

Lawmakers fight to protect Manhattan house linked to Underground Railroad

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UPPER MANHATTAN, New York City (WABC) -- Elected officials gathered in Upper Manhattan Friday to call on the city to reverse a decision to reject landmark status for 857 Riverside Drive, which is linked to the Underground Railroad.

Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer, State Senator Robert Jackson, Assembly Member Al Taylor, Council Member Mark Levine, other elected officials and the Upper Riverside Residents Alliance are demanding the city stay a demolition permit for the property until the status is clear.

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They argue Upper Manhattan already suffers from a lack of representation in the city's historic landmark designations, and that sites linked to the Underground Railroad and the abolition movement are rare in the city.

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The New York Times reported last week that just 17 of the more than 37,000 city properties with landmark protection are related to abolitionism or the Underground Railroad, and only two are in Manhattan -- both below 29th Street.

The property at 857 Riverside Drive is the last link to Underground Railroad conductor and abolitionist minister Dennis Harris and is in danger of being demolished as the owner filed for a demolition permit to construct a 13-story residential building on the property.

The Landmarks Preservation Commission ruled that 857 Riverside Drive lacks historical architectural integrity because of changes to the building, with the lawmakers arguing that architectural significance has been overlooked in the past for other sites.

They also claim there is systemic bias when it comes to designating landmark status in communities and neighborhoods of color, saying many historic buildings in Harlem and Washington Heights have fallen into ruin because property owners often lack the significant funds needed to restore or maintain them.

They say other sites have more funds to maintain expensive repairs and preserve architectural details.

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