Acclaimed Underground Railroad Historian: Losing Washington Heights House Would Be A "Travesty"

gothamist.com/arts-entertainment/acclaimed-underground-railroad-historian-losing-washington-heights-house-would-be-travesty

by Jim O'Grady June 18, 2021

"Riverside Drive, no. 857, at 159th Street, Manhattan," 1930s.
Courtesy of the NYPL

When historical preservationists got word last November that a developer planned to tear down a Washington Heights house once owned by a 19th century abolitionist — a rare surviving structure with possible ties to the Underground Railroad — they asked the city to save it. But the Landmarks Preservation Commission swiftly turned them down.

The agency cited two main reasons: The stripped-down, permabrick-sided house scarcely resembled the elegant Italianate original — a plain fact that no one disputes, although Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer says she and others can find the money to restore it to its former homespun glory. The second reason given was that the house's use as a stop on the Underground Railroad was merely "speculative."

Now comes Fergus Bordewich, author of *Bound for Canaan*, a definitive work on the Underground Railroad, with a message for the Landmarks Preservation Commission: *Not so fast*. Bordewich has proffered a pointed statement in support of preserving the site, which reads in part:

> At the very least, further historical study is urgently called for. Destruction of the surviving building would be a travesty, and an irreparable loss to a city which has a very poor record of preserving sites related to Black and abolitionist history.

The Landmarks Preservation Commission fired back in an email to Gothamist:

> LPC disagrees with Mr. Bordewich's characterization of the preservation of New York City's African American history. While more can and should be done, since its earliest years, the Commission has been designating places related to the city's African American heritage. (See our story map, Preserving Significant Places of Black History.) And it continues to advance designations related to New York City's long and varied African American history.

The LPC's email cites the Harriet and Thomas Truesdell House in Brooklyn as an example of a property recently landmarked for its connection to abolitionists who are believed to have used their home as a refuge for those fleeing slavery. The Truedell House is one of 17 landmarked sites related to abolitionism and Underground Railroad history in New York, out of more than 37,000 landmarked structures.

Bordewich pointed out in a recent Wall Street Journal essay that the Underground Railroad tends to be "saturated with myth" and that claims about it should be carefully considered. "For generations, tales of hidden tunnels, exotic hiding places, cryptic codes and secret maps abounded," Bordewich writes. "These were usually the invention of white Americans who turned vague local stories into romantic sagas of kindly whites rescuing faceless blacks who were incapable of helping themselves."

But he insists that this is not the case with Dennis Harris, the white abolitionist minister who owned the two-story house between 1852 and 1854, and built a nearby dock for steamboats plying the Hudson River, a common route for escapees fleeing north. "Harris's involvement in the Underground Railroad is well-documented," Bordewich writes in his statement. "The comparative isolation of Harris's Washington Heights properties argues for their utility as a protected, easily guarded waystation for fugitives who needed to be gotten quickly out of lower Manhattan." In the Wall Street Journal essay, he adds that Harris is a sterling example of "a dynamic partnership between blacks both free and enslaved and whites."

Gothamist reached Fergus Bordewich at his home in San Francisco, where he's working on a book about the Ku Klux Klan, and asked him to fill out the story of the Underground Railroad in New York. His remarks have been lightly edited and condensed for clarity.

GOTHAMIST: The current owner of 857 Riverside Drive is a development company with plans to knock it down and replace it with a 13-story residential tower, which they have the right to do. Why should the city Landmarks Preservation Commission protect it instead?

BORDEWICH: New York is a dynamic city. Always has been. It builds to tear down and then build another way. I'm from New York and I understand that. But the extremely scanty remains of Black history and the Black presence in New York are, frankly, an embarrassment. The Landmarks Preservation Commission should be embarrassed.

Elected officials and activists gathered in Washington Heights last week to call for the landmarking of 857 Riverside Drive in February 2021
Jim O'Grady / Gothamist

How active was the Underground Railroad in New York City in the mid-19th century?

The Underground Railroad was significant to New York in a very particular way. The city was hostile, generally speaking, to abolitionism. Nonetheless many, many, freedom seekers traveling north came through New York City. They moved up the coast on the Hudson River,

all of them bending to points west and further north, and in some cases to New England.

As a trans-shipment point, New York City was really significant. However, the atmosphere at that time and place was politically hostile to anti-slavery work and particularly to the Underground Railroad. So to be involved with it required an aggressive defiance of the law on behalf of assisting fugitives.

Why is documentation of that defiance hard to come by?

The Underground Railroad was actually quite open in upstate New York, especially west of Albany, where it wasn't very underground at all. But that was not true in the city, where it was not unknown but comparatively secret. That makes it harder to find evidence.

Is that also true for 857 Riverside Drive?

This is a rare and potentially important Underground Railroad related site. I'm choosing my words carefully because its use in the Underground Railroad is not yet proven. It's circumstantial but persuasive. The preservationists have made a very good case for the original owner, Dennis Harris. It’s a much better case than people in some other parts of the country have had to make in order to preserve buildings.

Why is Dennis Harris important to the story?

Primarily, it’s that Dennis Harris was a significant figure in the Underground Railroad. He was not a casual participant but somebody clearly recognized in his time as risking his security, his reputation, and perhaps his safety to assist in underground activity. His activity in Lower Manhattan is documented.

But then he moved to Upper Manhattan in the 1850s and built this house. That’s when documentation of his activity drops off.

But it is highly probable that a man who was so committed to abolition would have continued his engagement. It's particularly interesting and significant that his properties in Upper Manhattan are right on the Hudson River. That’s important because a vast majority of freedom seekers who were coming north out of New York City were sent up the river in steamboats. They didn't walk all the way to Albany. People have that notion but it's a myth. They went by boat, which was much faster and much safer. You could be in Albany in a couple of hours on a steamboat and bypass the Hudson Valley, which on the whole was hostile to anti-slavery for political reasons. It was not a friendly region for African-Americans or for fugitive slaves.

The main artery of the Underground Railroad was New York City to Albany. At least one steamboat company based in Albany was owned by abolitionists, and they were known to be ferrying people north from the city — there's documented evidence of that. Underground

activists in the city would put fugitives on steamboats that had many African-American workers. Somebody with Harris's kind of underground credentials, when he got to upper Manhattan, that would lend itself to his continued participation in this effort.

These are tantalizing bits of evidence but, as you say, circumstantial. Isn't that why you want more time for further research to be done, and why you think the house should at least be temporarily protected?

Even today, research into the activities of the Underground Railroad has barely scratched the surface. It's a myth that the underground was so secret that it's unknowable. That's not true.

The Underground Railroad was a collaboration between Black and white Americans across the color line, which is one of its most significant fruits. It was a very radical and interesting movement and way ahead of its time. Those truths about it were deliberately suppressed during the long Jim Crow decades so the Underground Railroad became kind of a matter of folklore. There's much more research to be done, and that can be done.

Is that basically your message to the city Landmarks Preservation Commission?

The commission should be looking for ways to protect properties like this, not looking for ways to discard them. I think they're abdicating their responsibility, frankly, and not for the first time.