

FORT TOTTEN OFFICERS' CLUB, United States Government Reservation, Fort Totten Road, Bayside, Queens. Built about 1870; enlarged 1887.

Landmark Site: Borough of Queens Tax Map Block 5917, Lot 1, in part, consisting of the land on which the described building is situated.

On September 25, 1973, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Fort Totten Officers' Club and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 9). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A representative of the United States Army testified as to the current status of the building. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The Fort Totten Officers' Club, a large frame building in the picturesque, Gothic Revival castellated style, represents an important phase of American 19th-century architectural tradition. It is located in one of the most beautiful military reservations on the Northeastern seaboard and, indeed, the entire complex seems far removed from the crowds and noise of the City.

The history of the area occupied by Fort Totten can be traced back to 1640. For many years, the point of land jutting out into the Sound was known as "Thorne's Neck," after an early owner, William Thorne, Jr. Members of the Thorne family became prominent citizens of Flushing and a number settled in adjoining towns. Several became active patriots during the Revolutionary War, notably Thomas Thorne of Flushing, who was captured by the British and died on a prison ship. In 1823, Charles Willet, a descendant of a family which had migrated from Suffolk, England, to Long Island in 1660, purchased Thorne's Point and the area then became known as "Willet's Point." Willet, one of the first nurserymen in the vicinity of Flushing, died in 1832 and his grave is located just inside the entrance of the post. Charles Augustus Willet, his son, was born in Flushing in 1826 and, after attending school in Hempstead, Long Island, and in New Jersey, returned to Queens. According to the 1850 United States Census, his occupation was that of "farmer," but a few years later, apparently preferring business to farming, he sold the land at Willet's Point. In 1854 he organized the Flushing Gas Light Company, the beginning of a long and prosperous business career.

The Willet land was sold to the United States Government on May 16, 1857 by George Irving, a resident of Little Neck and a broker at the Merchants' Exchange in New York, for the sum of \$200,000, a price which occasioned a scandal at the time and prompted an abortive Congressional investigation. In 1863 the government acquired additional acreage from Henry Day.

During the Civil War, part of the reservation was used as a depot for recruits and a camping ground for volunteer units; in 1864 a hospital was built which served over 5,000 wounded Union soldiers. In 1865 three companies of the Battalion of Engineers arrived at the "Fort at Willet's Point" as the first permanent garrison. In 1868, the War Department established an engineering school here and in 1870 the fort became the Engineers Depot for the entire Eastern United States.

In 1898, the reservation was designated by President McKinley as "Fort Totten" in honor of General Joseph G. Totten, Chief of Army Engineers from 1838 until his death in 1864 and Director of the Bureau of Seacoast Defense of the War Department. In sum, the history of Fort Totten serves as a reminder of a time when the Township of Flushing was a rural, farm community and as a memorial to General Totten's service to the nation in the planning of seacoast defenses. Today, the functions of this remarkable enclave are divided between the military and the civilian. The Officers' Club has for the past four years served as a New York City Job Corps Center, a division of the United States Department of Labor.

The Officers' Club is one of the few surviving examples in the City of the castellated Gothic Revival style, so popular in this country in the 19th century in military buildings, such as The Arsenal, Manhattan; in correctional institutions, e.g., Haviland's Eastern Penitentiary, Philadelphia; and churches of the Gothic Revival period, such as the First Unitarian, Salem, Mass. These were all masonry structures, but the castellated, crenellated tradition was quickly transposed into wood, notably for country churches and houses. Promoted in this country by A. J. Davis and A. J. Downing, the Gothic Revival style was an outgrowth of the Picturesque tradition of 18th-century England. The Gothic Revival, castellated mode was especially popular in Britain and spread rapidly throughout the British Empire, to even such a remote region as Barbados, as evidenced by a large, handsome residence of 1820, known as "Sam Lord's Castle."

More important to an understanding of the architectural background of the Officers' Club is the fact that the castellated Gothic Revival style was quickly adopted by British engineers: among many examples of so-called "Engineers' Castellated" are bridges by Thomas Telford and Stephenson & Thompson, as well as Brunel's first Temple Mead Railway Station in Bristol of 1839-40. Although the Officers' Club was erected later in the 19th century, the use of this early, castellated Gothic Revival style comes as no surprise.

The immediate prototype for the building was the handsome, turreted and crenellated Gothic Revival stone library building of 1841 at West Point, which was demolished in 1961. This "old" library was designed by Major Richard Delafield (1798-1873), of the Corps of Engineers and Superintendent of the Academy from 1838-45 and 1856-61. The members of Army Corps of Engineers must have known this building well, as had General Totten himself, since he served as Chief Engineer and Inspector of the Academy at West Point from 1838 to 1864, the year of his death.

According to an undated old photograph, the original Officers' Club was a quite modest, one-story frame building, topped with crenellations. It had a two-story, polygonal tower-wing only at the right (northwestern) side and this was crowned by a peaked roof. The entrance porch was pedimented. The exact date of construction is not certain, but it must have been built after the arrival at the fort of the Army Corps of Engineers in 1870. It was known as "the castle," a casino for officers, according to Munsell's History of Queens County, published in 1882.

The present three-story building, with a symmetrical facade flanked by polygonal tower-wings, represents an enlargement of the original structure, dictated by the growth of the fort and garrison in the decades following the Civil War. The entire left-hand (southeastern) side of the Officers' Club, including the tower and deep rear portion of the building, transformed it into a much larger, L-shaped structure. The side porches feature the same graceful, late Gothic style ogée arches as the entrance porch. A photograph dated 1888, showing the facade of the building much as it appears today, substantiates the date of 1887 for the enlargement of the structure, when an appropriation was made for this purpose. A rear section and back porch are also later additions.

The use of quoins to signalize the projecting central entrance section and the angles of the polygonal wings clearly derives from the masonry tradition. Other features borrowed from earlier Gothic Revival sources are the hood or drip moldings over the windows, the design of the porches with late Gothic style, arched openings and the crenellated parapets at roof level. Although these crenellations, ultimately derived from medieval prototypes, symbolically suggest the military, their use was by no means restricted to military architecture. A number of Gothic Revival country houses and even a house which stood on Fifth Avenue and 37th Street, the Waddell Villa designed by A. J. Davis, exemplified a mode which reached its apogée in the 1840s, at roughly the same period as the Gothic Revival Library at West Point, the model for the Officers' Club.

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 Fort Totten Officers' Club 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 Fort Totten Officers' Club is a frame building in the picturesque, Gothic Revival castellated style of the 19th century, that it is one of the few surviving examples of this style in the City, that it was inspired by an earlier building at the United States Military Academy at West Point, that the architectural detail is typical of the Gothic Revival style and that it continues to serve a useful function today.

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 Fort Totten Officers' Club, United States Government Reservation, Fort Totten Road, Bayside, Borough of Queens and designates as its related Landmark Site that part of Borough of Queens Tax Map Block 5917, Lot 1 which contains the land on which the described improvement is situated.