


Washington Heights Home With Underground Railroad Connection Faces Potential Demolition; Residents Want It Landmarked

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NEW YORK (CBSNewYork) - A group of residents are fighting to have the city grant a historic home in Washington Heights with links to the Underground Railroad landmark status.

As CBS2's Kiran Dhillon reports, the multi-story home in Washington Heights has been around since the 1800s. Residents say it has ties to the Underground Railroad and American history.

"This is one of the few buildings ... in New York that has a direct link to the whole idea that there were some people in New York City who actually fought against slavery," said Peter Green of the Upper Riverside Residents Association.

Built in the mid-1800s, neighbors say the home located at 857 Riverside Drive was once owned by abolitionist and Underground Railroad conductor Dennis Harris.

"He helped escaped slaves get from New York to Canada," said Green.

Harris' impact so profound, a group of area residents have asked the Landmarks Preservation Commission to grant the home landmark status.

That request has been denied.

"It's vitally important that this house become a memorial or a monument or a civic center that tells the history of the anti-slavery movement," Green said.

Residents are now demanding that decision be reversed. They're especially concerned about plans from the current owners to build a 13-story residential building on the property.

The city says it has received a demolition application for the building, but that application remains incomplete, so there is no immediate threat to the home.

The Landmarks Preservation Commission adds the home has changed so much over the years, it no longer retains historical significance. It adds its links to the Underground Railroad are speculative.

But Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer says of the 17 landmarks with a documented association to abolition in the city, none are in Upper Manhattan. She adds in areas that are predominately Black and Brown, historic landmarks are far and few between because residents lack the funding to restore or maintain them.

"I think the city has to do more landmarking in Black and brown communities," Brewer said. "Take into consideration the cultural aspect."

The Landmarks Preservation Commission says Lower Manhattan and downtown Brooklyn had the largest concentration of groups associated abolition period, which is why most designated landmarks exist in those areas.

CBS2 News reached out to the owners of the home and did not hear back.

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Kiran Dhillon contributed to this report.