

Preserving New York's Ties to the Underground Railroad

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Are landmarks that celebrate Black history given proper consideration by city government? That is a question hovering over two threatened antebellum houses once owned by abolitionists, one in Brooklyn and one in Manhattan, that have come before the Landmarks Preservation Commission in recent months.

Sixteen years after a fierce preservation campaign was sparked by the city's plan to use eminent domain to seize and demolish a Greek Revival rowhouse in Downtown Brooklyn that may have been a stop on the Underground Railroad, the proposed landmark at 227 Duffield Street finally received a public hearing at the commission in July. Support from elected officials and the public was overwhelming, with 131 people testifying or writing in favor of landmark status for the house, which was once owned by the avowed abolitionists Harriet and Thomas Truesdell. (The city's first lady, Chirlane McCray, had previously urged the commission to make a thorough review of the property, a position echoed by Mayor Bill de Blasio.) The single voice in opposition at the hearing belonged to a lawyer for the house's owner.

But even as the public awaits an as-yet-unscheduled vote on landmark designation that could permanently protect 227 Duffield, new efforts to preserve a second endangered abolitionist-owned house, at 857 Riverside Drive, were swiftly rejected by the commission in late November.

Image



The owners of 857 Riverside Drive have applied for permits from the Buildings Department to demolish the house and replace it with a 13-story residential building. In November, local preservationists formally asked the city to consider granting the house landmark protection, but the Landmarks Preservation Commission swiftly rejected the request. Credit...Katherine Marks for The New York Times

The proposed landmark would be unique in Upper Manhattan, which was miles north of the city in the mid-nineteenth century and which suffers from a notable underrepresentation among the borough's historic districts. Of more than 37,000 city properties with landmark protection, just 17 sites are related to abolitionism or the Underground Railroad, the network of Black and white activists who helped enslaved African-Americans flee north to freedom before the Civil War. Only two such protected sites are in Manhattan, none above 29th Street.

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Although slavery was not fully abolished in New York State until 1827 and the city maintained strong ties to the Southern slave economy until the Civil War, a small number of courageous New Yorkers played a significant role in the effort to abolish slavery and help those fleeing bondage. But documenting a building's connection to the Underground Railroad can be difficult, as those aiding fugitives often kept their activities clandestine out of necessity. The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 subjected people harboring freedom seekers to heavy fines and six months in jail, even in free states.

Additionally, Lower Manhattan, where much of the antebellum city was located and where many of those sympathetic to the Underground Railroad operated, has been largely redeveloped over the past 160 years, resulting in the loss of important Underground Railroad sites like the townhouse of the African-American publisher David Ruggles, at 36 Lispenard Street, which was demolished around 1875.

Image



Dennis Harris, an abolitionist minister, built a sugar refinery on the Hudson River at 160th Street, just down the hill from the house at 857 Riverside. He also built a wharf and bought a steamboat, which preservationists believe may have functioned as part of the Underground Railroad. Credit...via Yale University Art Gallery

The endangered two-story wood-frame house at Riverside and West 159th Street, built around 1851, is the only surviving Washington Heights home shot by the renowned photographer Berenice Abbott for her 1939 book, "Changing New York." Abbott's 1937 photograph shows a jaunty villa designed in a transitional Greek Revival-Italianate style, with Italianate scroll-sawn brackets at the eaves and windows as well as a wraparound porch adorned with lively scrollwork.

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The villa was also crowned with an octagonal, windowed cupola, an elegant topper that calls to mind the wood-frame dwelling at 200 Lafayette Avenue in Brooklyn. A designated landmark from the same period, that house also combines Greek Revival and Italianate elements, including a cupola built, as at 857 Riverside, to showcase what was once a fine waterfront view.

But the Riverside house has been scalped of its cupola and shorn of its front porch, and the clapboard of its front facade has been replaced with faux-stone siding.

The hits keep coming, too. In August, a demolition permit application was filed with the Buildings Department for 857 Riverside, following an application to construct a 13-story residential building on the site. At 135 feet, the proposed structure would tower over its three- and six-story neighbors.

The owners on the demolition application are Michael Petrokansky and Sigmund Freund of Spencer Developers. And city records show that the property was purchased by a limited liability company, RSD857, in October 2019 from Albert Wright, a retired New York City Transit track worker, and his wife, Doreen Green. The real property transfer report, which showed a sale price of \$975,000, was signed for the company by Mr. Petrokansky.

But Mr. Wright, who encountered cascading financial trouble with banks beginning with the mortgage crisis of 2008, maintains that he was “swindled.” He has refused to leave, even as, he said, Mr. Petrokansky has brought in several tenants to share the house with him in conflict-ridden cohabitation.

“We’re looking into the validity of the sales transaction, and we want to fight to deny his eviction,” said Lawrence Duran, Mr. Wright’s lawyer. “We believe he wasn’t entirely aware of everything that was going on when the transfer took place.”

Mr. Wright said that if he gets the house back, he plans to replace its missing cupola, clapboard siding and wraparound porch.

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“I’m a contractor,” he said, “and I want the house to look like it did in 1851.”

Mr. Petrokansky, reached briefly by telephone, declined to comment. Mr. Freund did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

Image



The house at 857 Riverside retains historic Italianate wooden brackets at the eaves of its front facade. Credit...Katherine Marks for The New York Times

The campaign to obtain landmark protection for 857 Riverside, which has the backing of Community Board 12, the Manhattan borough president, Gale A. Brewer, and several other local officials, is a grass-roots effort launched by the Upper Riverside Residents Alliance.

The T List: A weekly roundup of what the editors of T Magazine are noticing and coveting right now.

The house lies one block north of the Audubon Park Historic District, where heirs of the naturalist-painter John James Audubon carved a suburban community of Italianate villas out of the countryside in the 1850s.

Matthew Spady, a historian who lives up the street from the threatened house and recently published a book about Audubon Park, provided a treasure trove of period research. Joseph V. Amodio, a freelance writer who also lives nearby, added his own research and penned a report on the history of the house, which the alliance submitted to the landmarks commission in November.

The report contends that 857 Riverside is the last surviving link to the fiery abolitionist minister Dennis Harris, and that the house may even be tied to the Underground Railroad. Harris owned the house between 1852 and 1854, when he sold it to his business partner and fellow abolitionist Judge John Newhouse.

Image



Clapboard siding survives on the northern side of the house, just inches from the brick wall of the neighboring rowhouse. Credit...Peter S. Green

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Harris's antislavery activism is strongly documented in the report, while the Harris-Newhouse Home's possible use as a safe house for fugitives is conjecture.

An English immigrant and sugar refiner, Harris was a complex figure who was an outspoken opponent of slavery while deriving his income from an industry largely dependent on what the abolitionist Frederick Douglass called "the bloody system." At his Wesleyan Methodist chapel at 95 King Street in Lower Manhattan, Harris gave impassioned antislavery sermons and held abolitionist gatherings. Speakers included the relentless Underground Railroad leader Sydney Howard Gay and Lewis Tappan, a prominent abolitionist whose house at 86 Pierrepont Street is in the Brooklyn Heights Historic District.

Harris's sugar refinery, at 144 Duane Street in the area now called TriBeCa, was characterized as "a sort of Grand Central Station of the Underground Railroad" by an architect named William Johnson, a self-described "active operator" of the network.

In what Mr. Amodio calls "a prototypical Black Lives Matter moment writ large," a racist 1846 political cartoon shows a dehumanizing caricature of George Kirk, an African-American fugitive of Southern slavery, being violently captured by white pursuers who have discovered him inside a box on a horse-drawn wagon marked "D. Harris." Harris had sent his dray to try to spirit Kirk to the safety of his refinery, but "the whole police force of the city turned slave-catcher," according to the New-York Tribune, and Kirk was arrested by epithet-spewing policemen before being freed by a sympathetic judge.

Harris's refinery burned down in 1848, and the following year he paid \$32,000 for the country estate of Ambrose Kingsland, a future mayor of New York, in what is now Washington Heights. Among the "several elegant building sites" that Harris then advertised for development was a three-acre lot that would become 857 Riverside. Harris sold the parcel to John King, a sometime employee, and by 1851, the cupola-crowned villa had risen. The next year, Harris bought back both house and land.

According to Mr. Spady, the Audubon Park historian, the house may have been built by one of Audubon's sons, who was putting up villas on his family's land nearby and who also appears to have constructed a tenement for Harris.

Image



The house has been scalped of its octagonal, windowed cupola. The hatch that once led to the cupola has been sealed. Credit...Peter S. Green

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A man of ambition as well as humanity, Harris built a new refinery on the Hudson at 160th Street, down the hill from the little villa, along with a wharf. He also bought a steamboat, which ferried passengers from Lower Manhattan to Poughkeepsie, with a stop at the wharf

on 158th Street. Establishing a passenger line to compete with the Hudson River Railroad was a dicey proposition. But Harris's true motive was probably to create a new Underground Railroad stop, Mr. Spady surmised in his book, "The Neighborhood Manhattan Forgot."

The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 permitted slave-hunters to capture alleged escaped slaves without due process, making the city far more dangerous for African-Americans. In the face of these new threats to fugitives, Mr. Spady wrote, the "refinery and steamboat could have extended Harris's effort to move them farther up the river on their journey to freedom in Canada."

Beyond this possible infrastructure of liberty, Mr. Amodio's report establishes that Harris and Newhouse were at the heart of a largely forgotten abolitionist enclave in northern Manhattan. In 1854, the pair co-founded the Washington Heights Congregational Church, which took an unwavering antislavery stance. Harris personally introduced as speakers two formerly enslaved African-American abolitionists, and a celebration of the sanctuary drew a delegate from Plymouth Church, an Underground Railroad hub now in the Brooklyn Heights Historic District.

"Guys like Harris were certainly bucking the tide, they were certainly not in the mainstream at all of political and racial thinking in New York City," Eric Foner, the author of "Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad," said in an interview. "The city was tied in completely economically to the slave South. The New York merchants were the ones who transported southern cotton and controlled the cotton trade across to England."

New York companies also insured southern slave-owners against the death of their human chattel, while the city's banks lent money for the purchase of slaves and southern plantation land. Brooks Brothers and other city garment companies made money clothing enslaved African-Americans. In addition, New York had a pro-southern municipal government.

Kate Lemos McHale, director of research for the landmarks commission, was impressed with the report on the Harris-Newhouse Home, but not with the villa's condition.

"As a result of the extensive modifications that have been made to the house and its architectural details, it does not appear to retain the integrity necessary for consideration as an individual landmark," she wrote in response. "The alterations include the removal of the octagonal cupola and wraparound porch along with their decorative trim, replacement of windows and doors and removal of their enframements, and the addition of the permastone veneer."

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The house, she added, therefore "retains neither the historic appearance nor adequate historic fabric from the 19th-century abolitionist era."

Building modifications have also been an issue in the preservation struggle over the Truesdell house on Duffield Street (also known as Abolitionist Place), because a two-story storefront was added in the 1930s.

Image



The Greek Revival antebellum rowhouse at 227 Duffield Street, in Downtown Brooklyn, was owned by the abolitionists Harriet and Thomas Truesdell and may have been a stop on the Underground Railroad. Credit...Katherine Marks for The New York Times

Christabel Gough, the secretary of the Society for the Architecture of the City, said that intact historical fabric was not a legally required component of a landmark. The city landmarks law “states perfectly clearly that a landmark may have historic or aesthetic merits — it’s ‘or,’ not ‘and,’” she said. “The ugliest building in the world could be landmarked if it is historically important.”

The insistence on the integrity of historic fabric also “raises an interesting issue of racial equity,” said Peter S. Green, a leader of the Upper Riverside Residents Alliance. “In a neighborhood like this, things happen like, ‘We can’t afford to maintain the cupola, so we have to take it off because the roof is leaking.’”

The alliance and Ms. Brewer, the borough president, said they would continue the landmark fight and would challenge zoning determinations by the Buildings Department that might allow the house’s owners to put up a 13-story building.

Michael Henry Adams, the author of “Harlem Lost and Found: An Architectural and Social History, 1765-1915,” said that the wood-frame house of the African-American inventor Lewis H. Latimer, in Flushing, Queens, offered a precedent for landmark designation of a historic home that had endured major modifications.

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“The Latimer House was not only altered to remove external ornament and everything, but it was even moved to a new site,” Mr. Adams said. “The designation helped to facilitate the restoration, and one could easily see the same thing happening here, so that if the building

were designated and someone wanted to effect the restoration, then they could utilize the federal investment tax credit and the state investment tax credit, and that would be a benefit for the owner and the public.”

The Latimer House was granted landmark status in 1995 and is now a museum that runs programs highlighting the contributions to technology of Latimer and other African-Americans.

Mr. Adams will moderate [a virtual discussion](#) on 857 Riverside and other endangered houses in the Audubon Park area, hosted by Harlem One Stop and the Upper Riverside Residents Alliance, on January 10.

As for the supposition that Harris used his boat and refinery and the 857 Riverside villa to help freedom seekers heading north, “everything sounds supportable based on what was going on in New York City at the time,” said Tom Calarco, a co-author of “Secret Lives of the Underground Railroad in New York City.” “The Wesleyan Methodist connection was huge because they were such radical abolitionists — they were helping hundreds of fugitive slaves a year.”

Mr. Adams, the historian, said that quite apart from its antislavery connection, the Harris-Newhouse Home was worthy of landmark designation as a rare surviving example of a suburban wooden villa in Upper Manhattan, an ephemeral building type that proliferated there in the mid-19th century.

But at a time when the country is grappling wrenchingly with the legacy of slavery and the treatment of its Black citizens, the link to Mr. Harris and abolitionism certainly adds resonance.

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If the house were preserved and restored, “it would become a place of pilgrimage for Black people, where teachers could take school kids and say, ‘Hey, look, right here in your own neighborhood, there were white people who were highly invested in the notion that people shouldn’t be slaves,’” said Mr. Adams, who is African-American. He added: “There are figures in our past, like this sugar refiner, who point the way of what we have to do to go forward to overcome the people who want to turn the clock back, and this house is a remarkable landmark that represents this man and his cause.”

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