

Report on extant historic fabric at 857 Riverside Drive, New York, NY

1. Introduction and summary

The following report was requested by Peter Green in order to summarize the extent of existing historic fabric at 857 Riverside Drive, a residence constructed in 1851 for the abolitionist Dennis Harris. The findings are based on an inspection of the upper two levels of the four-story structure carried out in June 2021. The inspection included visual examination and photographic documentation of the building's exterior and interior, as well as a review of ownership information and historic photographs (Bernice Abbott 1937, 1930s tax photos, 1918 views, etc.). No invasive structural inspection or materials analysis was performed, and access to the lower stories was not possible at the time of the visit.

In summary, the examination found that the exterior of 857 Riverside drive retains a significant amount of historic fabric, much of it likely dating from the abolitionist period. The interior, though heavily altered, retains some historic details and the layout is reflective of a typical mid-19th century floor plan. Structurally, the house is intact with historic brick and stone foundations and though no through-wall inspections were conducted, the framing and form of the building appears largely unchanged. The exterior of the building could be restored to a more historically appropriate appearance simply by removing modern siding and restoring existing clapboard underneath - see section 4 for more detail.

2. Exterior

Cladding and fenestration

The exterior of the building retains its historic exterior wooden clapboard largely intact. The north façade, due to the later construction of the adjacent building, has been entirely preserved with all cladding, roof brackets, and two windows of the second story (fig. 2). These windows retain their original decorative cornices, brackets, and swinging shutters (figs. 2 & 3). Below these two windows there appears to be the remnants of a third window, perhaps a former light into the existing stairwell, which was covered over at some point leaving only the sill in place.



Figure 1 Bernice Abbot photo 1930 showing decorative window surrounds



Figure 2 North façade showing preserved window surrounds, shutters and clapboard



Figure 3 Detail of remaining historic window surrounds and roof brackets, north façade.

Figure 4 South façade detail showing original clapboard covered in siding.

Figure 5 Detail of roof brackets and eaves

On the southern and western facades, the same clapboard is preserved below layers of siding (fig. 4). On these facades, the decorative window cornices were likely removed to accommodate the siding, but the wooden sills remain in place covered by modern anodized aluminum. The eastern street-facing façade is covered in a faux stone finish applied in the 1990s. The faux stone is superficial and not an impediment to restoring the structure, while the existing window frames on the north façade and historic photos offer a model for restoring lost window cornices. The entire building retains the historic roof brackets below overhanging wooden eaves (figure 5).

All windows were replaced by the time of the 1937 Bernice Abbot photo and have been subsequently modernized again. The current window and door openings however are largely the same configuration as in historic photographs. Historic stained glass transom windows remain on the lower front windows and door. These windows retain historic wooden frames, painted in green (figures 6 & 7).



Figures 6 & 7 Four stained glass transoms may date to circa 1900, with potentially earlier wooden frames (in green).

Roof and chimneys



Figures 8-10: Aerial views of the roof and chimneys with corresponding chimney stack and fireplace on the interior

The building retains its original form and massing including hipped roof - characteristic of the italianate style - and two brick chimneys protruding from the southern part of the roof which correspond with two existing interior fireplaces.

Though these chimneys are lower than in historic photographs, their style and placement is significant as the construction is consistent with the 1850s. The framing for the cupola also remains in place as well as the original stairs which provided access to the cupola.

Foundations

The historic foundation is most visible on the southern façade, which reveals early construction details including heavy rough-cut schist stone masonry up to the second level and brick coursing supporting a heavy wooden sill beam where the above ground two-story wood frame construction begins.

The foundation level features historic fenestration with brick arched lintels, wooden window frames, and stone sills. The foundation is parged in cement on the western façade.

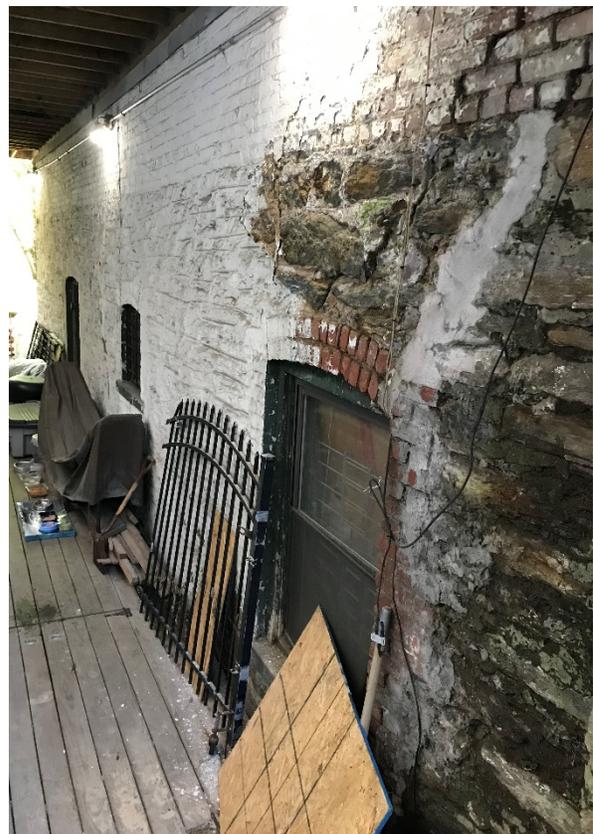


Figure 11 detail of the foundation showing stone and brick coursing and historic windows.

3. Interior



Figures 12-16 Clockwise from upper left: Wainscoting in the foyer, main stairs, stained glass at the entry, restored fireplace, original access stairs to the cupola.

The interior of 857 Riverside Dr. has been heavily altered over the years with significant renovations occurring around the turn of the 19th/20th centuries and during recent owners. Despite this, the interior retains some historic details and its layout has most likely not changed significantly since construction. Existing historic details include later 19th century wainscoting, moldings and stained glass, as well as the stairs, newel post and railing.

As previously mentioned the massing of the brick chimneys remains, though the fireplaces are later additions. The access to the cupola remains intact with spiral staircase winding around a custom-made wooden post.

3. Conclusions

A more detailed investigation with documentation and conditions assessment would be needed to develop a proper preservation plan for the structure. However, it is clear from the rapid inspection that a significant amount of historic fabric remains and that nearly the entire historic building envelope, with the exception of window cornices, is intact though it is largely hidden under modern siding.

One might not expect wooden stylistic elements as delicate and susceptible to change and deterioration as the scroll work of the porch, the cupola, or even original windows to remain, and we must consider the historic significance of the building and its context; one of very few pre-civil war residences in a neighborhood that has undergone rapid and constant change since 1851.

The next steps in the development of a preservation plan for the building would require the involvement of community stakeholders and specialists to develop a plan for restoration. This work could be divided into phases, with phase 1 as basic stabilization and repair and phase 2 comprising the restoration of certain key elements needed to create a visually cohesive structure. Phase 3 would be the complete restoration of missing architectural ensembles such as the cupola and porch, though this phase could be prohibitively expensive and subject to conjecture, as only a few historic photographs remain as source material. Details of these steps are outlined below.

Preparation:

- As-built drawings and conditions assessment
- Structural inspection to ensure the safety of the foundation and framing as well as assessment of the clapboard
- Working with the owner, community/city stakeholders and conservator or preservation architect to prepare a preservation plan for the house.

Phase 1 – stabilization and repair

- Removal of modern siding materials to reveal the condition of the historic clapboard
- Stabilization, repair and painting of existing roof brackets, clapboard, and remaining window frames
- Any necessary repairs to the foundation and roof

Priority 2 – Restoration of basic architectural elements

- Restoration of lost window cornices based on existing examples on the north façade and historic photographs
- Installing period appropriate wooden windows and door

Priority 3 – Reconstruction of sophisticated architectural ensembles

- Restoration of cupola based on historic photographs
- Restoration of chimneys to previous appearance
- Restoration of porch woodwork and details

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