

Landmarks Preservation Commission
October 12, 1967, Number 1
LP-0312

THE ARSENAL, New York City Department of Parks, Administration Building, Central Park at 64th Street, 830 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan. Begun 1847, Completed 1851; architect Martin E. Thompson.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1111, Lot 1 in part, consisting of the land on which the described building is situated.

On July 12, 1966, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of The Arsenal and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site. (Item No. 15). 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, Thomas P. F. Hoving, at that time Commissioner of Parks, favored designation of the Arsenal.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Arsenal in Central Park is a significantly important building both architecturally and historically. Standing proudly and serenely in a slight hollow about one hundred feet west of Fifth Avenue at 64th Street, this five-story utilitarian structure has both dignity and armorial character. Built "To House and Protect the Arms of the State", its compositional mass with crenellated octagonal towers is reminiscent of an early English manorial fortress. Designed by the architect Martin E. Thompson, who did considerable work in the early Nineteenth Century in New York City, the scale and ordered discipline of the openings with their double hung sash windows show the influence of his knowledge and work in the Federal and Greek Revival styles.

The ground floor, or basement level, is faced with rough-cut granite blocks, and the three floors above are of handsome orange colored brick with limestone trim. The main entrance facing Fifth Avenue is one floor above the ground level and approached by a broad flight of steps. These stone steps, constructed in 1934, replaced an earlier arrangement. The newel posts are of cast cannon, and the balusters represent casts of rifles. In the entablature of the handsomely enframed doorway is a carved eagle whose outspread wings hover over two stacks of cannonballs. A crenellated cornice crowns this charming and picturesque entrance.

The center bay is flanked by octagonal, partially engaged, brick towers that rise a full story above the fourth floor cornice level. Similar towers with crenellated parapets and small slotted windows are located at each corner of the building and terminate the north and south wings. The west elevation has the same arrangement of architectural elements. Large window openings, some with segmental arched heads and double hung sash painted white, constitute the remaining features of this unusually interesting structure.

This Arsenal building was completed in 1851, a replacement for one built in 1808 at Centre and Franklin Streets. Ground was broken in 1847 on state property. In 1857 the City purchased the land and the building. The arms and munitions were moved to make way for the headquarters of the 11th Precinct Police Department. In 1869, the Municipal Weather Bureau was installed in the upper story. In the same year, the second and third floors became, and remained for eight years the first home of the American Museum of Natural History. The Park Commissioner had his office here until 1914 when it was moved to the Municipal Building. The entire building was renovated in 1934 to accommodate the consolidated park system of the New York City Department of Parks which is located there today.

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 Arsenal 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 Arsenal in Central Park is one of the few surviving structures of its type built in the first half of the Nineteenth Century, that it is an excellent example of the crenellated military design so largely used in its day to symbolize the protection of the public by means of troops and armaments, that over the intervening years, the building has served as the distinguished home of a Police Precinct, a museum, the Weather Bureau and the Department of Parks and that this picturesque structure continues to serve the City as a useful building.

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 Arsenal, New York City Department of Parks, Administration Building, 830 Fifth Avenue, Borough of Manhattan, and designates as its related Landmark Site that part of Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1111, Lot 1 which contains the land on which the described building is situated.