

SAILORS' SNUG HARBOR - CHAPEL, first floor interior consisting of the entrance vestibule, the auditorium with apse, the office, and the staircases leading to the second floor balcony; second floor interior consisting of the upper part of the entrance vestibule, the balcony, and the upper part of the auditorium up to and including the ceiling; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, pews, cast-iron columns, balcony railing, platform, doors, windows, chandeliers, painted decoration, and fireplace; Sailors' Snug Harbor, Richmond Terrace, Staten Island. Built 1855-56; architect James Solomon.

Landmark Site: Tax Map Block 76, Lot 200 in part, consisting of the land on which the described building is situated.

On September 9, 1980, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as an Interior Landmark of the Sailors' Snug Harbor Chapel, first floor interior consisting of the entrance vestibule, the auditorium with apse, the office, and the staircases leading to the second floor balcony; second floor interior consisting of the upper part of the entrance vestibule, the balcony, and the upper part of the auditorium up to and including the ceiling; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, pews, cast-iron columns, balcony railing, platform, doors, windows, chandeliers, painted decoration, and fireplace (Item No. 2). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Five witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

#### DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Sailors' Snug Harbor was founded by shipping merchant Robert R. Randall who stated in his will of 1801 that his property in Greenwich Village be used to care for "aged, decrepit and worn-out sailors."<sup>1</sup> Land on Staten Island was purchased in 1831, and today Sailors' Snug Harbor is a superb collection of 19th-century buildings within a sixty-acre compound on Staten Island's north shore. The first building (Building C), designed by Minard Lafever in Greek Revival style, was begun in 1831 and created the stylistic and monumental character followed by later architects for the major buildings at the Harbor. Besides these monumental buildings, numerous simple and modest structures were also erected to house various services for the Harbor's expanding population of retired seamen (over 900 by 1900). One of these modest buildings is the Chapel, designated a New York City Landmark in 1965, which was designed in the Italianate style by James Solomon, a New York City builder, and erected between 1855 and 1856. It was one of three buildings by Solomon erected during a building program that started in 1854. The other two buildings were the wash house (now demolished) and the dining hall (Building G) which is behind the Main Building.

Solomon, a Manhattan resident, had leased some of the Snug Harbor's Greenwich Village property, a factor which may have influenced the trustees in their choice of a designer/builder for the 1850s building program. Although Solomon was referred to as a builder,<sup>2</sup> during the early 19th century in New York, the roles of architect and builder were not clearly defined. It was common practice for the owner of an undeveloped property to hire a builder - mason, carpenter, etc. - when he wished to erect a building, and the builder would then hire a craftsman to draw up the plans for the structure. Moreover, there was the widespread use of builders' guide books in this period. The books gave practical

advice on construction techniques to those in the building trade and often included plans for houses and designs for architectural detail. Undoubtedly Solomon worked in this tradition when designing the Chapel.

As completed in 1856, the Chapel was a simple brick structure, stylistically transitional from the Greek Revival to the Italianate. Surmounted by a pedimented gabled roof, it had a central round-arched entrance on the north facade enframed by two Doric pilasters carrying a pediment. To either side of the entrance was a round-arched window with round-arched lintel and at each corner was a full-height pilaster. The long elevations of the Chapel were punctuated by six round-arched windows separated by pilasters. The rear (southern) facade was similar to the front with a one-story high pedimented extension at the center which contained the office/sacristy. Solomon recommended a bell tower but this was not built until 1883 when the projecting bell tower was added to the front, replacing the original entrance. Venetian multipaned windows with stained glass replaced the earlier plain glass windows, and a bracketed entablature was placed beneath the edge of the roof. Other exterior features remained the same. This work was carried out by Richard P. Smyth. Smyth, like Solomon, was always referred to as a builder and was responsible for a large number of buildings at the Harbor.<sup>3</sup> In 1893, the Chapel was moved two hundred feet to its present location and placed on a new foundation. As seen today, the interior of the Chapel is a simple Italianate design with two major additions of 1873 and 1883.

One enters the Chapel through the small bell-tower vestibule of 1883 which has plain plaster walls, three round-arched openings, and three stone plaques, one on each of the side walls and one over the entrance to the auditorium. The main room, intended to seat 600 people,<sup>4</sup> is a straight-forward rectangular auditorium with a gallery across the northern end and a curved apse flanked by windows at the southern end. The gallery, which is carried on two cast-iron columns with simple foliate capitals is accessible by two enclosed staircases that flank the doorway to the auditorium. The face of the gallery is enhanced by recessed wood panels. The apse encloses a raised platform which once served as the altar area. All the original altar furniture and altar rail have been removed. The wooden pews with paneled ends and curved moldings are grouped into four sections by three aisles. On the walls, vertical wainscoting extends to the sill level of the windows. The deeply coved ceiling rises to a large recessed panel pierced by two handsome rosette ventilators from which hang glass lamps. These features, except for the lamps, date from 1856. In 1873, a reporter for Harper's Magazine described the interior:<sup>5</sup>

Here services are held every Sunday during the winter; and everyday, morning and night during the summer. The interior is plain, but scrupulously neat and tastefully decorated; and upon two long tablets, one on each side of the altar, are inscribed the names of all the trustees and officers that have been connected with the Harbor since its first opening.

That same year the board voted to refurbish the chapel and it largely assumed its present appearance (except for the color of the walls). Ionic pilasters were painted on the walls between the windows and around the curve of the apse, and the ceiling was painted to simulate panels with decorative moldings. On either side of the apse panels were painted; the lower one is a frame for two joined tablets and the upper is a spandrel with trompe l'oeil brackets. Over the arch of the apse is painted the quotation, "Holiness becometh thine house, O Lord, for ever." This work was carried out by Charles Berry, a decorator, who also worked on the

interior of Building C.<sup>6</sup> The whole is a very fine example of the trompe l'oeil technique, reflecting stylistic tastes of the period. The stained-glass windows added in 1883 complement the design. To the rear of the auditorium is the office which is entered through a door in the center of the apse. It has plastered walls, built-in bookcases and a stone fireplace.

The interior of the chapel is a simple and honest architectural expression of its period, reflecting the changing needs and tastes of Sailors' Snug Harbor in the 19th century. Although the building no longer functions as a house of worship, future reuse of the building is planned as part of the cultural complex evolving at the Sailors' Snug Harbor.

Report prepared by James T. Dillon,  
Landmarks Preservation Specialist

Report typed by Barbara Sklar

#### FOOTNOTES

1. David Gibson, Barnett Shepherd, Steven Bauer, Sailors' Snug Harbor, An Historic Structures Report, vol. I, (New York: P.S. Ross & Company, 1979), p. 3.2/4.
2. Ibid., p. 3.3/9.
3. Ibid., p. 3.3/11-15.
4. Ibid., vol. III, p. 4.18/3.
5. Louis Bagger, "The Sailors' Snug Harbor," Harper's New Monthly Magazine, 67, (January 1873), 197.
6. Historic Structures Report, vol. I, p. 3.3/2.

## FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this Interior, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Sailors' Snug Harbor Chapel, first floor interior consisting of the entrance vestibule, the auditorium with apse, the office, and the staircases leading to the second floor balcony; second floor interior consisting of the upper part of the entrance vestibule, the balcony, and the upper part of the auditorium up to and including the ceiling; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, pews, cast-iron columns, balcony railing, platform, doors, windows, chandeliers, painted decoration, and fireplace has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City, and that the Interior is one which is customarily open and accessible to the public and to which the public is customarily invited.

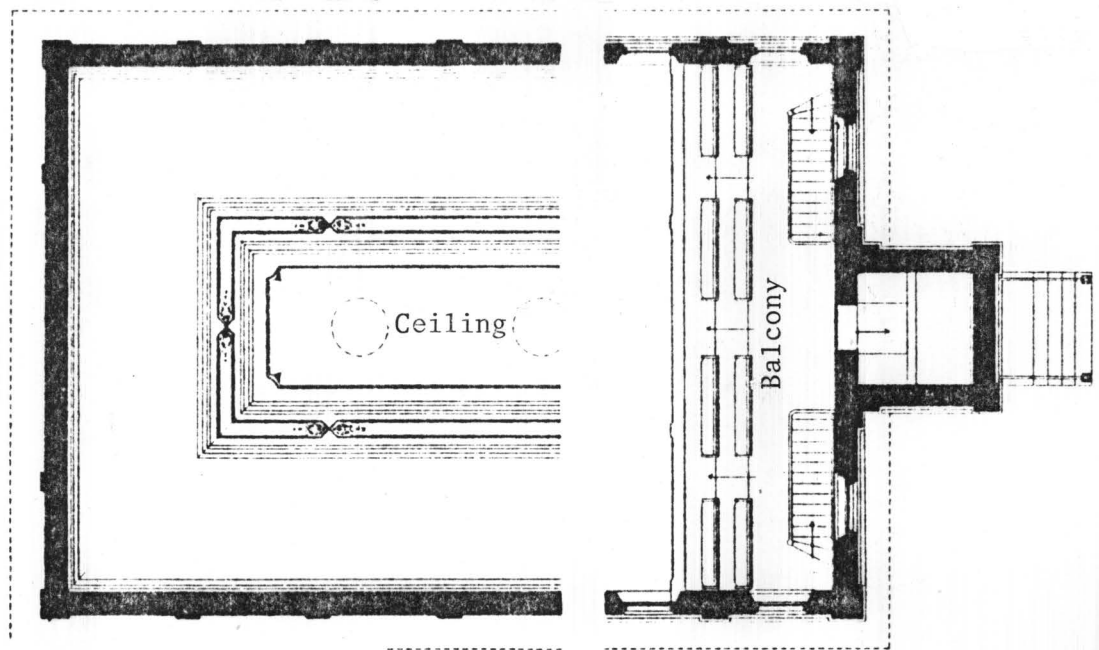
The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Sailors' Snug Harbor Chapel Interior is a simple and honest architectural expression of its period; that it was designed by James Solomon who worked in the tradition of the builder/architect; that it contains fine examples of trompe l'oeil painting simulating architectural details such as columns, panels, and brackets; that the stained-glass windows added in 1883 complement the interior design; that the interior reflects the changing needs and tastes of Sailors' Snug Harbor in the 19th century; and that it continues to play a part in the Sailors' Snug Harbor cultural complex.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly 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 an Interior Landmark the Sailors' Snug Harbor Chapel, first floor interior consisting of the entrance vestibule, the auditorium with apse, the office, and the staircases leading to the second floor balcony; second floor interior consisting of the upper part of the entrance vestibule, the balcony, and the upper part of the auditorium up to and including the ceiling; and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall and ceiling surfaces, floor surfaces, pews, cast-iron columns, balcony railings, platform, doors, windows, chandeliers, painted decoration, and fireplace; Sailors' Snug Harbor, Richmond Terrace, Borough of Staten Island, and designates Tax Map Block 76, Lot 200 in part, consisting of the land on which the described building is situated, Borough of Staten Island, as its Landmark Site.

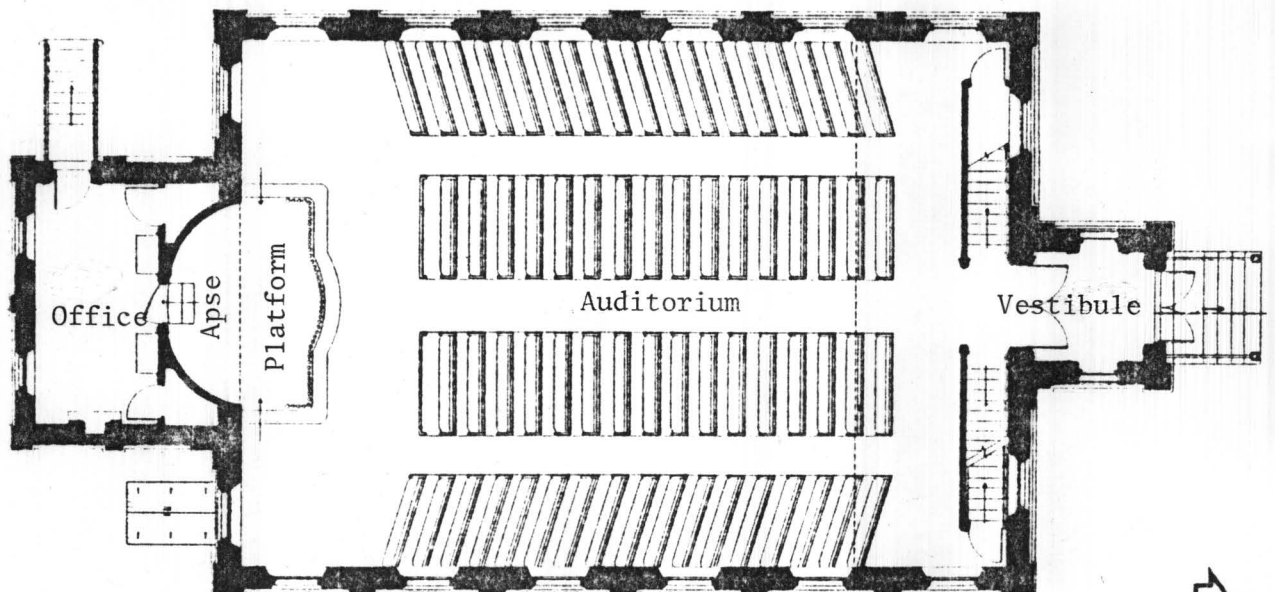
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Bagger, Louis. "The Sailors' Snug Harbor." Harpers New Monthly Magazine, 67 (January 1873), 186-197.

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SECOND FLOOR PLAN



FIRST FLOOR PLAN



SAILORS SNUG HARBOR  
CHapel INTERIOR  
RICHMOND TERRACE  
STATEN ISLAND

ARCHITECT: James Solomon

Built: 1855-1856



Photo Credit:  
Carl Forster  
1982

CHAPEL INTERIOR  
Sailors' Snug Harbor  
914 Richmond Terrace  
Staten Island

Built: 1855-56  
Architect: James Solomon