

Historians, politicians rally to save Washington Heights stop on the Underground Railroad from demolition

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By Larry McShane
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Civic leaders and politicians, in an urgent Friday plea, called for the city to spare from the wrecking ball a historic Washington Heights stop on the Underground Railroad.

The home at 857 Riverside Dr., once owned by abolitionist minister Dennis Harris, sits above the Hudson River and was reportedly used by Black slaves fleeing the south during the 19th century. But officials said the site was in danger of demolition to make way for a 13-story high-rise building, erasing the historic residence from the Manhattan landscape.

“We’re here because history matters,” said Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer at a news conference outside the building. “Landmarks matter. Black history matters. And Black landmarks matter.”



Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer (Theodore Parisienne for New York Daily News)

Harris, who operated a sugar refinery on the Hudson, owned the house between 1852-54 before selling the property to fellow abolitionist Judge John Newhouse. Some historians believe Harris used a steamboat to ferry escaped slaves into Washington Heights on their way to safe haven in Canada.

“This heritage location right here ... once it’s gone, it’s gone,” said Democratic state Sen. Robert Jackson. “During slavery times, this building was huge in the Underground Railroad. Stop it!”

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The contested property is a two-story wood-frame house located at W. 159th St. and Riverside Drive. The Landmarks Commission said a review of the site raised questions about its use in ferrying slaves to freedom, and that “extensive alterations” over the years negated its “historic fabric.”

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What's This?



The two-story building on the right is 857 Riverside Dr. in Manhattan. (Google Maps)

Harris “did not live in the house and — and as acknowledged in the report that was submitted to (the commission) — claims that it was used in the Underground Railroad are speculative,” said a statement from the commission.

But neighborhood activist Maria Luna, who has lived next door for 60 years, delivered an impassioned call to spare the building from demolition and gentrification.

“We need to continue educating our community about the historic impact of this building,” she said. “This building needs to stay here. We don’t need a 13-story high rise in our midst ... We need to make sure the people housed here are looking from wherever and saying, “Thank you, because this saved our lives.””

A demolition permit was issued in August 2020, but there are currently no active construction permits related to its tear-down, according to the NYC Department of Buildings.

“To date that application is still incomplete,” said DOB spokesman Andrew Rudansky. “To move forward with the proposed demolition, the owners must come back to us with all of the required items needed to legally demolish a building in New York City.”

Historian John Reddick argued forcefully against that day ever coming.

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“Just like my ancestors of 1851, this house is back on the auction block,” said Reddick. “The African-American engagement in American history is complicated. It’s fascinating. And it takes a little more scholarship and a little more backbone than the Landmark Commission is showing for this house.”