

## Effort Continues to Save 857 Riverside Drive

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**857 Riverside Drive.** Photo Credit: Marc Bussanich

**By MARC BUSSANICH**

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New York, NY—Elected officials, neighborhood leaders, preservationists and residents gathered for the second time in two months at 857 Riverside Drive because the 1851 wood-frame house that is historically linked to the Underground Railroad is in danger of being demolished.

Back on January 22, a preservationist group, the Upper Riverside Residents Alliance, joined by Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer, led a press conference to say that after learning that the current owners of the property wanted to demolish the house in order to build a 13-story luxury tower, they submitted an application to the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) asking the city agency to grant landmark protection, but the Commission refused.

So, at today's press conference, the preservationists announced a new strategy. It will be meeting with the LPC on Tuesday, and it will ask the LPC to expand the nearby Audubon Park Historic District in order to save 857 Riverside Drive.

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“Once the LPC refused our initial idea, which was to landmark this house, we decided another way to gain protection for it is to expand the Audubon Park Historic District and basically protect several blocks in this area, which is something that we think is possible and is relevant to the history,” said Joe Amodio, a member with the Upper Riverside Residents Alliance and a journalist and writer by trade, in an interview.

Some of the properties that the preservationist group is proposing to the LPC include three sets of row houses on W 158<sup>th</sup> Street, right around the corner from 857 Riverside Drive.

According to Amodio, the row houses had fallen into disrepair but then in the 1960s a group of African-American families purchased the properties and then renovated them, turning them into single-family homes that contributed to a rejuvenation of the community.

“And this was an amazing accomplishment for African-American families at the time because banks and financial institutions [did not lend them the capital], so the fact that they were able to do that in the 1960s is remarkable,” Amodio said.

He added that another building in the proposed expanded district is a Mitchell-Lama building—the River Terrace—which is where David Dinkins lived and began his mayoral ambitions.

“So, we’ve got families and homes and stories to tell in this area that we think need to be preserved and protected, and told and retold so that people today can know the significant work and the incredibly committed people who lived here for decades,” noted Amodio.

The house at 857 Riverside Drive was built by Dennis Harris, an abolitionist minister who participated in the Underground Railroad movement in Lower Manhattan. He was eventually driven from downtown because of his abolitionist views and then made his way to Washington Heights.

During today’s press conference, Gale Brewer noted that there are so few landmarks in New York that link to the anti-slavery movement. LPC has granted landmarked status to only 17 properties that have a historical connection to the anti-slavery struggle, and of these only three are in Manhattan—all below 96<sup>th</sup> Street.

“This may be as a building the remaining link to the abolitionist movement in this community. This building is in danger of being destroyed for a 13-story luxury tower—that’s outrageous,” said Brewer.

Councilman Mark Levine (D) also noted the precariousness of the moment.

“We’re an inch away from losing 857 Riverside Drive. We are very close to losing this house forever, so we must act urgently,” said Levine.

Levine then pointed to the recent preservation of a house in Brooklyn, 227 Duffield Street, that also featured prominently in the abolitionist movement. Just as the city threatened eminent domain against the Brooklyn property, the city should do so with 857 Riverside Drive. Also, the city should seek to buy 857 Riverside Drive, as it did the Brooklyn property, so that it can renovate it and transform it into a cultural institution which will teach the history of abolitionism Uptown.

“To review: we need eminent domain on the table, we need this property to be landmarked as part of an extension, and we need the city to step up to purchase this, so we don’t get a 13-story monstrosity in place of this historic jewel,” Levine said.

Public Advocate Jumaane Williams also joined the press conference to provide his support to the preservation of 857 Riverside Drive.

“Just as it was vital seven years ago to acknowledge and designate the shameful history our city’s slave market at Wall Street, we must preserve and uplift our role in the abolitionist movement,” said Williams.

“It is a history woefully underrepresented through the five boroughs, but one that can be reclaimed and remembered.”

Peter Green, who founded Upper Riverside Residents Alliance with fellow preservationists, said in an interview that he’ll be making the argument to the LPC on Tuesday that 857 Riverside Drive is situated in an historic neighborhood that’s made up of all kinds of people and some very diverse architecture—at least as diverse as the people who live in it, and it needs to be preserved.

“This is a beautiful way of life, it’s a slice of what makes New York really New York, and this is the kind of neighborhood, if you’re going to go about saving neighborhoods and landmarking things that are of historic, cultural or architectural significance, you really hit all three right here,” said Green.

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