

Landmarks Preservation Commission
November 25, 1980 List 138
LP-1112

OLD ADMINISTRATION BUILDING (Third District U.S. Lighthouse Depot)
U.S. Coast Guard Station, 1 Bay Street, Borough of Staten Island.
Built 1868-71; architect Alfred B. Mullett.

Landmark Site: Borough of Staten Island Tax Map Block 1, Lot 55 in part, consisting of the land on which the described building is situated.

On December 11, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Old Administration Building (Third District U.S. Lighthouse Depot), U.S. Coast Guard Station, (Item No. 18). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of the law. One witness spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. Letters have been received in favor of designation.

The Commission had previously held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the item as a landmark in 1966.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The three-story granite and red brick Second Empire style building which occupies a central location on the grounds of the former Coast Guard Station at the foot of Bay Street, St. George, Staten Island, has had a long and distinguished history of government service; first as the main office of the Lighthouse Service Depot for the Third Lighthouse District, and later as the Administration Building when the compound became a United States Coast Guard Base.

Well built, of fine design and materials, this building is expressive of the era when, under the direction of Alfred B. Mullett, Supervising Architect of the Treasury Department for nine years from 1865 to 1874, many important and impressive buildings were built by the federal government. Among these were the old State, War, and Navy Department Building located next to the White House in Washington, D.C., a tour-de-force of French Second Empire design, and the huge Second Empire style post offices in New York City and St. Louis, Missouri; the former, located at the foot of City Hall Park, was demolished in 1939, while the latter, now being handsomely restored, is a designated Landmark of St. Louis.¹ The small but beautiful office building at St. George, Staten Island, erected for the U.S. Light-House Service in 1868-1871, clearly shows that A.B. Mullett gave as much thought and attention to buildings of small scale as to larger ones.

Alfred Bult Mullett, who always signed his name "A.B. Mullett," was born April 7, 1834, at Taunton, England. In 1845, his family immigrated to America and settled in Glendale, Ohio. Mullett received his education in Ohio and while a young man, he became very interested in architecture. Subsequently, he traveled abroad where he pursued the study of architecture, returning to the United States in 1860. Soon after that, he began work in the office of Isaiah Rogers, a famous architect, then living in Cincinnati, Ohio.²

Rogers, born in Marshfield, Massachusetts in 1810, had been the architect for many buildings of great importance throughout the nation, in particular such fine hotels as the Tremont House in Boston (1829) and the Astor House (1836) at the corner of Broadway and Vesey Street in New York City. Rogers' masterpiece was the Merchant's Exchange on Wall Street, erected between 1836 and 1842. This monumental building with its colonnaded facade and eighty-foot dome cost over one million dollars to build and it replaced the original Exchange (designed by Martin Thompson) which was destroyed by the great New York fire of December, 1835.³

In 1862, Isaiah Rogers was appointed to the office of Supervising Architect of the Treasury Department in Washington, D.C., where he completed the west wing of the Treasury Building, following the original plans of Robert Mills. He took Alfred Mullett to Washington to be his assistant and in a letter dated June 3, 1863, Rogers appointed Mullett "to act as Chief of the Office of Construction and Superintendent of the Treasury Extensions (sic) during my absence from the office at any time."⁴ Due to the condition of Rogers' health, Mullett assumed many of the duties of the Supervising Architect and he was appointed to that position in 1865 after Rogers had resigned.⁵

With the Civil War just over, and the nation reunited, the federal government undertook many new projects as well as ones which had been postponed. The Office of the Supervising Architect of the Treasury Department was a very busy place. Mullett had to determine the condition of all existing federal government buildings in the United States and plan for their repair, renovation or replacement. Mullett was the first incumbent of his office to keep records and files on the progress of his projects and their cost.⁶ Unfortunately, many of these records were heavily damaged in a fire.

Because of the extensive amount of work which passed through the office of the Supervising Architect, it is unlikely that Mullett designed all of the buildings which were erected during his tenure. Many of them were variations on a theme. However, while subordinates did the drafting and possibly some of the planning, the concepts and the responsibility were Mullett's as well as the final approval for the design of any building.

The nine years during which Mullett served as Supervising Architect coincided almost exactly with the American period of popularity of the French Second Empire style of architecture which Mullett advocated so strongly. He could, and did work in other styles. The U.S. Branch Mint in San Francisco (1869-74, his only design in Roman Doric style) was severely classical and quite similar to the Treasury Building in Washington, D.C., on which he had worked while under Isaiah Rogers. A few buildings were in the Italianate style, like the Custom House and Post Office at Cairo, Illinois, (1869-72) but most were in French Second Empire style.

It may be that Mullett developed his preference for Second Empire architecture while visiting Paris in the late 1850s where the best examples of that style literally lined the Avenues for miles. Certainly nothing in America even came close to the great plans developed and executed by Haussmann in the French Capital. Most of Mullett's buildings

were large, even colossal, but a few were small and they had a gem-like perfection which great size could not achieve. The Office Building built 1868-71 for the U.S. Light-House Service at St. George on Staten Island is one of these.

The Light-House Service was established by act of Congress approved August 7, 1789. This act was the ninth law passed by the first Congress and the first provision for any public work.⁷ Its purpose was to create a central and unified lighthouse administration to be controlled and supervised by the government of the United States. Prior to 1789, all lighthouses had been owned by the states in which they happened to be. The act of 1789 provided that the United States Government would be responsible for the cost of operating all lighthouses in the country, provided that title to these lighthouses was turned over to the United States within one year from the date of the act. However, it was not until 1797 that all the states had ceded their lighthouses to the United States Government.⁸

The act of 1789 placed the care and administration of the Lighthouse Establishment under the Treasury Department. As the first Secretary of the Treasury, this duty devolved upon Alexander Hamilton. In 1792, the office of Commissioner of Revenue was created and Hamilton assigned responsibility for lighthouse affairs to that branch. Although under different offices of the Revenue Department at different times, the Light-House Service remained with that department until 1852; the last thirty-three years were under the supervision of Stephen Pleasonton, Fifth Auditor of the Treasury.⁹

By mid-century, administration of the Light-House Service was becoming a burden to the Treasury Department. The number of lighthouses had increased from fifty-five in 1820 to 325 lighthouses and lightships with almost 1,000 buoys, fog-signals, and other aids to navigation.¹⁰ On May 21, 1851, the Secretary of the Treasury appointed a committee headed by Rear Admiral William B. Shubrick to make a thorough investigation of the lighthouse situation. The committee turned in a very comprehensive report, some 760 pages in length, which advised a complete reorganization of the Light-House Service. This led to the law creating the Light-House Board, established on October 9, 1852, which administered the Light-House Service for the next fifty-eight years.¹¹

The Light-House Board was instituted as a semi-autonomous body having complete control over Light-House matters, but responsible to the Secretary of the Treasury as President of the Board, ex-officio, for its actions. The first chairman was Admiral Shubrick who, with a brief intermission, served in that capacity for nineteen years. He was succeeded by Professor Joseph Henry, a brilliant scientist and researcher who was also secretary of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. Professor Henry was chairman of the Light-House Board for seven years, and the only civilian who ever held that post. Throughout his many years of devoted service, Professor Henry refused to accept any payment whatever.¹²

The Light-House Board divided the United States into twelve lighthouse districts with an inspector and an engineer for each district. The

New York area was in the Third District which included the Atlantic coastline from Maine to Delaware.¹³ An office was established in New York City and for some time supplies for lighthouses in the Third District were kept on piers and in warehouses in the city. This arrangement was not very satisfactory for several reasons. More office room was needed than was available and since many of the materials on hand were flammable or explosive, storage was costly and restricted to safe areas. Methods of operating lighthouses had not kept up with scientific discoveries and many nations, particularly the French, were more advanced and better equipped.¹⁴

The Light-House Board felt that an experimental station should be established where tests of new materials and investigation of new methods could set improved standards to then be applied to all lighthouses in the United States. Admiral Shubrick and Professor Henry, who then headed the experimental department, set out to see how these very special needs could be met. They wanted a location where all functions of the Light-House Service for the Third District could be combined and consolidated, which also had easy access for large ships, and room to erect buildings suited to the needs of the department.

Since 1799, the State of New York had owned a large tract of land at Castleton, later Tompkinsville, which extended along the Narrows on Staten Island. This property was used, originally, for a Marine Hospital and a Quarantine Station. In 1814, the State of New York, with Governor Daniel D. Tompkins as grantor, sold much of this acreage to the United States Government and a section containing about five acres was set aside for use as a Revenue Station for the port of New York.¹⁵ This was actually more land than the Revenue Service needed and, in their search, Admiral Shubrick and Professor Henry decided that it might be possible to locate a Light-House Depot on this part of Staten Island. Their efforts were rewarded in 1863, when the Secretary of the Treasury wrote the following letter:¹⁶

TREASURY DEPARTMENT

July 13, 1863

Rear Admiral Wm. B. Shubrick
U.S. Navy
Chairman, Light-House Board

Sir:

I have received a letter from the Chairman of a Special Committee of the Light-House Board enclosing a copy of its report adopted by the Board, in reference to the selection of a site for a Light-House Establishment depot in the vicinity of New York.

This report recommends the occupation of a portion of the lot now belonging to this Department on Staten Island, Castleton, N. York, and the transfer to the Treasury Department of a portion (\$32,000.) of the appropriation of 3rd March 1863, for a Light-House depot for the improvement of the property, erection of a sea-wall &c, &c.

This recommendation meets my approval, and instructions have been given to the supervising architect of the Treasury Department

to make the necessary steps to carry into execution the improvements designated in his letter of the 24th ulto - and accompanying plan - copies of which are enclosed herewith.

The Department hereby assigns to the Light-House Board, and for its permanent use and occupation for the purposes above named, so much of its lot on Staten Island as lies north of the dotted line on the map or plat containing about 2½ acres.

I am, very respectfully,
(signed) S.P. Chase
Secretary of the Treasury

An 1866 map of the Marine Hospital Grounds in the Town of Castle-ton, Staten Island, New York, surveyed by J. Nelson Tubbs, Civil Engineer, by direction of J.P. Goodsell, State Engineer and Surveyor, shows the grounds of the Revenue Station roughly divided in half with the Revenue Service and the Light-House Service each having a residence for a superintendent, an office, a storehouse, and a pier.¹⁷ Plans were afoot to move the Revenue Service to Manhattan and, in 1868, this was done after an office at 28 Pine Street was fitted up for them.

In May, 1867, in anticipation of taking over the entire station, the Acting Light-House Engineer, Joseph Lederle, drew a map showing the existing buildings and those which were proposed including a large brick workshop to have a cooper shop on the first floor, space for lampmakers on the second floor, and laboratories for testing oil and other experiments on the third floor.¹⁸ Other work included vaults to contain oil, new sheds for storage, and a much needed office building. Mullett in his capacity as Supervising Architect was responsible for the design.

A photograph taken in the spring of 1868 shows the workshop, referred to as the "lamp-shop," under construction with stone walls carried up to the second floor level. The spot later occupied by the Office Building is shown stacked high with bricks waiting to be used for the upper floors of the lamp-shop. This building is still standing with the date 1868 carved on a stone above the doorway. The next building to be built at the Light-House Depot was the "Office Building," the subject of this designation. Beginning with the year 1868, the Annual Reports of the Light-House Board describe the progress made with the construction of the Office Building as follows:¹⁹

Annual Report for 1868: "Office Building - At present the offices connected with the service of this depot (Staten Island) and of the Third District, are located in the storehouse, a building which is not fireproof, and wherein is usually stored something like a half million Dollars' worth of Light-House supplies and apparatus, besides records which could not be replaced. No fire should be permitted in or about this building, and to avoid the necessity which now exists, a fireproof building for offices, and for the preservation of archives, should be built after the design long since approved as part of this establishment. For this building the foundation has been laid, and the walls carried up to the water table, where the work will probably stop for a year, unless an appropriation for its continuance is specifically made, as it is not thought the general fund for the support of the Light-House establishment during this year and the next can afford a larger

draft upon it than that required for the completion of the workshops."

Annual Report for 1869: "The work on the office building has been continued. The first story is nearly completed, and the iron beams of the second floor are laid. It is expected that the building will be roofed in before winter fairly begins."

Annual Report for 1870: "Building for offices - In last year's report it was stated that the first story of the building was completed and the iron beams of the second floor laid. Since then the second story and the iron roof were put up, the slating and tinning completed, the iron stairs set, and the stone sidewalk laid. The inner partitions are all up, and the iron beams arched over with brick. To complete the building there are yet required the furring and plastering, flooring, sashes and shutters, heating apparatus, doors, painting &c."

Annual Report for 1871: "Building for offices - The work on this building having been suspended for more than one year for want of funds, has been resumed, and the structure will be completed and ready for occupation by November."

The French Second Empire style office building as completed in 1871, was the square portion which now forms the center section of the structure and it was constructed of the best materials. The foundations and the stone trim are of a pale grey granite liberally streaked with veins of pink and flecked with tiny specks of black. The walls are of red sandstone and hard-pressed red brick of excellent quality, while the mansard roof is covered with dark grey imbricated slates arranged in a hexagonal design - a most striking combination of colors and materials, now concealed beneath white paint. It is interesting to note that when the wings were added in 1901, the original Second Empire design (executed in the same materials) was used throughout except for the windows, where one-over-one sashes popular at the turn-of-the-century were substituted for the two-over-four sashes of the 1860s. The foundations up to and including the water table are of rock-faced granite as are the window enframements, the quoins at the corners, the belt course at second floor level, and the square stone porch at the main entrance. The walls of the first story are constructed of random ashlar blocks of red sandstone while those of the second story, above the granite belt course, are of hard-pressed red brick laid in a running bond. Originally, the building presented the same basic arrangement of openings on all four sides. The front having a centered entrance with a single window above and paired windows at the sides on both first and second floors; the rear, identical, but without a porch at the entrance; and the sides with the same design, except that all openings were windows. All windows contained two-over-four sashes which are still in place. Each of the four sides of the sloping mansard roof had three metal-framed, flat-topped dormer windows with two-over-four sashes and decorative "Flemish" scrolls at the base where the enframements met the roof at the eaves, just above the wide cornice which contained a metal-lined gutter atop a wooden frieze decorated with long and short horizontal wooden panels. There was a small square cupola in the center of the roof to aid in ventilating the building.

Today, the front facade remains totally undisturbed. The sides have been altered toward the rear where the wings added in 1901 attach themselves to the original building by the device of small square entrance bays which fill the corners and rise the full height of the building. The rear of the original building is now engulfed by the long south side of the addition, and the cupola has been removed. The square stone porch at the entrance, always a conspicuous feature, remains unaltered although the original doors have been removed. It is built entirely of rock-faced granite with wide pilasters at the corners which support the roof and the low stone parapet above it. In the center of the railing above the entrance is an oblong stone tablet bearing the date 1869. Each of the three sides of the porch contains a round-arched opening which formerly had a demi-lune glass transom and a pair of tall wooden doors. These openings are indented just enough behind the plane of the pilasters at the sides to lend a sense of lightness to a rather bulky composition. The great charm of the original building was that it had an intimate - almost domestic - feeling which was lost when the wings were added. However, even with the wings, when compared to the storehouse and the lamp-shop which flank it, the Office Building is still a small-scale structure.

On July 1, 1903, the Light-House Board was transferred from the Treasury Department to that of Commerce and Labor and subsequently was re-organized as the Bureau of Lighthouses on July 1, 1910. The functions of the Bureau of Lighthouses were taken over by the U.S. Coast Guard on July 1, 1939, at which time the Office Building of the Light-House Service at St. George, Staten Island, became the Administration Building of the Coast Guard Station located there.²⁰ In 1966, the U.S. Coast Guard Station for the Third District moved from Staten Island to Governor's Island which had just been vacated by the Army and after a century of continuous service, the Staten Island facility was closed, to become surplus Government property.

The Old Administration Building at St. George, Staten Island, constructed 1868-71, which for nearly seventy years served as the Office Building for the Light-House Depot, is a splendid example of a small-scale government building in French Second Empire style designed during the tenure of Alfred B. Mullett, as Supervising Architect of the Treasury Department. Built of superior materials and enlarged in 1901 using the original Second Empire design, the Old Administration Building typifies an era when government buildings had great symbolic importance and architectural distinction was an essential part of that quality.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Incredible as it may seem, these two post offices cost between nine and ten million dollars each when they were built in the 1860s and 1870s. This was because of the extremely fine quality of the building materials and the great pains taken to see that the buildings were solidly constructed and fireproof. In spite of the high cost of these buildings, there does not seem to have been any indications of graft or scandal on Mullett's part other than the implication that he had created a bonanza for suppliers of granite. The thought which Mullett put into these post office designs is illustrated by the fact that he built into them below-ground receiving stations for delivery of mail by underground railroad, thus anticipating by several years a means of transportation which did not exist when the buildings were built.
2. Henry F. Withey, A.I.A. and Elsie Rathburn Withey, Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, Inc. 1970), p. 432.
3. The Merchant's Exchange, now the First National City Bank at 55 Wall Street, is a designated New York City Landmark (LP-0040). The lower portion of the bank was built for the Merchant's Exchange as a fireproof building replacing the old Exchange building which burned in the Great Fire of 1835. The new Merchant's Exchange was designed by Isaiah Rogers, architect of several fine Greek Revival hotels. In 1862, this building became the United States Custom House. When the Custom House moved to the Battery, the Exchange was acquired by the National City Bank and in 1907, the upper portion of the building was added from designs by McKim, Mead & White, the outstanding firm of architects of that day.
4. Microfilm letters of the Treasury Department, National Archives, Washington, D.C. Roll 6; June 3, 1863.
5. Isaiah Rogers had a history of acute heart attacks and he died as the result of one in 1869.
6. Lawrence Wodehouse "Alfred B. Mullett and His French Style Government Buildings," Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, 31 (March 1972), 23.
7. The Public Statutes at Large of the United States of America, edited by Richard Peters, Esq. (Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1853), Vol. 1, p. 53.
8. George Weiss, The Lighthouse Service. Its History, Activities and Organization (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press. 1926) pp. 2-3.
9. Weiss, pp. 3-4.
10. Weiss, p. 10.

11. George R. Putnam, Lighthouses and Lightships of the United States. (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1933), p. 43.
12. Dictionary of American Biography, edited by Dumas Malone (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1964), Vol. V, pp. 550-553.
13. Prior to 1789, there were ten lighthouses in the area which was to become the Third Lighthouse District. One of these was probably the first on the American continent; built in 1716 by the Province of Massachusetts on Little Brewster Island at the entrance to Boston Harbor. Another was the well known Sandy Hook Light at the entrance to New York Bay, built in 1764.
14. The French physicist, Augustin Fresnel, beginning in 1822, revolutionized lighthouse practice by developing a built-up annular lens comprised of a central spherical lens surrounded by rings of glass prisms. This was a great improvement over anything used previously. The first Fresnel lens in the United States was installed at Navesink Light in 1841, but up to 1853, only five stations were equipped with Fresnel lenses. After the organization of the Light-House Board, lenticular apparatus was rapidly introduced, and by 1860, practically all lighthouses in the United States were equipped with these lenses.
15. Deed from the State of New York to the Government of the United States. Records of the Third Lighthouse District, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
16. Records of the Third Lighthouse District, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
17. Records of the Third Lighthouse District, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
18. Records of the Third Lighthouse District, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
19. Annual Reports of the Light-House Board for the years 1868-1871. National Archives, Washington, D.C.
20. Herbert B. Reed, "Joseph Henry and Lighthouse Board Activities on Staten Island," The Staten Island Historian, 28 (January-March 1967), 5.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architectural and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Old Administration Building has a special character, special historic and aesthetic interest and value as a part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Old Administration Building is a splendid example of a small-scale government building in French Second Empire style designed during the tenure of Alfred B. Mullett, as Supervising Architect of the Treasury Department; that it was well built of superior materials; that completed in 1871, it was enlarged in 1901, using the original Second Empire design; that it has had a long and distinguished history of government service, first as the Office Building of the Lighthouse Service Depot for the Third Lighthouse District, and later as the Administration Building when the compound became a United States Coast Guard Base; and that the Old Administration Building typifies an era when government buildings had great symbolic importance and architectural distinction was an essential part of that quality.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Old Administration Building, 1 Bay Steeet, St. George, Borough of Staten Island, and designates Tax Map Block 1, Lot 55 in part as its Landmark Site.

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East Wing 1901

Photo Credit:
William Kushmick

The Old Administration Building
No. 1 Bay Street, St. George, Staten Island
as it looks today
- 1980 -

Original Building
1868-71

Architect:
Alfred B. Mullett



The Office Building of the Third District
U. S. Lighthouse Depot
as completed in 1871

Photo Credit:
National Archives

Architect:
Alfred B. Mullett



The Third District Light-House Depot in 1868

Upper Left: The Storehouse
Foreground: The Lamp-Shop under construction
Center: Site of Office Building

Photo Credit:
National Archives