archway, the view of the whole symmetrical composition is dramatically enframed.

That the designer recognized the essentially formal role of the Gatehouse is revealed by an unexpectedly subtle detail. What at first glance appears to be a simple rectangular building is actually slightly trapezoidal in plan. The long north wall of the Gatehouse is parallel to the fence and the line of Richmond Terrace, the south wall is parallel to the slightly different alignment of the five Greek Revival temples beyond it. Thus, whether viewed from either its north or south side (which, incidentally, are identical in design) the Gatehouse seems correctly related to its surroundings.

The elevations themselves, however, are what give the little building its unique character. The high central archways, which frame each end of the tunnel vault that runs through the building, are flanked by a pair of generously proportioned flat-headed windows that light the two flanking guard rooms through four-over-four sash. The archways themselves, the windows, the corners of the buildings, as well as the corners of two projecting wings are strongly emphasized by projecting quoins. These are cut from marble on the original buildings, and from sandstone on the wings. Their alternating long and short shapes and the sharp bevel of their rustication contrast vividly with the cream-colored painted brickwork of the building itself.

The Gatehouse on Richmond Terrace

A rather plain cornice picks up the line of the window heads and runs around the east and west ends of the building, rising to form simple pediments above the two-over-two windows at the ends of the little projecting wings. On the important north and south elevations, however, the cornice does something quite unexpected. In the first place, the bottom chord of what might have been a classical pediment is abruptly cut off as soon as it gets past the corner quoins. Then, as the rake of pediment rises, a series of closely spaced brick corbels, strongly Romanesque in feeling, are introduced to support the overhang. At the half-way point in its rise, the rake of the cornice suddenly stops, runs horizontally for a couple of feet and then springs in a segmental curve across the semi-circular archway beneath it. The supporting brick corbels faithfully follow the cornice through all these changes in direction.

The crowning glory, quite literally, is a small square cupola over the center of the tunnel vault. Originally this was topped by an elaborate ornament of open scroll work. One can look up into the cupola from below: each of its four faces contains a pair of small round-headed windows--typically Italianate in feeling--glazed in ruby red glass. In addition, a pair of small but elaborate bulls-eye dormers, flanked by curved ornaments, project at right angles to the tunnel vault over the flat portions of the roof deck. They serve to ventilate the attic space and would look quite at home on a French Second Empire building, as would the cast iron cresting that once ran along the top of the curved dormer roofs and along the ridges of the projecting wings. Finally, two rather prominent chimneys penetrate the curved portion of the roof at either side of the cupola.

Surprisingly enough, this highly original combination of elements hangs together very well. Its honesty is appealing. Its rather cozy quality provides a warm welcome to the severe grandeur of the great Greek Revival buildings beyond it.

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 the Gatehouse on Richmond Terrace, Sailors' Snug Harbor, 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, the Sailors' Snug Harbor Gatehouse on Richmond Terrace combines in a fresh and original way elements from various styles popular in the third quarter of the 19th century, that the siting and design of the Gatehouse provide a welcoming approach to the formal composition of the five main buildings beyond it and that its contrast to them in feeling and style illustrate vividly the long span of Sailors' Snug Harbor's architectural history.

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 the Gatehouse on Richmond Terrace, Sailors' Snug Harbor, Richmond Terrace, New Brighton, Borough of Richmond, and designates as its related Landmark Site that part of the Borough of Richmond Tax Map Block 76, Lot 1 which contains the land on which the described improvement is situated.