

LIGHTHOUSE

This 50-foot tall, gray gneiss, Gothic-style lighthouse was built in 1872. It is not an official Coast Guard lighthouse, but it was commissioned by the city. The Lighthouse's purpose was to "effectually light" the nearby New York City Insane Asylum for boats navigating the treacherous Hell Gate waters. It was designed by architect James Renwick, Jr., whose other works include Smallpox Hospital and St. Patrick's Cathedral. Inmate labor was probably used in the city-run project, but to elaborate much on its construction is to explore legend.



The Lighthouse, ca. 1893

Whether McCarthy complied or not is the choice of the storyteller, but the fort did come down. Then supposedly another Asylum patient was summoned to build the Lighthouse. This inmate styled himself "Thomas Macey, Esq., architect, mason, carpenter, civil engineer, philosopher, and philanthropist." The lighthouse was built, though adherence to Renwick's blueprint is questionable. Despite Thomas Macey's supposed labor, John McCarthy's name was credited on a plaque that remained at the Lighthouse's base until its mysterious disappearance in the 1960s: "THIS IS THE WORK/WAS DONE BY/JOHN MCCARTHY/WHO BUILT THE LIGHTHOUSE FROM THE BOTTOM TO THE TOP ALL YE WHO DO PASS BY MAY/PRAY FOR HIS SOUL WHEN HE DIES."

The Lighthouse was decommissioned in the 1940s, designated a city landmark in 1975, and partially restored the following year. In 1998 an anonymous grant of \$120,000 funded complete restoration (including internal lamps).

You have now reached the end of the Roosevelt Island Historical Walk. For those who missed any part of the tour: This tour begins with a plaque at the island's southern tip about Strecker Memorial Laboratory. To reach this plaque, follow the island's Queens-facing seawall south (that is, towards the Queensboro Bridge). To join the tour from any point, look for plaques like this one and follow the white and green "Roosevelt Island Historical Walk" signs.

Roosevelt Island Historical Society

www.rooseveltisland.org/rihs

Roosevelt Island Historical Walk

Boy Scout Troop 59

Neil Tandon

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Before the Lighthouse was built, what is now the northern end of the island was only marsh and large rocks. In this 1815 sketch, you can see how exposed the Insane Asylum was and why the Lighthouse was deemed necessary to "effectually light" the building.



The Lighthouse, ca. 1975, before construction of Lighthouse Park

Roosevelt Island Operating Corporation

www.rioc.com

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