

Mount Morris Park (now Marcus Garvey Park) Fire Watchtower

Individual Landmark

Mount Morris Park (now Marcus Garvey Park)

Designation Date: July 12, 1967



Mount Morris Park Fire Watchtower

Photo: Lorraine Colbert

In making its selection of outstanding architectural monuments in New York City, the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission could not exclude from its list of distinctive, individual monuments the cast-iron Fire Watchtower, located in Mount Morris Park (now Marcus Garvey Park). This fire lookout tower is remarkable, and its four-story octagonal structure is the last remaining one of 11 such towers which once stood throughout the city. It is a good example of post and lintel construction, and has a quality of pristine beauty in its slender elegance that is unmatched elsewhere.

The Watchtower is an open cast-iron structure composed of three tiers of fluted columns superimposed on one another, supporting a smaller eight-sided open lantern on top. It is a fine example of constructive expressionism. A large alarm bell hangs from the cross member at the second floor level. A spiral stairway sweeps upward in a graceful curve adding an attractive appearance to the otherwise rectangular and octagonal composition. All the horizontal members are indented with unadorned sunken panels, and the slender, fluted

columns have bases but no capitals. A band course or simple molding forms a plain but dignified cornice at the third floor level. This Watchtower is a rare architectural phenomenon in our midst.

For more than 150 years, there were bell towers and fire watchtowers in New York City that were used to sound alarms. The forerunner of the fire watchtower was the bell tower, and the earliest one in New York dates back to 1790, when a bell was imported from England. There were no lookout stations in the early bell towers; they were structures equipped with a bell that was rung in case of fire. Early records indicate that the first fire watchtower in New York was in the cupola of City Hall, which was used as a fire watchtower starting in 1830. The first fire watchtower built for that purpose was the one erected in the Jefferson Market in 1832 of wood construction. (The Jefferson Market Courthouse tower was built of stone in 1875.) Some of the early watchtowers had closed-in compartments in the upper story for protection of the watchers against inclement weather.

In 1851, the telegraph was first employed in New York to communicate fire alarms, and in that year the eight watch towers in Manhattan were connected with a telegraphy system. The watchers used a Morse code signal to communicate with each other, and then sounded the bell to indicate in which district the fire was located. Before the first fire alarm box system was installed below 14th Street in 1871, and long before advent of the telephone, the fire watchtower played an important part in New York's fire control system. Fire watchtowers were discontinued after 1878, but the bell in the Mount Morris Park watchtower rang at 9:00 am and 12:00 noon for years afterward, because the citizens of the area insisted on having this function performed daily by a member of the local fire house.

[Read the full NYC LPC designation report here.](#)