

Harlem Fire Watch Tower
Marcus Garvey Park
New York City
New York County
New York

HAER No. NY-104

HAER
NY,
31-NEWY,
163A-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

NY 104

HARLEM FIRE WATCH TOWER

Date: 1856

Location: Marcus Garvey Park, Harlem New York City, New York Co. NY.

Built by: Julius B. Kroehl (based on original design by James Bogardus)

Owner: City of New York.

Significance: The Harlem Fire Watch Tower is the last remaining fire watch tower in New York City. It was one of the first completely iron structures in New York City and is the last of only three iron watch towers built in Manhattan. The tower is also a fine example of architectural detailing in iron.

Transmitted by: Dan Clement, 1983.

The fire watch tower in Harlem is part of the long history of fire protection technology in the City of New York. As New York grew so did the possibility that fire, if not detected quickly enough, could destroy large areas of the city. Bell towers had, as early as 1790, been used to sound the alarm during a fire. But, it was not until 1830, with the use of the cupola on City Hall, that the first fire watch tower first began being used. These early towers were cupolas of existing buildings but soon towers were erected for the sole purpose of fire detection,

The credit for the iron fire tower goes to Jame Bogardus; a pioneer in early iron construction. Bogardus designed and constructed two towers for the city of New York. The first on 33rd Street in 1851 and the second two years later on Macdougall Street.

The tower in Marcus Garvey Park (formerly Mt. Morris Park) was first proposed in 1854. Because of the exposed rocky site a wooden tower would have proved impractical so an iron tower, agreed upon. In 1856 Julius B. Kroehl underbid James Bogardus for the contract. Because of the high elevation of the sight Kroehl submitted a bid for a design that was half the height and so half the price of Bogardus' bid.

The tower in Marcus Garvey Park is an octagonal four story structure (counting the observatory platform) using fluted Doric columns and paneled sills all made of iron. Many of the details can be traced back to the two previous Bogardus towers. The Kroehl design differed in the bell and observatory

support girders. Although similar to Bogardus' bow string girder, they are rigidly connected to a central iron post on each level, instead of freely joined. Local telegraph alarm boxes quickly replaced the need for the watch towers. Twenty years after its completion the Harlem Fire Watch Tower was obsolete. For many years the bell of the tower rang twice a day because the residents wished it.

As of 1975, the tower was in poor condition. Although still standing after all its counter parts had been demolished, the tower's iron had deteriorated because of rust and some of the structural members had developed cracks.

ADDENDUM TO:
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FIELD RECORDS

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