

# State to Act on Pier A Status

By ROBERTA B. GRATZ

State preservation officials are expected to decide this week whether to nominate as a national landmark New York City's oldest covered pier, which is currently scheduled for demolition.

Pier A, built in 1886, is currently an active fireboat station and remains one of the few viable waterfront landmarks in an area fast losing touch with its maritime origins.

Resting on the north corner of Battery Park, only a stone's throw from Castle Clinton—the 1812 fort that once served as an aquarium—Pier A stands in the way of the Battery Park City bikeway planned for the waterfront area.

## A Familiar Sight

For several years now, preservationists have been quietly arguing that the pier should remain. It is one of Lower Manhattan's most familiar unofficial landmarks, they say.

Its replacement, they add, will be an unnecessary expense to the city. And, they point out, it is rich in historic importance—especially its 70-foot clock tower, a World War I memorial.

Two years ago, the State Board of Historic Preservation unanimously voted to nominate the pier for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Such nominations require final approval by the State Parks and

Recreation Commissioner. Once given, federal approval is normally automatic.

Orin Lehman, recently appointed to that post by Gov. Carey, says he plans to visit the pier this week "and then make a decision.

"I've always been generally sympathetic to this type of thing," Lehman said, "but I have to see it before I decide."

Efforts to save Pier A from demolition have been stymied in recent years because of subtle but strong political complications. The city's Landmark Preservation Commission has avoided even holding a public hearing to consider designation because the pier's designation would interfere with BPC legal and political agreements.

## 'Politically Sensitive Debate'

Former Parks Commissioner Alexander Aldrich, a cousin of then-Gov. Rockefeller, avoided approving it for a national landmark because that would have pitted him against the head of another state agency, Charles J. Urstadt, chairman of the Battery Park City Authority. Urstadt is known to be adamant about having a clear southern vista for his commercial and residential community.

"It became one of the most politically sensitive landmark debates," one state preservation official acknowledged last week, "although the be-

hind-the-scenes battling was kept very quiet."

Now, with a Democratic Governor and Parks Commissioner, observers believe the reluctance to interfere with Urstadt, a Rockefeller appointee, may be diminished. The building of Pier A was initiated in the early 1870s by Civil War Gen. George B. McClellan, who was by then engineer-in-chief of the city Dept. of Docks.

It had a painted green roof, grey aluminum siding and arched windows, but Pier A was more than just a visual introduction to the city.

For many years it was a police station from which boats departed to welcome distinguished visitors from Charles Lindbergh to Queen Marie of Romania. Today it remains the headquarters of the Fire Dept. Marine Division and other fire services.

## Historic Addition

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 peal the hours in shlp's bells. The other is at the U. S. Naval Academy.

Under current plans, a new fire facility is to be constructed in Brooklyn and the clock tower is to be located within the grounds of Battery Park City. BPC has hired Giorgio Cavaglieri,

the city's most eminent preservation architect, to design a base for the tower—a move some observers consider "quite clever."

As one commented: "It's an obvious attempt to take the wind out of the preservationists' sails. They've picked the one architect that can't be faulted."

The tower had been offered to the South Street Seaport Museum, which rejected it, according to one source, because "we know it can and should stay where it is."

A number of groups—the Landmarks Conservancy, the Seamen's Church Institute, South Street Seaport—have been quietly pushing to reverse the decision to demolish the pier.

## 'City Had to Capitulate'

"At the time we negotiated the lease," a former city official who was involved told The Post last year, "we resisted giving up the fireboat pier. It's such an authentic piece of the past of which Lower Manhattan has already lost so much. We lost. The city had to capitulate. They were threatening to cut off other kinds of state aid."

Replied Urstadt: "That's ridiculous, untrue. At no point did the city request saving it. The reason for demolishing it is to give the public an esplanade along the waterfront that would continue into Battery Park and a full view of the river.

"I have yet to see any advantage in saving it," Urstadt added. "It doesn't mix with modern architecture, and is it worth saving if it's going to destroy the master plan everyone has agreed to?"

The master plan calls for two or three office towers scheduled for the south end of Battery Park City. Even if Pier A should remain—a mere speck in the shadow of the 60-story towers—the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island are still in full view.

In a letter to the editor, published in The Post a year ago following a story on Pier A, Urstadt reiterated that "it was not the state that insisted on its removal, but rather a longstanding city policy dating back at least to the June 1966 plan for Lower Manhattan made public by the City Planning Commission."

It is unclear what national landmark status would do for the future of Pier A. Unlike city designation, inclusion on the federal register—under the auspices of the Dept. of Interior—does not provide a legal roadblock to demolition.

"But it does provide a powerful moral one," notes one preservationist. "When it doesn't even stand in the way of construction, it would be hard to argue against its rescue. More importantly, it's what is really needed to get the reversal machinery going."

"There have been no changes in plans to remove the pier," a Battery Park spokesman said recently. "It's in the lease with the city, even if we were disposed not to do it."

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