

Landmarks Preservation Commission
Designation List #178 LP-1396
April 9, 1985

SEAMAN'S RETREAT: PHYSICIAN-IN-CHIEF'S RESIDENCE, 131 Bay Street, Borough of Staten Island. Built 1842; builder - Staten Island Granite Company.

Landmark Site: Borough of Staten Island Tax Map Block 534, Lot 1 in part, consisting of the land on which the described building is situated.

On October 12, 1982, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Seaman's Retreat: Physician-in-Chief's Residence and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 3). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Ten witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. A letter was received in favor of designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Physician-in-Chief's residence of Seaman's Retreat, the fourth building constructed for the newly founded hospital, dates from 1842. A relatively severe structure, built by the Staten Island Granite Company, the residence was designed to harmonize with the main hospital building completed in 1837. The residence is a rare survivor of a housing type once found in several of Staten Island's mid-19th century suburban developments, and its siting, which expresses the hospital's administrative structure, is characteristic of other maritime-related institutions such as Sailors' Snug Harbor. For most of its history, Seaman's Retreat was the only hospital at the Port of New York devoted solely to the care of merchant seaman. The Physician-in-Chief's residence continues to evoke the important role the hospital played in medical research and in providing health care to thousands of seamen.

Development of Seaman's Retreat

Opened on October 1, 1831, the hospital originally known as the Seaman's Retreat was the first of two major institutions for merchant seamen to select Staten Island's north shore as a location particularly suited to its purpose. Convenient access to New York City and panoramic views of the harbor were also important factors determining the north shore location of Sailors' Snug Harbor, the home for aged seamen which began operations just two years later.

Established by "An Act to Provide for Sick and Disabled Seamen," passed by the New York State Legislature on April 22, 1831, the Seaman's Retreat was conceived in response to long-pressed demands for sorely needed hospital facilities made by the Seaman's Association, the Nautical Society, and related advocacy groups. It was to be supported by the head-tax imposed on seamen arriving at the Port of New York. This tax, instituted in 1779, had earlier been used to fund the port's Quarantine Station originally located on Bedloe's Island but transferred to Staten Island in 1799. The Seaman's Retreat was operated as a state institution until the port-entry tax was revoked in 1882; it was immediately acquired by the New York Marine Society which leased it to the federal government the following year for use as a U.S. Marine Hospital.

Funds for the marine hospital system founded in 1798 were obtained from the monthly twenty-cent head-tax imposed on all seamen; this system was in effect the country's first pre-paid health-care plan. For reasons that are not entirely clear, a U.S. Marine Hospital had never been established at the Port of New York.¹ Instead, federally funded hospital care for seamen was provided by a number of institutions in the metropolitan area. Demand was always far in excess of the amount of care available and many entitled to receive it did not.² Utilization of the funds obtained from the state-imposed tax for the Seaman's Retreat helped meet that demand and mitigated the injustice of the double taxation to which seamen entering the Port of New York were subject.

Beginning in 1883 the Supervising Surgeon, chief officer of the U.S. Marine Hospital Service, urged annually that the former Seaman's Retreat be formally acquired by the federal government. This goal was not achieved until 1903. By then the hospital was, in terms of annual admissions, the largest of more than twenty U.S. Marine Hospitals then in operation, a status it retained for the duration of its existence. In 1951 the marine hospitals were re-named; known after that date as U.S. Public Health Service Hospitals, they received additional classes of beneficiaries but continued to serve large numbers of merchant seamen, a function they performed until the hospital system was disbanded in 1981.³

Built in 1842, the residence for the Chief Physician was the fourth structure completed at the Seaman's Retreat. The hospital started out in a converted and enlarged farmhouse standing on the 36 acres of land which had been acquired in 1831 by the Retreat's Board of Trustees from the Cornelius Corson family; the land was part of a large farm which had been in the family's possession since the 18th century. Like many of Staten Island's colonial period farms, it fronted the water and offered an eminently suitable location for the new marine hospital; choice of this site followed the tradition established by the earlier English marine hospitals at Plymouth, Greenwich, and Chelsea. Patients would often be transported by boat and a new dock opposite the Corson farmhouse was quickly readied to receive them.

A second building, a three-story structure of brick with an equal number of porches on the front and rear elevations was constructed in 1832 at the top of the long slope leading up from the water but additional space was still required. Plans to add extensions to the 1832 building were abandoned and a far more imposing structure of granite ashlar -- the existing main building -- was begun in 1834. Completed in 1837, it consisted of a three-story center pavilion which housed administrative offices, treatment rooms, services, and staff residential quarters, and lower wings which contained the patient wards. No less monumental than the contemporary main building at Sailors' Snug Harbor, the Retreat's main building demonstrates a classicizing approach which is more eclectic. The general form and proportions of its center pavilion, its emphasis on a center axis, and the prominent quoining all seem more Georgian than Greek Revival. Yet the Greek Revival style is clearly conveyed by such elements as the projecting portico carried on Doric columns and the eared surrounds of the windows directly above the portico.

The Physician-in-Chief's Residence

Constructed in 1842, the Physician-in-Chief's residence is set close to the eastern edge of the hospital grounds. Fronting Bay Street and the waterfront beyond, it was clearly intended to provide a pendant to the converted Corson farmhouse directly south. That building, no longer needed for patient use after the new main building was completed, became the residence of the Hospital Superintendent, the hospital's chief non-medical officer, a position filled from the beginning by retired sea-captains. The two residences expressed the dual authority, which presided, not always harmoniously, over the institution set to their rear.⁴

A similar hierarchical arrangement originally existed at Sailors' Snug Harbor where the Governor and Head Physician also occupied shorefront residences which flanked the main institutional buildings located some distance behind them. The Snug Harbor residences were identical and a mate to the Physician-in-Chief's residence was originally planned at the Retreat. Although early prints show such a structure, late 19th-century views reveal that Retreat officials never replaced the Corson farmhouse. The persistence of the tradition established by the Retreat's site plan is suggested by the 1910 construction of a large Colonial Revival residence on the Corson farmhouse site for junior officers of what was now a U.S. Marine Hospital. Similarly, when the U.S. Public Health Service complex was constructed in the 1930s, it utilized the same basic site plan; the row of junior officers' residences along Vanderbilt Avenue fronts the main hospital building lying some distance to its north. Although similar site plans have been used for other institutions, this grouping seems particularly appropriate for a hospital which, in so many aspects of its administration and operations, was guided by maritime traditions.

Hospital records make no mention of an architect for the Physician-in-Chief's residence, however the Staten Island Granite Company is cited as the builder. Opened in 1835, the company's quarry can still be seen off Forest Avenue just west of Morningside Road in the area known today as Graniteville. The more vernacular character of the Chief Physician's residence -- if contrasted with the main building -- may be related to the possibility that it was both designed and built by the Staten Island Granite Company.

By virtue of its plan and building materials, the Physician-in-Chief's residence is related to the contemporary Gothic Revival cottage at 69 Delafield Place, a designated New York City Landmark. One of several designed by Calvin Pollard for the suburban development planned by the eminent ophthalmologist Dr. Samuel MacKenzie Elliot, it too appears to have been built by the Staten Island Granite Company.⁵ Similar mid-19th century dwellings constructed of local granite were once fairly common not only in "Elliotville," but elsewhere on the north shore of Staten Island. The Physician-in-Chief's residence and No. 69 Delafield Place are rare survivors of a dwelling type common to several of the Island's mid-19th-century suburban developments.

More than twenty of the hospital's chief medical officers have lived in this residence beginning with Dr. James Boardman, Resident Physician from 1836-1844.⁶ Dr. Thomas Moffatt's occupancy from 1854 to 1859 was the longest. Dr. Moffatt, a much revered figure, was the compiler of an invaluable history of

of the institution in 1862. Dr. Walter Wyman, later to become Surgeon General of the U.S. Marine Hospital Service, lived here from 1885 to 1888. After the new Hospital Director's residence was constructed in 1939 a short distance to its south, the old Physician-in-Chief's residence continued to be used for staff living quarters, a purpose it still serves today.

Care at Seaman's Retreat

An appreciation of the needs met by this institution may be gained by reading the case histories recorded by hospital's first Physician-in-Chief, Dr. Peter Townsend. The following from 1832 is typical:

Jacob Schultze-Scorbutus - age 32 - Born in Bremen - arrived last night on brig from round Cape Horn. Has been to sea 118 days and had had nothing but indifferent salt food to feed upon; and rice once a week only and a short allowance of water - was the carpenter on board. Twenty days after sailing his gums became sore and spongy and bled very freely... the ankles and instep and so around the small of each leg caked hard and over the instep of a deep blue almost black color...during the whole time especially at first suffered universal pain, especially in the muscles of the thorax...very much prostrated and emaciated and was brought into the Retreat. Had no lime juice on board nor any other antiscorbutic so effectual in preventing as well as curing scurvy...it is in this shameful manner vessels are provided to the destruction of seamen...an object of pity to behold...

Hundreds of thousands of similarly "sick and disabled seamen" were provided with care over the 150-year existence of the hospital which had opened in 1831 as the Seaman's Retreat. Beginning in the mid-19th century the hospital's physicians were among the first to address the etiology of the diseases they treated. The pioneering advocacy of the Retreat's early physicians for improved living and working conditions -- both in port and aboard ship -- was later acknowledged by the U.S. Marine Hospital Service's Surgeon General. Dr. Charles King, the Retreat's last Chief Physician, continued this tradition with his investigations of the wretched living conditions endured by seamen in New York City's waterfront boarding houses. Dr. King was also one of the first proponents of mandatory medical examinations for seamen, a requirement which ascertained a crew's seaworthiness prior to shipping out. The list of shipboard provisions and medications to which seamen were legally entitled, an accomplishment of the late 19th century, was formulated by physicians at this hospital.

The hospital also gained recognition as an important center for medical research, a tradition initiated in 1887 with the opening of the Hygienic Laboratory in the Seaman's Retreat main building. Headed by Dr. Joseph Kinyoun, a student of Robert Koch, this laboratory for bacteriological research was later described as laying the groundwork for the present program of medical and public health research carried on by the National Institutes of Health.

The main building also housed the U.S. Public Health Service's Venereal Disease Laboratory established in 1927. In 1945 the effectiveness of penicillin in treating these diseases was discovered by the laboratory's director, Dr. John Mahoney, an achievement for which he received the American Public Health Association's prestigious Lasker Award.

Federal ownership of the hospital was terminated in 1981 and the property was transferred to the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul. Known today as Bayley-Seton Hospital, its name honors this country's first native-born saint, Elizabeth Ann Seton. Born Elizabeth Bayley in 1774, she was recognized for her charitable and educational contributions. Her father, Dr. Richard Bayley, served as New York City's Health Officer and was Chief Physician at the Quarantine Station. Today's hospital is thus linked with the history of its origin in 1831.

Description

Constructed of local granite ashlar which is somewhat darker and larger than that used for the main building, the Physician-in-Chief's residence was obviously intended to harmonize with the structure completed in 1837. Its relative simplicity and exterior sobriety accord with the general character of the earlier building as do specific details such as the small rectangular attic windows which matched the original attic windows of the main building's wings, the tall window openings used in the first story of the facade which suggest similar openings appearing in the wings of the earlier building, the columned facade porches, and the concentration of Greek Revival detailing at the doorway. Like the main building, the Physician-in-Chief's residence underwent a number of alterations following federal acquisition of the property in 1903.

Rectangular in plan, the original portion of the Physician's Residence is a two-story, three-bay wide structure with an attic and full basement.⁷ The facade areaway provides entry to the basement level. The original porch extended the width of the facade; almost two stories high (the ground-level story was slightly shorter) it repeated the forms of the porches used on the wings of the main building. The post-1903 alterations widened the porch by a bay and extended it along the southern side of the structure. Large brick piers replaced the lower porch columns; the porch posts above now consist of a square core with corner-boards attached at each angle. The door surround with its four-light transom, attached pilasters and narrow sidelights appears to be original; a partially glazed door replaces a solid one. The one-over-one sash is of relatively recent date as are the fixed-in-place slatted shutters. The parapet above the modestly projecting cornice was once articulated with some sort of balustrading; it is now covered by modern facings. The two massive chimneys rising above the parapet on the southern side of the house are particularly striking. Although not the subject of this designation, much of the Greek Revival interior finishing -- window reveals, interior shutters, doorway surrounds and moldings -- remains intact. The lavishness of the interior provides an unexpected contrast to the severity of the exterior.

FOOTNOTES

1. Inter-hospital rivalry appears to have delayed establishment of a U.S. Marine Hospital at the Port of New York. New-York Hospital, originally located on Broadway between Duane and Worth Streets, was New York City's chief recipient of seamen funded under the federal act of 1798. Although a large portion of the hospital's revenues were obtained from this source, it resisted absorption by the U.S. Marine Hospital system. New-York Hospital was later able to thwart the efforts made by the Seaman's Retreat in the 1830s to be designated the Port of New York's U.S. Marine Hospital.
2. As described in sources of the 1820s, federally funded hospital care at the Port of New York was limited annually to a total of four months of care provided to 100 persons. Although the number of individuals receiving care exceeded 100, care was not available to many who had been taxed. No one person was entitled to more than four months of care.
3. The U.S. Marine Hospitals were designated as the recipients of beneficiaries of the War Risk insurance Act, during World War I and in the years immediately thereafter, treated many military personnel. Coast Guard and Department of Defense employees were later determined eligible for care. In the 1960s the U.S. Public Health Service Hospitals began to receive patients funded by Medicaid and Medicare programs. Seamen accounted for less than half of the hospital's admissions beginning in 1965. When the system was disbanded in 1981, seamen constituted 21 percent of annual admissions.
4. The early rivalry between the Retreat's Chief Physicians and its Hospital Superintendents is related to the dominance of maritime-related interests on the Board of Trustees. Conflicts arose when Hospital Superintendents attempted to assume some of the responsibilities claimed by the institution's physicians. Described by an early Board member as "like a ship with two captains," the Retreat by the mid-19th century had achieved a larger degree of serenity; medical representation on the Board of Trustees was increased and the hospital's physicians had clarified the parameters of their professional role.
5. The Calvin Pollard diaries for 1842 in the collection of the New-York Historical Society contain numerous references to work in progress for Dr. Elliot as well as for Thomas E. Davis, developer of the suburban community of New Brighton. The transcription of the entries for that year found in the Elliottville file, Archive, Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences, makes no mention of the Seaman's Retreat.
6. In 1848 Dr. Boardman constructed his own residence a few doors north of the Chief Physician's residence. Located at 710 Bay Street, it is a designated New York City Landmark. During his second term of service at the Retreat (1849-1854) he probably lived at his own residence rather than on the hospital grounds.

7. During the 1930s the south porch was further extended by a large bay and continued along the rear elevation of the house; this section of the porch was then enclosed.

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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 Seaman's Retreat: Physician-in-Chief's Residence has 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 Seaman's Retreat: Physician-in-Chief's Residence is a relatively severe structure of granite ashlar designed in 1842 to harmonize with the main hospital building completed in 1837; that its construction, similar to a number of granite-block structures built on Staten Island in the 1840s and 1850s, is a documented work executed by the Staten Island Granite Company; that it is a rare survivor of a housing type once found in several of Staten Island's mid-19th century suburban developments; that its siting which expresses the hospital's administrative structure is characteristic of other maritime-related institutions such as Sailors' Snug Harbor; that the hospital was for most of its history the only hospital at the Port of New York devoted solely to the care of merchant seamen; that the hospital has provided care for many thousands of seamen over a 150-year period; that its physicians played a major role in improving seaman's living and working conditions; and that the hospital has won recognition as an important center of medical research related to its maritime mission.

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 a Landmark the Seaman's Retreat: Physician-in-Chief's Residence, 131 Bay Street, Borough of Staten Island and designates Tax Map Block 534, Lot 1 in part consisting of the land on which the described building is situated, Borough of Staten Island, as its Landmark Site.



Photo Credit: Carl Forster
Landmarks Preservation Commission

Physician-in-Chief's Residence
Seaman's Retreat
131 Bay Street

Builder: Staten Island Granite Co.
Built: 1842