

WATCH TOWER, Center of Mount Morris Park opposite East 122nd Street, Borough of Manhattan. Erected about 1855; attributed to James Bogardus.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1719, Lot 1 in part, consisting of the land on which the described improvement is situated.

On July 12, 1966, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Watch Tower in Mount Morris Park 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. In a letter to the Commission read at the hearing, former Park Commissioner Thomas Hoving approved the proposed designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

In making a selection of outstanding architectural monuments in New York City, the Commission could not exclude from its list of distinctive, individual monuments the iron Watch Tower, located in Mount Morris Park. This fire lookout Tower is remarkable, and its four-story octagonal structure is the last remaining one of several such towers which once stood in this Borough. It is a good example of post and lintel construction and has a quality of pristine beauty in its slender elegance, unmatched elsewhere.

This Tower is an open cast iron structure composed of three tiers of fluted columns superimposed on one another, supporting on top, a smaller eight-sided open lantern. It is a fine example of constructive expressionism. A large alarm bell hangs from the cross member at the second floor level. A spiral stairway sweeps upward in a graceful curve adding an attractive appearance to the otherwise rectangular and octagonal composition. All the horizontal members are indented with unadorned sunken panels, and the slender, fluted columns have bases but no capitals. A band course or simple molding forms a plain but dignified cornice at the third floor level. This Watch Tower is architecturally a rare phenomenon in our midst.

For more than a century and a half there were bell towers and fire watch towers in New York City that were used to sound alarms. The forerunner of the fire watch tower was the bell tower, and the earliest one in New York dates back to 1790, when a bell was imported from England for that purpose. There was no lookout station in the early bell towers; they were structures equipped with a bell that was rung in case of a fire. Early records indicate that the first fire watch tower in New York was in the cupola of City Hall, which was used as a fire watch tower starting in 1830. The first fire watch tower built for that purpose was the old fire tower erected in the Jefferson Market in 1832 of wood construction. (The Jefferson Market Courthouse tower was built of stone in 1875.) Some of the early towers had closed-in compartments in the upper story for protection of the watchers against inclement weather.

In 1851 the telegraph was first employed in New York to communicate fire alarms, and in that year the eight watch towers in Manhattan were inter-connected with a telegraphy system, and the watchers used a Morse code signal to communicate with each other and then sounded the bell to indicate in which district the fire was located. Before the first fire alarm box system was installed below Fourteenth Street in 1871, and long before advent of the telephone, the fire watch tower played an important part in New York's fire control system. Fire watch towers were discontinued after 1878, but the bell in the Mount Morris Park Tower rang at 9 a.m. and noon for years afterward, because the citizens of the area insisted upon having this function performed daily by a member of the local fire house. The Mount Morris Park cast iron Watch Tower is the only one of its type remaining in New York City.

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 Watch Tower in Mount Morris Park 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 Watch Tower in Mount Morris Park is a unique architectural phenomenon in New York City, that it has distinction and a constructivist character, that its post and lintel construction is an extremely artistic expression of early cast iron architecture in our City and that as a building, it is a fine expression of its function.

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 Watch Tower, Center of Mount Morris Park opposite East 122nd Street, Borough of Manhattan and designates as its related Landmark Site that part of Borough of Manhattan Tax Block 1719, Lot 1 which contains the land on which the described improvement is situated.