

Landmarks Preservation Commission
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LP-0911

LIGHTHOUSE, Roosevelt Island (formerly Blackwell's Island and then Welfare Island), located at the northern tip of the island, approximately opposite East 86th Street, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1872, Supervising Architect James Renwick, Jr.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1373, Lot 1 in part consisting of the land on which the described building is situated.

On November 25, 1975, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Lighthouse and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No.8). 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. While expressing reservations, the representatives of the Roosevelt Island Development Corporation have agreed to the designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

This small lighthouse stands at the northern tip of Roosevelt Island on a projection of land which was at one time a tiny separate island connected to the main one by a wooden bridge. Local legend maintains that during the 19th century a patient from the nearby Lunatic Asylum was permitted to build a stone fort on this outcropping since he deeply feared an invasion by the British. When plans were formulated to build the lighthouse, this patient allegedly was persuaded to surrender the fort only after much cajoling and a bribe of bogus money. The tale continues that the patient himself demolished the fort and built the new lighthouse, carving the inscription:

This is the work
Was done by
John McCarthy
Who built the Light
House from the bottom to the
Top all ye who do pass by may
Pray for his soul when he dies.

While construction of the lighthouse cannot actually be credited to the diligent Mr. McCarthy, the warden of the Lunatic Asylum did specially mention in his annual report of 1870 an "industrious but eccentric" patient who had built near the Asylum a large section of seawall, thereby reclaiming a sizeable piece of land. The warden further remarked that this patient "is very assiduous, and seems very proud of his work, and he has reason to be, for it is a fine structure, strong and well built." Whether or not this patient was the model for the legendary fort and lighthouse builder, the connection of the lighthouse with the Lunatic Asylum is an historical fact. In May 1872, City officials resolved to "effectually light" the Asylum and the tip of the island. The following September, the lighthouse was completed, with lamps furnished by the U.S. Lighthouse Service. The stone structure was built under the direction of the Board of Governors of the Commission of Charities and Correction, the body which administered the numerous City institutions on the island. At that time, the supervising architect for this Commission was James Renwick, Jr.

James Renwick, Jr. (1818-1895), the son of a highly regarded professor at Columbia College, began his notable career in 1836 as an engineer supervising the construction of the great Distributing Reservoir at 42nd Street of the Croton water supply system. With the selection in 1840 of his competition drawings for Grace Church, at that time New York's wealthiest and most fashionable congregation, Renwick--then only twenty-five and entirely self-trained as an architect--achieved instant recognition. During his long and

highly successful career he designed many important buildings, including the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D. C., a building at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, the William E. Dodge villa (now the Greyston Conference Center), and St. Patrick's Cathedral--both designated Landmarks, as is Grace Church. An art collector and yachtsman, Renwick's association with the Charities and Correction Board must, to a certain degree, have had philanthropic motivations. He designed the Workhouse, City Hospital and Smallpox Hospital on Blackwell's Island (as Roosevelt Island was then known); the Inebriate and Lunatic Asylums on Ward's Island; and the main building of the Children's Hospital on Randall's Island, as well as several smaller structures, among them the lighthouse on Roosevelt Island.

The lighthouse is approximately fifty feet tall and is constructed of rock-faced, random gray ashlar. This stone (gray gneiss) was quarried on the island itself, predominantly by convict labor from the Penitentiary on the island, and was used for many of the institutional buildings erected there. The lighthouse is encircled by a small yard paved with flagstone. An entry walk at the south is flanked by stone bollards which have pyramidal tops carved with simple trefoils. The lighthouse is octagonal in plan and vertically organized according to the tripartite division of the classical column--base, shaft and capital. The base is separated from the superstructure by a series of simple moldings which are interrupted on the south side by a projecting gable above the single entrance doorway. This doorway, with an incised pointed arch above a splayed keystone with flanking corbels, is designed in a rustic version of the Gothic style. The stepped stones of the outer profile of this gable simulate roof tiles. The octagonal shaft of the lighthouse is pierced above the doorway by two slit windows which light the interior staircase. The top of the shaft is adorned with Gothic foliate ornament in high relief, separated by simple moldings from the brackets which support the observation platform. These elements form the crowning feature of the lighthouse. The octagonal lantern, originally surmounted by a picturesque conical roof is of glass and steel and is surrounded by a simple metal railing.

The rock-faced stone and the sparing use of boldly scaled ornamental detail give the lighthouse the strength and character of a medieval fortification. In its isolated setting the lighthouse is a prominent and dramatic feature of Roosevelt Island.

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 Lighthouse 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 Lighthouse is a handsome 19th-century structure with an interesting legendary history, that it was built under the supervision of one of New York's most prominent architects, James Renwick, Jr., that its boldly scaled Gothic detail and rock-faced walls give it a stony, rustic character, and that it is a prominent feature on Roosevelt Island.

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 Lighthouse, Roosevelt Island, located at the northern tip of the island, approximately opposite East 86th Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designated as its related Landmark Site that part of Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1373, Lot 1 on which the described building is situated.