



## Community Board 12 - Manhattan Washington Heights & Inwood

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Eleazar Bueno, Chairperson  
Ebenezer Smith, District Manager

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December 1, 2020

Hon. Sarah Caroll, Chair  
NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission  
David N. Dinkins Municipal Building  
1 Centre Street, 9th Floor North  
New York, NY 10007

**Re: Supporting the Request for Evaluation submitted to The Landmarks Preservation Commission to Designate 857 Riverside Drive as a New York City Landmark.**

Dear Chair, Caroll:

At the General Meeting on Tuesday, November 24, 2020, Community Board 12 Manhattan passed the following resolution with a vote of 40 in favor, 0 opposed, 0 abstentions, and 0 not voting, supporting the Request for Evaluation for the designation of 857 Riverside Drive as an individual landmark and requesting the Landmarks Preservation Commission to diligently and expeditiously undertake the work necessary to recommend the designation of the various additional individual landmark buildings and historic districts in Washington Heights and Inwood. Community Board 12, Manhattan, urges the City Council and the City Planning Commission to approve, once is made, the Landmarks Preservation Commission's designation of 857 Riverside Drive as an individual landmark.

Whereas: A group of community residents who reside in lower Washington Heights near or within the Audubon Park Historic District, organized as the Upper Riverside Residents Alliance ("URRA") over concerns related to the proposed demolition of 857 Riverside Drive, formerly known as the Harris-Newhouse Home ("857 RSD"), and the construction of a 13-story residential condominium building containing 46 micro condominium units. 857 RSD is an 1851 wood-frame structure built and once owned by Dennis Harris, a hero of the Underground Railroad, and subsequently owned by Judge John Newhouse, his friend, and colleague. Both were ardent abolitionists, civic-minded entrepreneurs, pivotal figures in the growth of Washington Heights, and active in the creation of a church congregation on 158th Street and Amsterdam Avenue, which later built a church at 155<sup>th</sup> Street and Amsterdam Avenue that was actively anti-slavery and which brought well-known African American abolitionists to speak to the congregation; and

Whereas: Sites related to abolitionists and the Underground Railroad are rare in New York. This house, originally designed in the Greek Revival-Italianate style, is arguably the only one known to survive north of 96<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan. Because of the relative remoteness of

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what is now Upper Manhattan to urbanized New York City of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and fortunately the lack of urban renewal or other large scale redevelopments in the area, it has been possible for buildings to survive in Washington Heights and Inwood that likely would have long been demolished if they were located downtown; and.

Whereas: This structure provides an irreplaceable sense of history that none of the surrounding buildings, including those in the Audubon Park Historic District, possibly can. Its invaluable link to the community's roots in the 1800s would be permanently lost if the developer who is the current owner of the property is allowed to carry out his plan to demolish it; and

Whereas: On October 26, 2020, Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer, City Councilman Mark Levine, State Senator Robert Jackson, State Assemblyman Al Taylor, and Community Board 12-M ("CB12-M") Chair Eleazar Bueno sent a letter to Buildings Department Commissioner Melanie La Rocca and City Planning Director Marisa Lago requesting that the Buildings Department refrain from issuing any building or demolition permits for the site at 857 Riverside Drive, New York, NY until significant concerns about both the zoning calculations used for the proposed new building and the historical significance of the existing building are addressed; and

Whereas: On November 2, 2020, URRRA submitted a request for evaluation (the "RFE") to the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission ("LPC") asking LPC to designate 857 RSD as a New York City Landmark; and

Whereas: The house that Harris built and Newhouse later also occupied is arguably the only remaining connection to the dedicated anti-slavery community in Upper Manhattan, providing context to other such venues throughout New York City. It stands as a powerful reminder that the earliest efforts in the fight for racial justice were not limited to downtown Manhattan and Brooklyn, as has generally been assumed given the location and preservation of other sites of conscience, such as Brooklyn's Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims, currently landmarked by the LPC. Although 857 RSD's architectural appearance is significantly and unsympathetically altered, its historical and cultural significance is undiminished; and

Whereas: URRRA briefed CB12-M's Land Use Committee (the "Committee") at its September 2, 2020, and October 7, 2020 meetings about the proposed demolition and redevelopment project at the site of 857 RSD and on the research conducted to investigate 857 RSD's historical significance. URRRA further briefed the Committee on the contents of the RFE at its November 4, 2020 meeting; and

Whereas: Now, more than ever, attention must be given to matters of equity and inclusion in city planning, including historic preservation and designation. In the past decade, CB12-M passed several resolutions supporting contextual zoning and suggesting the designation of

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Historic buildings and districts, including a historic district encompassing both sides of Riverside Drive north of West 158<sup>th</sup> Street, would include 857 RSD. The discovery of the history of 857 RSD as a residence of active New York City abolitionists reveals a previously unrecognized aspect of the role of Washington Heights in New York City's African American history and recognition of the scarcity of landmarks relating to Black history, 857 RSD should be preserved. Now, therefore be it

Resolved: Community Board 12-Manhattan supports the Request for Evaluation for the designation of 857 Riverside Drive as an individual landmark, and be it further

Resolved: Community Board 12-Manhattan once again urges the Landmarks Preservation Commission to diligently and expeditiously undertake the work necessary to recommend the designation of the various additional individual landmark buildings and historic districts in Washington Heights and Inwood for which it previously expressed support in the form of duly approved resolutions including but not limited to resolutions adopted in 2009 urging LPC to expand the Audubon Park Historic District, in 2012 supporting the work undertaken by the Volunteers for Isham Park requesting LPC study the potential for designating of landmarks, including the William A. Hurst House, and districts in Inwood, in 2016 supporting the designation of the West 158<sup>th</sup> Street Row House District, and in 2018 urging LPC to work with CB12-M, community residents and local elected official to designate additional landmarks in Washington Heights and Inwood; and be it additionally

Resolved: Community Board 12-M urges the City Council and the City Planning Commission to approve, once it is made, the Landmarks Preservation Commission's designation of 857 Riverside Drive as an individual landmark.

Sincerely,



Eleazar Bueno  
Chairperson

cc: Hon. Bill de Blasio, Mayor  
Hon. Jumaane Williams, Public Advocate  
Hon. Scott M. Stringer, Comptroller  
Hon. Brian Benjamin, State Senator  
Hon. Robert Jackson, State Senator  
Hon. Gale Brewer, Manhattan Borough President  
Hon. Al Taylor, Assembly Member

Hon. Carmen De La Rosa, Assembly Member  
Hon. Ydanis Rodriguez, Council Member  
Hon. Mark Levine, Council Member  
Lisa Kersavage, Executive Director, NYC  
Landmarks Preservation Commission  
Simeon Bankoff, Executive Director HDC  
The Upper Riverside Residents Alliance