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THE FIGHT FOR CASTLE CLINTON

by

Mr. George A. McAneny

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AFTERNOON SESSION

GENERAL GRANT: Ladies and gentlemen, I am very happy and proud to be able to introduce to you now one who doesn't need any introduction to many of you -- Mr. George A. McAneny -- who will speak on the subject of preserving historic sites and buildings.

Mr. McAneny is the President of the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society, Chairman of the Federal Hall Memorial Association, Associate Member of the National Council, and a member of the Executive Board, and Vice Chairman of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. ~~His most recent achievement was the winning of an eight-year~~ battle to save Castle Clinton in New York Harbor as a national monument. It is an 1812 war memorial.

I think that we are particularly interested in the fact that Mr. McAneny was one of the originators of the National Council and that if he had not given it the initial push which he gives to so many things we would not be rolling along now.

So, the father of the National Council, Mr. McAneny!
(Applause.)

THE FIGHT FOR CASTLE CLINTON

by

Mr. George A. McAneny

MR. McANENY: Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I have been asked, nevertheless, to speak of one thing only, and that is to tell you something of the processes through which the historic Castle Clinton in the Battery in New York City was saved from destruction and is now triumphantly on the way to complete restoration.

It has taken us nine years to accomplish this. We have done a few other things in the meanwhile, but, nevertheless, this has been on the table for nine years, beginning in 1941 and ending today.

I am going to tell you a little bit about the history of Fort Clinton so that you will realize what it meant to us and what we believed it meant to the city and indeed to the nation that the old structure should be saved.

I might say that there is no part of New York City that is held so sacredly by those who understand as this little plot down on the Battery at the tip of the Island of Manhattan. Castle Clinton not only represented, looking backward, the military life of the nation, particularly the period of the war of 1812, just after it was finished, but it was the center of so much that relates to the history of New York that it may well be taken as an epitomy of it all, an epitomy in value and in interest.

As you know, all of you who have studied New York in any degree, the first visitors in New York Harbor were the French, sailing under the flag of Louis XV, and with an

Italian navigator named Verrazano as their director. Verrazano entered the harbor in 1524. Popularly, we speak of Henry Hudson. Actually a hundred years elapsed between that landing and the landing of the Dutch in 1609 and the settlement by the Dutch in 1623. Just a hundred years.

The little ship "Dolphin" was his flagship and his only ship, and the "Dolphin" is being celebrated far more now than before as its relationship to the city becomes better known.

But in 1623, 14 years after the voyage of Henry Hudson, there was a settlement by the Dutch, by Waroons, and in the three years after that the purchase of the island from the Indians at that famous sale of which you all have heard in which the Indians parted with the island for the equivalent of \$24. The price has risen since in sections.
(Laughter.)

But the Dutch settlement was a very peaceful one, and it was not until 1660 when the rumors commenced to fly that the British had their eye on the island and all of New Amsterdam, all of the New Netherlands for that matter, arguing that by grace of sailings up and down the coast of the Cabots at the end of the 15th Century it belonged to them.

To cut a long story short, in 1664 they landed. They swept old Peter Stuyvesant off his wooden leg, frightened him to death, had him retired up the island, and they took

possession of New Netherlands.

In 1626 when the Dutch came in, they commenced the building of the fort which is the forerunner of the building that we now celebrate. The fort was the main thing in the old settlement, the Dutch settlement. Within its walls, which were built of earth and rubble and other easily removable objects, there stood the church. The church in the fort. The prison in the fort. Everything that belonged to the life of the town centrally was situated within the fort in 1626. And it continued to serve its purpose without being involved in any warlike performance until the day the English arrived.

The English held it until 1776 when the Patriotic army took possession of it and held it for a few short and lively months. Then the rear end of the fort was knocked out to let the American army in the fort escape, and the fort stood on until 1790, seven years after the evacuation, when it was considered that George Washington would require a residence in New York as the President of the United States indefinitely. He had been inaugurated there in 1789.

In 1790 a grandiose plan was adopted to provide a Government House, the residence of the President, and to provide the site they arranged to tear down what was left of the old fort. And they did. And they built the house there. They hardly finished it before the master stroke of the

Philadelphians occurred and the capitol was removed to Philadelphia to remain for ten years. The Government House was left on our hands, to be occupied by Clinton and Jay as Governors but otherwise to stand there unemployed.

Immediately a great clamor arose in the city: In view of the fact that from the first settlement there had been a fortification watching over its fate at that point, something must be placed in its stead. And the Army Engineers took the matter up, and appropriations were secured in Washington to build a substitute for it. That was in 1807. This talk commenced around 1800 and when the Government House had been eight or ten years old.

But Colonel Williams, who was the Colonel of Engineers at the time in the United States Army, conceived the idea of building three forts to take the place of the old one which had been removed. There was to be this one of which we speak, a second on Governor's Island, and a third on Bedloe's Island. The forts on Bedloe's Island, Governor's Island and the Battery were uniform in their arrangement and taste and functions, built of red sandstone taken from the same quarry near Newark, manned with the same kind of equipment, and calculated to keep the British away when the war of 1812 commenced, as it was expected it would.

The fort was just a year old and was occupied by the first Commandant, Governor Bloomfield of New Jersey, who was

also Commandant of the New Jersey Militia. He opened the doors of the fort on the morning of the 20th of June, 1812 and announced the beginning of the war with England two days before in Washington. There was no service except courier service for information, and the information reached New York in that fashion. And Bloomfield opened the doors wide and proclaimed to the people of the city and thereby to the people near New York that the fight had commenced. It went on from that point furiously, as you know.

The fort became the center of military operations in that part of the country. They had 40,000 men enrolled under its banners at one time. A succession of Commandants included three others, the last of whom was General Winfield Scott, a youngish man at that time.

Then the headquarters were removed to Governor's Island and Congress, in a mellow mood, voted to transfer Fort Clinton to the city for a dollar and left the city free to use it as it wished.

The city had no better use for it than to turn it into a great place for public amusement, which it did. Fortunately, it found able and appropriate tenants, and Castle Garden took its place in the scheme of the city. Castle Garden though not only became the center of the city socially but patriotically, publicly and in every way. There was held the great reception to Lafayette at the time of his revisit

to America in 1824; the visit of Kosciusko; the visit of the then Prince of Wales, later Edward VII. Every President of the United States found some occasion for going to New York and was entertained at Castle Garden.

It is a long story, and I won't bore you with it except to point out that all that was in its history and that it remained in that way.

It provided for the debut of Jenny Lind in America, of grand opera in New York.

In 1855 it was sold to the State of New York to be used as an immigrant station. And during the period immediately following that until 1890, 7,900,000 future citizens of the United States passed through its portals.

In 1890 the aquarium was established there under an arrangement with the Zoological Society of New York, and there that remained until its death knell was apparently about to be sung.

That brought us right down to 1940. The origin of the present row which ended so happily recently lay in the fact that the Commissioner of Parks for the city, who was also president of two or three of the subway companies of the city, designed a great bridge to cross the Battery Park and to connect New York and Brooklyn. This bridge would have cost a mint of money. It would have blotted out the fine skyline of the lands around the Battery. It would have

been a great and precarious thing to regard in times of war.

There were some of us who organized a little coterie of committees, of which I took the chairmanship, to oppose that bridge. We did oppose it there and in the press and before the people in Washington, and the War Department decided against it, chiefly on the ground of a war peril.

The Commissioner was pretty "wrathy" about that. He had held this bridge very much to his heart as a link in a circumferential chain of highways about the city which would be broken there at that point. But there had been a movement before that to build a tunnel, and we pointed to that and said, "Why not go ahead with it?" And we did go ahead with it, and the money was provided largely by the RFC. It was about to commence when the war came along in 1941 and all chances of building a bridge or tunnel were obliterated for four years.

But the discussion of what was to be done later went on. And the Commissioner, in part I have always believed as perhaps an undue expression of his spiteful feeling about it, started in to remove the aquarium, as he called it, and otherwise to tear down great trees and to destroy the beauties of the Battery from our point of view.

The plot to save the fort became crystallized under a committee of the same leadership and management, and we

took the matter before the Board of Estimate and Apportionment, which is the governing body of the City of New York. There a motion to demolish the fort was carried by a vote of 9 to 5. The votes that were cast were given under the impression that it also would probably fail.

We went ahead with the suit, nevertheless, and we came within one vote in the higher court of carrying it, but the decision to do nothing prevailed. And the Board of Estimate voted to demolish the fort.

Then followed two years in the courts, many more years in the press, the organization of civic bodies of every description there about us, the chamber of commerce, the Council of Commerce and Industry, the Institute of Architects. There was a list of 24 organizations, I believe, who banded together and appointed their representatives to our council. And under that leadership the fight went on.

We enlisted the aid of the Secretary of Interior, Mr. Ickes, early in the discussion. He took the matter up with the Mayor, LaGuardia, and a lively correspondence ensued: Mr. Ickes speaking for the fort, the Mayor for destruction.

That delayed it again in the largest part for a long time.

The National Park Service did early in the game take the matter up, and from that time forward we had a most powerful and influential, lively, interested friend.

Part of the plot, an important part of the plot, was to gain the money from Washington to pay for the cost of restoring the old fort. This we promoted before committees of Congress where eloquent discourses were had by members of the Park Service, and which ended in the appropriation of \$165,000 to inaugurate the work.

That was done and the news was carried to the City Hall. In the meantime on two other occasions they had voted to demolish the fort. There were five all told. But they were much impressed by the appearance of an interest in Washington expressed in this fashion and began to talk quite differently.

But it was necessary to get an enabling act through at Albany permitting the city to make the transfer to the government. That took us two years. All of these things combined to add up to nine years of effort to have this thing done. And finally the Board of Estimate acted favorably. The government was notified accordingly. A deed was prepared transferring the property from the city to the nation. That deed passed the scrutiny of the Attorney General and received his approval. All of this within the past few months, and it was announced by the Park Service that Fort Clinton would be saved.

Well, that meant a powerful lot to us. We believed that it not only meant victory in a local contest but that

it would serve as an example and encouragement to others all through the land that the way in which to gain the acquisition of a property destined for destruction was to keep everlastingly at it and not be discouraged by any events whatsoever.

We were hauled out of court again and again, but we came back time after time, and we succeeded. Now the Park Service has taken hold of the restoration itself. They have before them a list of 14 different suggestions of things that can be done with Castle Clinton. The piles of rubbish that had heaped up about it, for one thing, were removed very soon. And may I say in parentheses that Mr. Drury received a letter from Commissioner Moses several weeks ago referring to the work to be done, calling attention to the close proximity of the park in which the reservation was made, and volunteering to cooperate with him in any way possible to bring the thing to a proper conclusion.

So that was a very fitting and very happy ending of our old feud with the Commissioner, who was very much in earnest and very properly so perhaps at having lost his bridge, but, nevertheless, it has been defeated and he says he is willing to work with the victor.

The first thing to be done there, after the cleaning-out process has been finished, has been to denude the building

evidences of its having been adopted, and adopted here and adopted there. It's becoming almost a cry: "Save the old places."

That cry is considerably aided by the creation of the National Trust, about which so much has been said here today. The National Trust was conceived in fine shape and under fine circumstances and upon fine patterns, following the success of what had been done in England during 60 years past, and we expect from it, as soon as public attention has been properly fastened on its possibilities, great things, as Mr. Surface said this morning.

Gentlemen, ladies, just one more word ~~about a matter~~ that is akin to the fort, which developed at the same time and is now ripening at the same time. That is the turning into the Federal Hall Memorial of the old Sub-Treasury building at Wall and Nassau Streets in New York. On that site it was that the first Congress sat for 20 months. On that site it was that George Washington was inaugurated as President, the great departments created and their heads appointed, and a great start given to the affairs of the country through the adoption of Hamilton's financial system. There the Bill of Rights was framed and passed and passed on to the states for ratification. There the history of the country has pressed that old building at a hundred thousand points, constantly, constantly for years.

The original city hall which had been converted into Federal Hall in 1699 had disappeared in 1812, but not until it had been converted to be the Federal Hall under the plans of Major L'Enfant which were expressed in his beautification and adaptation for practical uses. Ten years ago it seemed to some of us that it was a mistake to consider the Hall and its site, which were valued by the city not for taxing purposes but for appraising purposes at eight millions and a half -- it is situated on the most costly land in the world -- it seemed, nevertheless, a great shame that it should be turned into surplus as the then ~~disposition provided for it.~~

The World's Fair was about to open up, and some of the people who were interested in that matter took up at Washington the question of saving the old Hall. The upshot of it was that the idea of selling it for any price was given up, and it was turned into a national historic monument. It was used first as the Custom House, later as the Sub-Treasury, later still as the Federal Bank -- the first. Just before the war of 1941 it was turned over to a body of citizens known as Federal Hall Memorial Associates as custodians of the most of it.

They organized a museum. They have organized a library. They have conducted hundreds of popular meetings on the steps, appeals for funds during the war, and so on.

For ten years we held it without further ado. For the first four the war stood in the way of anything. President Roosevelt had looked over the plans, was enthusiastic about it but said, "It will have to wait." And it did have to wait. And no sooner was the war ended than the Government announced that it contemplated the establishment of the Passport Division of the State Department in the building, and there that precious place was given over to the issuance of passports.

That, though we struggled against it constantly, continued until a month ago when, through the cooperation of the State Department, ~~the Interior Department and the~~ Park Service, which is the real custodian of the property, it was turned over to us in toto, and the Passport Division was moved.

Contracts have now been let for the removal of all of the things that have blocked the inside of the building, particularly the great dome room, which is one of the most magnificent I have ever seen. Steps will be taken at once to restore that Hall and have it in shape for public dedication as soon as it is feasible.

Purely through coincidence the fight to save Fort Clinton has proceeded hand in hand with that to save the Federal Hall Memorial. We won them both. Therefore, we consider it a year of jubilee, of a good deal of satisfaction.

We hope that wherever you are yourselves interested and in whatever ventures of salvation you have your hand, you will consider the wisdom of waiting everlastingly if necessary to get what you want as we did.

(Sustained applause.)

GENERAL GRANT: Thank you very much, Mr. McAneny, for this historically interesting and most encouraging talk on how these two memorials have been saved.