

Statement on Preserving 857 Riverside Drive: Matthew Spady

Since its inception in 1965, the Landmarks Preservation Commission—charged with “safeguarding the buildings and places that represent New York City’s cultural, social, economic, political, and architectural history”—has underserved northern Manhattan.

In the commission’s earliest years, this underrepresentation resulted in part from northern Manhattan’s lack of preservation advocates. The community and civic leaders who might have led these efforts from the late 1960s into the 1990s were dealing with more pressing social and economic issues than saving buildings. As a result, the designations went primarily to institutions that had executive directors or boards to champion them, buildings like the Morris-Jumel Mansion, the Cloisters, and the museums on Audubon Terrace.

At present, the designations north of 155th Street include only a scattering of these institutional and religious buildings and three residential districts: Jumel Terrace (1970), Audubon Park (2009), and Park Terrace West-217th Street (2018). The Audubon Park and Park Terrace districts are among the smallest in the city, and the Jumel Terrace district sits adjacent to the Morris-Jumel Mansion, buffering it from development that could destroy its sense of place.

Since the turn of the 21st century, preservation champions have emerged in northern Manhattan’s communities. With support from the Community Board, the Historic Districts Council, and elected leaders, they have nominated several sites, but with limited positive results.

In late 2020, a group working to preserve 857 Riverside Drive, an 1851 house with a demonstrable connection to the Underground Railroad, submitted a request for evaluation to LPC. Despite acknowledging the building’s historical and cultural relationship to the abolitionist movement, LPC deemed it unworthy of consideration, citing its architectural integrity. To support that viewpoint, the commission’s researchers focused on two missing architectural elements and ignored the many that remain.

Ironically, just this week, LPC has launched an “equity framework” that will prioritize “designations that represent New York City’s diversity and designations in areas less represented by landmarks.” Unless it reverses its decision to reject a building that has clear and significant ties to the Underground Railroad, in an area of Manhattan that is severely underserved with designations, LPC’s newly professed commitment to diversity is nothing more than lip service.

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