

Pier A Gets Landmark Boost

By ROBERTA B. GRATZ

State preservation officials have approved for designation as a national landmark New York City's oldest covered pier, Pier A, despite its scheduled demolition by another state agency.

The recommendation for designation will be forwarded this week to the Interior Dept., overseer of the National Register of Historic Places. Acceptance of state nominations is normally automatic.

At the same time, the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission will discuss in executive session whether to hold a public hearing to consider the pier for city designation.

The pier, completed in 1886,

is at the southern end of Battery Park City and has been scheduled for demolition since a city-state lease agreement in 1970.

Unlike city landmarks designation, national approvals carry no legal prohibition against demolition. Thomas Galvin, BPC executive director, said yesterday that they had not yet been notified of the state action but would "explore the legal ramifications" in the next few weeks.

Preservationists have been quietly arguing for years that the pier is rich in historic and visual importance and should be incorporated in the new city. But state and city preservation officials have been reluctant to interfere with standing legal

and political agreements to demolish it.

"It became one of the most politically sensitive landmark debates," one state preservation official said recently, "although the behind-the-scenes battling was kept very quiet."

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Two-story structure

Originally the simple two-story structure with its arched windows and bright green roof stood in the way of a planned esplanade and bikeway. But under current plans, it interferes with one of the three office towers scheduled for the southern end of the mixed residential and commercial community.

Two years ago, the state Board of Historic Preservation unanimously voted to nominate the pier as a national landmark but such actions require final approval of the State Parks and Recreation Commissioner — the state's chief preservation officer. The approval had not been acted upon by former commissioner Alexander Aldrich but was one of the first preservation actions taken by Orin Lehman, recently appointed by Gov. Carey to that post.

"I studied the matter very carefully," Lehman said, "and determined it is definitely worth saving. It might affect plans for the office building but it certainly should be a part of the view and the esplanade. If anything, that office tower will really block the view."

Noting that his determination did not have to be based on new construction complications, Lehman added that "Pier A could be a real asset to Battery Park City which will be entirely new. The builders should meld at least something of the old with the new."

The building of Pier A—currently an active fireboat station—was initiated in the early 1870s by Civil War Gen. George B. McClellan, then engineer-in-chief of the city's Docks Dept.

A Focal Point

For many years it served as the focal point of lavish welcoming displays for distinguished visitors to the city. It has long been considered one of lower Manhattan's most familiar unofficial landmarks—one of the few viable waterfront structures left in an area fast losing touch with its maritime beginnings.

In 1918, the pointed-roof clock tower was added at the end of the pier as the nation's first permanent memorial to World War I dead. It is one of only two clocks on the East Coast that peel the hours in snip's bells. The other is at the U.S. Naval Academy.

