

**Request for Evaluation to the New York City Landmarks Preservation  
Commission**

**THE HARRIS-NEWHOUSE HOME**

**857 Riverside Drive, Manhattan**

**Tax Map Block 2135 Lot 23**

**Bui It: c. 1851**

**Architect: Undetermined**

**Style: Transitional Greek Revival-Italianate**



*857 Riverside Drive, photographed in 1937 by Berenice Abbott. Courtesy NYPL*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Nestled on a diagonal plot along a narrow, curving stretch of Riverside Drive lies a two-story wood-frame house built in 1851, once owned by Dennis Harris, a hero of the Underground Railroad, and Judge John Newhouse, his friend and colleague. Both men were ardent abolitionists, civic-minded entrepreneurs, and pivotal figures in the growth of Washington Heights.

Sites related to abolitionists and the Underground Railroad are rare in New York, and this Greek Revival–Italianate house is arguably the only one known to survive north of 96<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan.

Harris was a leading activist in the fight for racial justice and an ally of suffragists, befriending such luminaries as Elizabeth Blackwell and Lucy Stone. Together, he and Newhouse enriched the life of the nearby Audubon Park and Carmansville neighborhoods, exerting an impact on the economic, social and spiritual life of the area that was both significant and historic.

Harris purchased the land (situated just north of what is now the Audubon Park Historic District) from Ambrose Kingsland shortly before Kingsland became mayor of New York. Though Harris never lived in the home, residing with his family in the Kingsland mansion nearby, he maintained the property, eventually selling it in 1854 to his friend and business partner John Newhouse, a judge who shared Harris' anti-slavery sentiment. Newhouse and his descendants would occupy the home for some 50 years.

Greeted by rambling fields and orchards, they altered the landscape. As Harris bought up more parcels of land to sell to a wave of new residents, they built the New Congress Sugar Refinery (a major local employer) along the Hudson River, founded the Washington Heights Congregationalist Church, and operated the *Jenny Lind* steamboat, which provided passenger ferry service from Lower Manhattan to West 158<sup>th</sup> St. and on upriver to Poughkeepsie.

This was no ordinary commuter line. Harris' sugar refinery in downtown Manhattan had been a busy and documented station on the Underground Railroad, and accounts suggest he extended those efforts uptown, providing shelter to runaway slaves at the new refinery and the Riverside home, and safe passage in the steamboat to points north, aiding those in their journey to freedom in Canada.

Precise details on Underground Railroad activities and participants are sketchy by necessity. As are the numbers. “There isn't any fully satisfactory estimate of the number of slaves who passed through New York City,” notes Eric Foner, professor emeritus of history at Columbia University, a Pulitzer Prize-winning authority on slavery, and author of *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad*. In that book, Foner estimates some 100 slaves came through New York City each year in their quest for freedom, or 3,000 in all in the three decades prior to the Civil War. Overall, he suspects some 1,000 slaves annually escaped the South via any route. “But these are rough guesses,” Foner wrote in an email conversation.<sup>1</sup>

The Harris-Newhouse home—the only surviving link to this activist and local businessman—reflects the great period of transition that the nation and neighborhood were about to undergo. Architecturally, it straddles both the fading Greek-Revival and burgeoning Italianate periods, and bears characteristic features of those styles despite some cosmetic alterations to the front façade, and the removal of two wooden features – a porch and a cupola - which the previous owner had plans to restore.

Today, though dwarfed by its immediate neighbors, a sprawling World War I-era apartment building to the south and a row of Beaux Arts townhouses to the north, the modest dwelling stands out. It serves as a potent reminder of a more rural phase of this neighborhood as the United States itself was on the brink of seismic change—and a link to the brave men and women who brought forth that change with passion, innovation and hope.

## HISTORY

### **DENNIS HARRIS—THE SWEET LIFE**

In 1846, in the shadow of City Hall, onlookers reported being stunned by the sight of a “slave hunt”. A lone black man was seen sprinting across a Lower Manhattan park, tailed by a violent mob.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Foner, email with author, October 7, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, information on the manhunt for runaway slave George Kirk comes from Don Papson and Tom Calarco, *Secret Lives of the Underground Railroad in New York City: Sydney Howard Gay, Louis Napoleon and the Record of Fugitives* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2015), 43-6. It was also confirmed with the following sources: George Kirk et al., *Supplement to the New-York legal observer, containing the report of the case in the matter of George Kirk, a fugitive slave, heard before the Hon. J. W. Edmonds, circuit judge: also the argument of John Jay, of counsel for the slave* (New York: Legal Observer Office, 1847), PDF retrieved from the Library of Congress <https://www.loc.gov/item/98104378/>; “Court of Over [sic] and Terminer: Before Judge Edmonds and Ald Jackson and Johnson,” *The New York Herald*, Oct. 23, 1846; “Case of the Fugitive Slave: Tremendous Excitement,” *New-York Daily Tribune*, Oct. 28, 1846; “The Slave Case,” *New York Evangelist*, Oct. 29, 1846, 17, 44; “The Police of New-York on a Slave-Hunt!” *New-York Daily Tribune*, Oct. 30, 1846.

The escaped slave had been a stowaway on a brig out of Savannah that had docked in New York. “A crowd of roughs in full pursuit,” as news accounts described, along with police who’d been ordered by Mayor Andrew Mickle to arrest the fugitive, nearly overtook him when he ducked into a pie shop and escaped through a back door. He succeeded in reaching the offices of the American Anti-Slavery Society, where workers hid him under floorboards. With police outside on stakeout, and rabble-rousers roaming the streets, his protectors wondered how they would get him out. The answer came to them: Get Dennis Harris.”

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## A SLAVE HUNT IN NEW-YORK.

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### AND A RESCUE BY THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD.

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*Dennis Harris’ efforts to assist runaway slaves earned him unexpected news coverage, even decades after the fact. This headline, from a retrospective article in the New-York Tribune, ran in 1885.*

That massive police hunt came just five years before the construction of a modest two-story home in Washington Heights that today helps tell the story of one of New York’s boldest—yet barely known—abolitionists.

Dennis Harris, a bricklayer and ordained Methodist minister, arrived in New York from England in 1832. While at sea aboard the steamship *Cosmo*, he and his wife, Ann, both in their early twenties, met and befriended the sugar refiner and abolitionist Samuel Blackwell. It was a chance meeting that changed the course of their lives.<sup>3</sup>

Like the Harrises, Blackwell, too, was immigrating to the U.S. He was impressed by Harris—both were resolutely opposed to slavery, and by the time the ship docked in New York, after seven weeks at sea, Harris had forged what would be a lifelong friendship with Blackwell and his pregnant wife and eight children who were also onboard the *Cosmo*.<sup>4</sup> In fact, after Blackwell’s death in 1839, Harris enjoyed relationships with Blackwell’s children in adulthood, including Henry Blackwell, just 7 years old on the voyage, who would become a noted reformer and husband to the famed abolitionist and suffragist Lucy Stone;

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<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted, information on Dennis Harris’ career in New York as a sugar refiner, speculative land developer and abolitionist comes from Matthew Spady, *The Neighborhood Manhattan Forgot: Audubon Park and the Families Who Shaped It* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 67-73.

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, *Pioneer Work in Opening the Medical Profession to Women, Autobiographical Sketches* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1895), 8.

and Elizabeth Blackwell, 11 at the time, who would grow up to be the first female doctor in the United States and founder of the New York Dispensary for Poor Women and Children, for which Harris would serve as a trustee.<sup>5</sup>

Samuel Blackwell hired Dennis Harris, teaching him the refinery business. In 1837, Harris struck out on his own, buying the Washington Street refinery in Lower Manhattan, a short walk from his home at 33 Van Dam Street. A few years later, when Blackwell's Congress Sugar Refinery was heavily damaged in a fire, Harris purchased the remains and built the New Congress Refinery at 144 Duane Street. This was the refinery that within a decade would move up to what is now Washington Heights, and lead to the construction of the house that today sits at 857 Riverside Drive.

The Duane Street refinery was a success, and as Harris' business grew, so did his moral convictions concerning slavery—and his confidence to voice them.

Taking a vocal stance against slavery was no casual undertaking in New York in the decades leading up to the Civil War, especially for a businessman with a young family to feed, and for an immigrant still somewhat new to the U.S. Despite today's current conception of New York City as a blue bastion of liberal ideology, the New York of the 1830s, '40s and '50s was a vastly different place, geographically and politically. Thousands of white New Yorkers actively defended Southern slavery. "The city's economy rested heavily on trade with the South: New York merchants and bankers shipped slave-grown cotton to England, extended loans to Southern planters so they could plant their crops and buy new slaves, and insured their property," notes Steven H. Jaffe, a curator at the Museum of the City of New York. The state's slaves may have been freed in 1827, but white New Yorkers were often openly hostile to their black neighbors, and the growing tide of Irish immigrants competing for service-industry jobs—servants, seamstresses, street vendors and the like—only upped the ante. "New York often seemed to be as much a Southern city as a Northern one," Jaffe observed.<sup>6</sup>

In the midst of this unwelcoming atmosphere, Harris found himself speaking out more, and more loudly, in support of African Americans. For this, he would pay a heavy price at the Methodist Episcopal Church on Vestry Street, where he was a lay preacher. In 1840, after asking congregants to pray for slaves, Harris was subjected to an angry tirade by his pastor, censured and nearly stripped of his ministerial duties. (Today, it may seem hard to imagine that the practice of slavery could be rationalized and sanctioned by churches, yet in the first half of the 19th Century, many denominations defended slavery and considered abolitionism radical.) "Thunderstruck," Harris left the church

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<sup>5</sup> Henry B. Blackwell to Samuel C. Blackwell, 8 May 1853, Blackwell Family Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.

<sup>6</sup> Steven H. Jaffe, "David Ruggles' Committee of Vigilance," *Lapham's Quarterly*, May 21, 2018,, <<https://www.laphamsquarterly.org/roundtable/david-ruggles-committee-vigilance>> accessed Oct. 5, 2020.

and helped lead the new “Wesleyan Connection,” a movement that broke away from the Methodist Episcopal Church in the U.S. over the issue of slavery.<sup>7</sup>

### **HARRIS AND THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD**

Given his commitment to the cause of racial justice, Harris wasted no time in 1846, upon hearing of the massive chase through downtown Manhattan, and the runaway slave—a man named George Kirk—now hiding out in the American Anti-Slavery Society office on Nassau Street.

The office was the center of abolitionist activity in New York: the headquarters of the Society, founded by William Lloyd Garrison in 1833, and the editorial offices for its influential newspaper, *The National Anti-Slavery Standard*. After two days in hiding, Kirk had become something of a cause célèbre. Various papers covered the story each day, some with a decided bias. (The *New York Herald* described Kirk as “a miserable specimen of humanity.”)<sup>8</sup> As one participant later recalled, the “leading anti-slavery workers” of the day gathered to plot Kirk’s escape.<sup>9</sup> This group would have no doubt included Sydney Howard Gay, a major organizer of the Underground Railroad, and then the editor of the *Standard*. He couldn’t have ignored the situation—Kirk was hidden in Gay’s workplace, and various thugs and police officers were loitering outside on the street. Given the publicity of this case, Gay would have needed to turn to someone with experience in such matters. Someone he trusted.

By this time, Harris was not merely an outspoken abolitionist, he was a committed and experienced stationmaster, and his Duane Street refinery a busy station stop, on the Underground Railroad. Which is precisely why the activists of the Anti-Slavery office sought him out.

As would later be extolled in newspaper accounts and history books, their plan was simple: Kirk was to be packed up in a crate, loaded onto a wagon with other boxes of papers and books, and delivered to Harris’ sugar refinery a few blocks away. They would carry out their subterfuge in broad daylight. It would be just three short blocks until they hit the danger zone, City Hall Park, with its crowds and pedestrian traffic, in which any number of bounty hunters and other random malingerers might be hiding, waiting. But with a quick sweep around the park’s southern tip the wagon could slip away down a side street. Once at the refinery, Kirk could meet up with “conductors” of the

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<sup>7</sup> Lucius C. Matlack, *The History of American Slavery and Methodism from 1780 to 1849: And History of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection of America* (New York, 1849), 288-91, 357-9, 367. See also *Doctrines and Discipline of the Wesleyan Methodist Church* (Ann Arbor, MI: N. Sullivan, printer, 1842), 3-4, 29-30; and Joelle Million, “Samuel Blackwell: Sugar Refiner and Abolitionist,” *New York History Review* (June 14, 2017), <http://newyorkhistoryreviewarticles.blogspot.com/2017/06/samuel-blackwell-sugar-refiner-and.html>>

<sup>8</sup> “Court of Over [sic] and Terminer: Before Judge Edmonds and Ald Jackson and Johnson,” *The New York Herald*, Oct. 23, 1846

<sup>9</sup> “A Slave Hunt in New York: And a Rescue by the Underground Railroad,” *New-York Tribune*, Oct. 25, 1885.

Underground Railroad who would smuggle him out of the city and into the care of an Underground veteran, the Reverend Ira Manley, an abolitionist minister living upstate in Essex, New York.

Harris sent his own horse-pulled dray. The crates were loaded under the supervision of a downtown architect—in reality, an Underground Railroad worker—who pretended the delivery was for him. The dray pulled out, the architect following casually behind, on the lookout for anyone paying too much attention, anyone itching for a fight. Just three blocks: Nassau Street. Then Beekman. Then Park Row. It drove past the crowds enjoying City Hall Park at midday. Then almost home, rounding the bottom of the park where it meets Broadway, with the side street, dead ahead, just 100 feet to go—when police stopped the dray. A crowd gathered, “like buzzards flocking to carrion,” the architect later recalled. Hurling racial epithets, the police broke open the boxes and dragged out their fugitive.<sup>10</sup> It was a prototypical Black Lives Matter moment writ large, nearly two centuries before the three-letter acronym and hashtag would define it.

Police hauled Kirk off to the Tombs, but luck was on his side. In court the next day, he found himself defended by John Jay, grandson of the first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and an avowed abolitionist. A judge eventually released Kirk. With both supporters and angry mobs gathered on the courthouse steps, workers with the Underground Railroad hatched another plan, secreting Kirk out a back door, where the architect was on lookout. Kirk was thrust into a waiting covered carriage, and the getaway vehicle raced off, smuggling the dazed refugee out of the city. In a matter of days, he was safe in Canada, and soon lost to history.<sup>11</sup>

Just three years later, another slave would try a similar stunt—and succeed. Henry Box Brown, as he was then called, gained fame when he had several accomplices nail him inside a small crate and mail him from Richmond to Philadelphia.<sup>12</sup>

Though Kirk never made it there, Harris’ large Duane Street refinery was a “station” on the Underground Railroad. This fact is documented by several sources, including Willis Fletcher Johnson, the acclaimed journalist, lecturer and long-time editorial writer for the *New York Tribune*, who devoted a chapter to the Underground Railroad in his 1922 tome on the political history of New York State. His account of the George Kirk slave hunt is full of compelling detail, provided by an intimate and trusted source who was a close associate of Harris,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Willis Fletcher Johnson, *History of the State of New York, Political and Governmental, vol. 2, 1822-1864*, (Syracuse, NY: The Syracuse Press Inc., 1922), 287-90. See also Papson and Calarco, 46; and Tom Calarco, *The Underground Railroad in the Adirondack Region* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2004), 178.

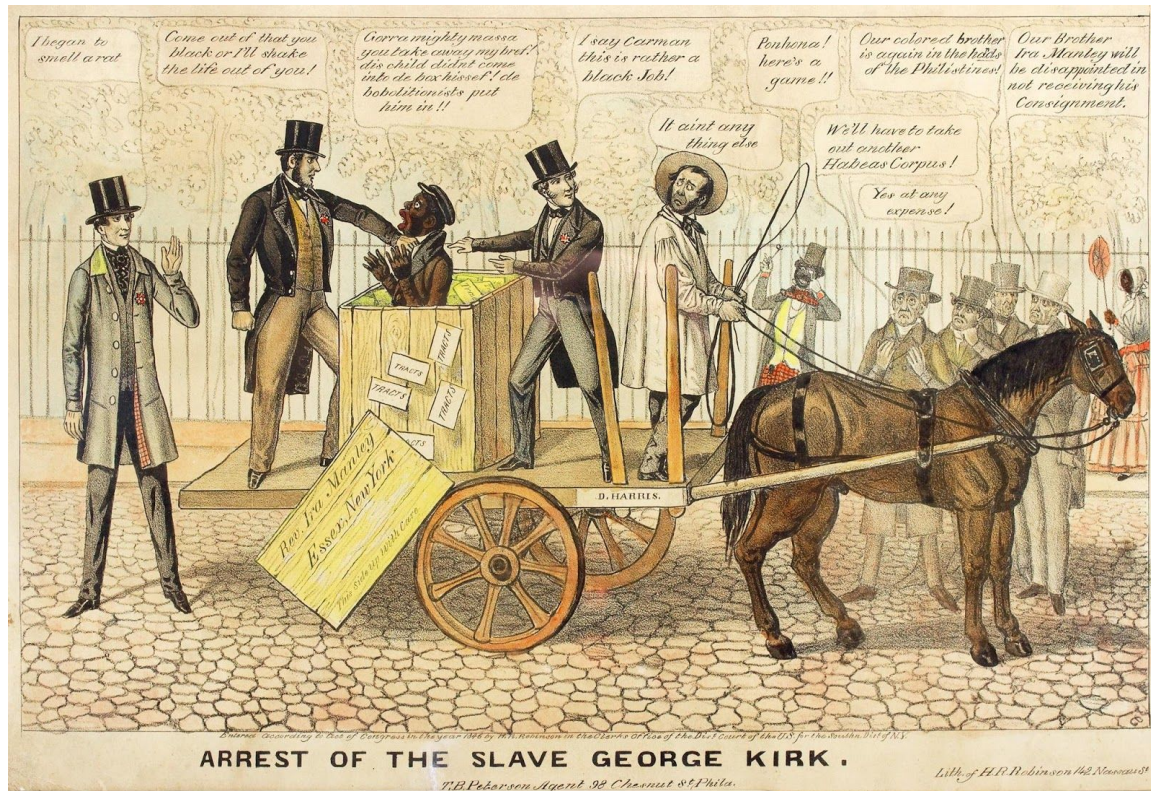
<sup>12</sup> For details on his remarkable escape, see Henry Box Brown, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown* (Manchester, England: Lee and Glynn, 1851), <<https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/brownbox/brownbox.html>>.



and who described Harris' refinery as "a sort of Grand Central Station of the Underground Railroad."<sup>13</sup>

That source was Willis Fletcher Johnson's father, New York City architect William Johnson, the man who had witnessed the George Kirk chase, participated in the rescue, and wrote about it in detail in his memoirs, from which his son liberally quoted. Like Harris, the elder Johnson was also an "active operator of the Underground Railroad," and his son chronicled his father's memories "not as a matter of mere filial pride but as a vivid picture of some characteristic scenes in [this] 'irrepressible conflict.'"<sup>14</sup>

In addition to Johnson's memoirs, the story of Dennis Harris and his participation in the George Kirk affair conforms to an earlier account that William Johnson gave of the incident, which was published in various newspapers, including the *New-York Tribune* in 1885,<sup>15</sup> and in a book about New York City history from 1897.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the most vivid depiction of the escapade is found in this 1846 hand-colored lithograph of a political cartoon published by H.R. Robinson.



<sup>13</sup> Johnson, 289.

<sup>14</sup> Johnson, 287-90.

<sup>15</sup> "A Slave Hunt in New York: And a Rescue by the Underground Railroad," *New-York Tribune*, Oct. 25, 1885. The same story from the *Tribune* was reprinted in other regional papers, as in "A Slave-Hunt in New York: And a Rescue by the Underground Railroad," *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, Oct. 27, 1885.

<sup>16</sup> Frank Moss LL.D., *The American Metropolis, from Knickerbocker Days to the Present Time: New York City Life in All Its Phases* (New York: Peter Fenelon Collier, 1897), 245-7.

The satiric cartoon, entitled “Arrest of the Slave George Kirk” and rendered in racist imagery, depicts a caricature of the apprehended Kirk, along with names and details of those involved—including Harris. The name “D. Harris” is clearly printed on the wagon.<sup>17</sup>



Tom Calarco, a historian of the Underground Railroad, and co-author of the book *Secret Lives of the Underground Railroad in New York City: Sydney Howard Gay, Louis Napoleon and the Record of Fugitives*, reports that it is almost impossible to quantify the record of the Underground Railroad, whose activities were necessarily secret. The counts he has reviewed varied wildly, from 3,000 former slaves passing through New York City to as many as 5,000

<sup>17</sup> “The Arrest of the Slave George Kirk,” Ian Brabner Rare Americana website <<https://www.rareamericana.com/pages/books/3728628/c-clay/arrest-of-the-slave-george-kirk?oldItem=true>>

during the entire antebellum period. “We have no idea how many were never included in those reports,” he says.<sup>18</sup>

Just how many escaped slaves did Harris have a hand in saving? That Harris played a frequent role in the Underground Railroad is confirmed by William Johnson in his memoirs; by Willis Fletcher Johnson, William’s son and a respected journalist, in his book; and an earlier newspaper interview reprinted many times over. It is also borne out by his character. A deep dive into yellowed newspaper clippings and other accounts from the period reveals dozens of anecdotes that paint a picture of a man in bold, clear lines.

Dennis Harris was no mere pamphlet-pusher, or over-eager meeting-goer. Harris spearheaded and participated in a wide array of spiritual and political activities with some of the city’s most prominent anti-slavery activists. He hosted frequent anti-slavery meetings in his Wesleyan chapel at 95 King Street, drawing a Who’s Who of abolitionist congregants and speakers, many of whom worked on the Underground Railroad, including Sydney Howard Gay (editor of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*),<sup>19</sup> Lewis Tappan (who helped liberate enslaved Africans aboard the ship *Amistad*), Rev. Lucius Matlack and Rev. Luther Lee (leading anti-slavery lecturers and Wesleyan movement co-founders), and Henry Bibb (an escaped slave, newspaper founder and author of an acclaimed autobiographical slave narrative).<sup>20</sup>

Harris spoke openly and forcefully in support of others engaged in the Underground Railroad, a position not popular with many, if not most, New Yorkers. In May, 1846, just five months before the George Kirk incident, Harris delivered a fiery sermon from his church pulpit, extolling the virtues of the Congregationalist minister and Underground Railroad pioneer Charles T. Torrey, who had just died in a Maryland prison after being convicted for rescuing slaves. Torrey estimated he had ushered nearly 400 slaves to freedom,<sup>21</sup> and Harris preached that despite the “wrath of Slavery,” Torrey’s name would forever “be a terror in the ears of oppressors, and a talisman of encouragement to all who labor in the course in which he fell a martyr.”<sup>22</sup>

That same year, Harris returned to England on something of a public relations tour, which was covered in the *Anti-Slavery Standard* alongside reports of the esteemed reformer Frederick Douglass. Distributing some 800 pamphlets to his former countrymen, Harris publicized the efforts of the Wesleyans, now numbering some 17,000 in the U.S., all committed to ending “the great sin of slavery.”<sup>23</sup> Back home, along with his fellow Wesleyan “missionaries,” Harris

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<sup>18</sup> Tom Calarco, email with author, October 7, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Papsen and Calarco, 118.

<sup>20</sup> “Wesleyan Methodist Society,” *New-York Daily Tribune*, May 10, 1850.

<sup>21</sup> Richard O. Boyer, *John Brown: A Biography and a History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), 351

<sup>22</sup> “Sympathy for Rev. Charles T. Torrey,” *National Aegis*, May 27, 1846.

<sup>23</sup> “At a Meeting Held in King Street Chapel,” *The Anti-Slavery Standard*, March 9, 1848.

helped raise thousands of dollars to support former slaves who had traveled the Underground Railroad and settled in Canada.<sup>24</sup>

He also was known to stand up for free persons of color living in New York. At a five-year celebration of the Wesleyan ministry, he invited two Native American women to speak to the congregation.<sup>25</sup> And in one episode that seems particularly emblematic of his worldview, Harris hired an African American man to work a construction site on Duane Street, and stood up to nearly 70 Irish laborers who chose to strike in retaliation. The strikers took up a collection, hoping to bribe Harris into firing the man, but Harris refused. A newspaper account noted that he had taken a similar stand in the past, supporting Irishmen when Germans refused to work alongside them, and in turn Germans when they were targeted by others.<sup>26</sup>

Such generosity and commitment was recognized at the highest levels of the abolition movement. In a letter to the renowned social reformer and statesman Frederick Douglass, the Rev. L. Delos Mansfield commended Harris, along with Gerrit Smith and Arthur Tappan, two of the most influential abolitionists of the era, for their “numerous contributions to the cause of humanity,” in addition to their own financial donations to Mansfield’s new Advent Mission Church at 39 Forsyth Street, which served an integrated congregation.<sup>27</sup>

For Harris, fair play and racial justice were moral imperatives, whether he was working for the Underground Railroad, guiding others in prayer, or giving from his own pocket.

Despite these achievements, arguably his greatest challenge was yet to come. In April, 1848, he suffered a major setback, when his Duane Street refinery burned to the ground. Such fires were a common fate of refineries at the time. He was down, but not out. Undaunted, and ever the entrepreneur, he now turned his gaze uptown.

## **BUILDING A HOUSE—AND NEIGHBORHOOD—IN WASHINGTON HEIGHTS**

In 1849, the year after his refinery fire, Harris began buying up land in Washington Heights just north of the farm of America’s first great naturalist, the ornithologist John James Audubon. Harris paid wealthy merchant Ambrose Kingsland, a future mayor of New York, \$32,000 for his 26-acre estate, which stretched from the Kingsbridge Road (now St. Nicholas Avenue) to the Hudson River. The parcel included an impressive mansion where the Harris family—Dennis, wife Ann, their three children and Dennis’ older sister from England—would live with a staff of five.<sup>28</sup> Harris later paid \$50,000 for an

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<sup>24</sup> “Wesleyan Methodist Society,” *New-York Daily Tribune*, May 10, 1850.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> “City Items,” *New-York Daily Tribune*, November 6, 1850.

<sup>27</sup> Frederick Douglass, *The Frederick Douglass Papers: Series Three: Correspondence, vol. 2, 1853-1865* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 35.

<sup>28</sup> “United States Census, 1850,” database with images, *FamilySearch.org*

additional 56-acre parcel, and the eastern block of Audubon's property, then called Minnie's Land.<sup>29</sup>

In addition to sugar refiner and minister, he would now add land speculator and developer to his resume. Carving up the farmland into lots, Harris advertised "elegant building sites, located near the Hudson River." Unlike next-door Audubon Park, where large houses would soon adorn winding ribbon-like drives, Harris's development aligned its lots in rows along the grid, in the style of Carmansville, the industrial village just to the south, anticipating the future blocks that would eventually multiply north of 155<sup>th</sup> Street. One property, however, defied this lined-in-rows neatness.

In 1851, he sold a three-acre plot to John King, who had worked for Harris as a sugar refiner. The cost: \$8,000.<sup>30</sup> Here, at what would eventually be 857 Riverside Drive, near West 159<sup>th</sup> Street, atop a bluff that tumbled down to the Hudson, a charming Greek Revival-Italianate home rose up in the Eden of surrounding dogwoods, pines and ancient oaks. Reached by a winding carriage lane, it featured a wraparound veranda, glass-windowed cupola and a grand river view.



<sup>29</sup> Spady, 67-9. See also City Register, "Kingsland to Harris," (October 27, 1849), Liber 528, Page 298; "Kingsland to Harris," (November 5, 1849), Liber 530, Page 105; "Morgan to Harris," (December 11, 1850), Liber 557, Page 414; "Audubon to Dennis Harris," (March 12, 1851), Liber 567, Page 178; "Audubon to William Harris," (November 7, 1851), Liber 584, Page 558; "Audubon to Dennis Harris," (November 12, 1851), Liber 589, Page 303; "Audubon to Dennis Harris," (December 8, 1851), Liber 588, Page 320.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 67-8. See also Spady, email with author, October 5, 2020.

*Detail of Dripps map, with the Dennis Harris house located in the upper left corner, and labeled for its occupant John King. It sits due north of John James Audubon's property, known as Minnie's Land.*

The house first appears on the 1851 Dripps map, along the line of what would be 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue. It is unclear who designed, built or paid for its construction, Harris or King, though it's fair to say Harris still essentially owned the home given that he held an \$8,000 mortgage on the property. Research on homes built in the Audubon Park and Carmansville area at the time suggests that John Woodhouse Audubon, a son of John James Audubon, may have built or supervised construction of the house. At that time he was building multiple villas in the area in the same Italianate style, along with a nearby tenement house for Harris. The Audubon family was also hard up for cash at the time, periodically selling off property, all of which makes John Woodhouse Audubon a leading contender for the role of builder or building supervisor.<sup>31</sup>

A year later, King sold the property back to Harris for \$13,000, possibly to avoid foreclosure. Harris maintained the house and property for the following two years.

Besides the buying and selling of houses and lots, Harris had bigger plans. Seeing beyond the orchards and pastureland that surrounded him, he envisioned a more urban landscape, setting in motion three major construction projects.

**A New Church**—Having preached downtown for many years, he decided to establish a small Wesleyan chapel on 158<sup>th</sup> Street—one of the first churches in Upper Manhattan. The *New-York Daily Tribune* described it as a “chaste and beautiful specimen of a village church...erected by the munificence of one man, Dennis Harris, Esq., whose public spirit and generous deeds have long been the admiration of the public, and secured [for him] a wide and lasting esteem.” The noted abolitionist minister and Wesleyan founder Rev. Lucius Matlack, who had delivered sermons at Harris’ downtown church, also preached at the uptown location, where Harris planned to open a Sabbath School and day school for the local youth.<sup>32</sup>

**A New Refinery**—He built a newer, larger New Congress Sugar Refinery on the Hudson at 160<sup>th</sup> Street, what would soon become known as “Sugarhouse Point.” It was a “monstrous red-brick” factory, local historian and 158th Street resident Reginald Pelham Bolton would later recall, “a building of the most commonplace and disfiguring appearance.” Still, it was a major employer for local residents.<sup>33</sup>

**A New Transportation Hub**—After building a wharf at 158<sup>th</sup> Street, Harris then bought a steamboat, naming her the *Jenny Lind*, after the popular Swedish

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<sup>31</sup> Spady, email with author, September 30, 2020.

<sup>32</sup> “Religious Items,” *New-York Daily Tribune*, October 4, 1851.

<sup>33</sup> Reginald Pelham Bolton, *Washington Heights, Manhattan: Its Eventful Past* (New York: Dyckman Institute, 1924), 114-5.

opera star. The boat provided passenger service for anyone in the community needing to reach downtown Manhattan or points north to Poughkeepsie. The steamer line was a gamble, as the nearby Hudson River Railroad, with a stop at West 152<sup>nd</sup> Street, provided stiff competition. But Harris may have had an ulterior motive.



*Dennis Harris' New Congress Sugar Refinery on the Hudson River at 160<sup>th</sup> Street, with the "Jenny Lind" in foreground, circa 1853. (Yale University Art Gallery)*

As historian Matthew Spady asserts in his new book, *The Neighborhood Manhattan Forgot: Audubon Park and the Families Who Shaped It*, the steamboat and new refinery likely had overt *and* covert uses. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which required that escaped slaves be returned to their owners, even in free states, made New York riskier than ever as a place for people of color to live. Waves of bounty hunters had flooded downtown Manhattan, on the lookout for incoming runaways. And escaping via public transport was increasingly problematic, especially buses and trains, in which nonwhites were

segregated or prohibited from riding at all.<sup>34</sup> Harris' steamboat and reconstructed refinery were needed now more than ever, if only to move his "Grand Central" way-station to a safer location, far from downtown's "roughs" and roving mobs, and its 900 police officers who could be mobilized, as Mayor Mickle did in the case of George Kirk, at a moment's notice.

Was Harris, once more, bedeviling the bounty hunters, and up to his old tricks again? To suggest that his abolitionist spirit would wane just as the nation was nearing a flashpoint, that he would for some reason not attempt uptown what he'd so successfully done downtown, seems unlikely, and inconsistent with the facts. A mere change of address wouldn't change his heart. While thus far, evidence in the form of letters, journal entries, or other hard evidence has yet to be found, there is precedent. Harris had successfully leveraged the resources of his refinery before. There's no reason he would not have done so again. The uptown, less populated location might have actually made the sheltering of slaves easier, except perhaps for the matter of moving them up there. But then, he had his own steamboat.

Having an empty house (as it seems to have been, after King's departure, according to Harris' deeds and financial records) just a short walk up the hill from the new refinery would surely have provided additional benefits. Escapees could be housed there until Underground Railroad conductors arrived to usher these individuals on their pilgrimage to a safe haven in Canada.

The use of the house for these purposes, of course, is conjecture. Like all sites linked to the Underground Railroad, little extant evidence is available, as the work of these reformers was, by necessity, kept secret. What is unequivocal is that the new refinery, the steamboat, and even the house—given its size, rural location, and proximity to the refinery and steamboat wharf—would have been judged ideal in the fight against slavery, a fact that would not have gone unnoticed by an abolitionist of Harris' experience and dedication.<sup>35</sup>

## **THE ARRIVAL OF JOHN NEWHOUSE**

In 1854, after maintaining the house for two years, Harris sold the property (Block 2135, Lots 23 to 32) to his friend and business partner John Newhouse for \$10,000, according to financial records. (For Harris, this was a \$3,000 loss, but he and Newhouse were close and perhaps the trouble of finding and keeping tenants made him amenable to the price. It's also possible that Harris owed Newhouse for outstanding debts.) Newhouse was a lawyer, former commissioner of deeds and a New York Supreme Court judge. Land assessment records show he'd known Harris at least as far back as 1834, when Harris sold him some other real estate.<sup>36</sup>

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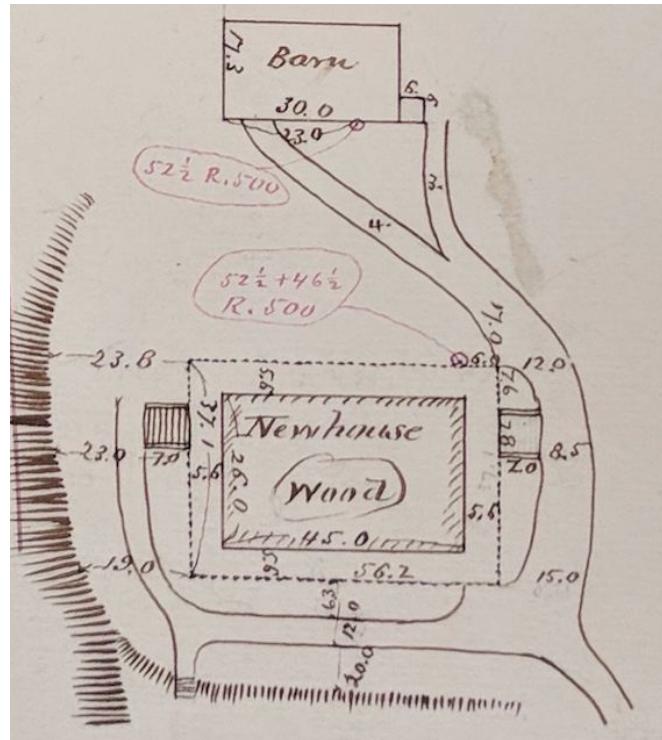
<sup>34</sup> "L. Delos Mansfield to Douglas, 12 August 1853," *The Frederick Douglass Papers: Series Three: Correspondence, vol. 2; 1853-1865* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 35, 37n.

<sup>35</sup> Spady, 68-9.

<sup>36</sup> "United States, New York Land Records, 1630-1975," database with images, *FamilySearch.org*.



The frame house, today listed as a two-family dwelling, was a two-family unit—and then some—back when Newhouse moved in. Valued at \$10,000 in the 1855 New York State census, it served as home for a growing clan, including Newhouse, then 44; his new wife, Ann Jane Newhouse, 24; Newhouse’s four children from his first wife (Cornelius, 19; Mary, 17; and Emma, 11; plus Catharine, 21, her husband, John Tonnele, 22, their son, John, 3, and Peter Tonnele, 12, a “boarder” from Pennsylvania), also Sarah Newhouse, 65, the



*Detail of a Blackwell map from around 1860. The property included the wood-frame house, which faces south, and a barn in back.*

judge’s widowed mother from Germany; and two young Irish servants, Sarah Stewart and Margaret Madden.

Just a few years earlier, Newhouse had been living in the 18<sup>th</sup> Ward, on 23<sup>rd</sup> Street near Fifth Avenue, with his first wife, Jane, and their children. The posh neighborhood of new brownstones bustled with the energy and cachet that comes from living on a wide thoroughfare in what was then a rapidly growing part of the city. In terms of social standing, his wife brought a certain status, too. Jane Newhouse was a descendant of the van Coevanhoven family<sup>37</sup>(also spelled Kouwenhoven), a prominent name in New York’s high

<sup>37</sup> “Mrs. Emma M. West” obituary, *The New York Times*, September 7, 1898; “New York, New York City Marriage Records, 1829-1940,” database, *FamilySearch* <<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:24ZR-R32>>; Barbara Eldredge, “This Remarkable Flatbush Mansion Used to Be a Kings Highway Icon,” *Brownstoner*,

society, with a lineage dating back to Wolfert Gerritse van Couwenhoven, one of the earliest Dutch immigrants who settled New Amsterdam in 1625.<sup>38</sup> While Jane's surname spanned centuries, her time with John was cut short. She died in 1850, leaving him with four children, the youngest just 6 years old.

As was the custom, he soon remarried, to a woman 20 years his junior. It was a new chapter for the Newhouse family, and perhaps John was hoping this new home and new uptown neighborhood would make for a fresh start. It would certainly be quieter than what the family was used to. At the time, Washington Heights was evolving from rural farm country to a distant sleepy suburb. For the family, it would be an adjustment. Luckily for John Newhouse, he had a friend, Dennis Harris, who had made the same move, from downtown to uptown, and had been living there with his family for the last five years.

### **WORKING TOGETHER: THREE WAYS HARRIS AND NEWHOUSE MADE A DIFFERENCE**

Over the previous two decades, Newhouse's relationship with Harris had grown. They were now friends, neighbors, colleagues and fellow travelers, united in their opposition to slavery. They also shared a civic-minded determination to help their newly burgeoning community flourish, enriching the area in three key ways:

#### ECONOMIC IMPACT

Though lower Washington Heights would not see a surge in population or commercial growth for another half-century, triggered by the northward extension of the subway, the first glimmers of urbanization happened on Harris' and Newhouse's watch. Their influence would be long-lasting.

Their initial impact on the neighborhood was economic. Newhouse became a partner in the firm of Harris & Co. in the fall of 1853, helping to oversee the running of the sugar refinery and steamboat.<sup>39</sup> Thanks to their

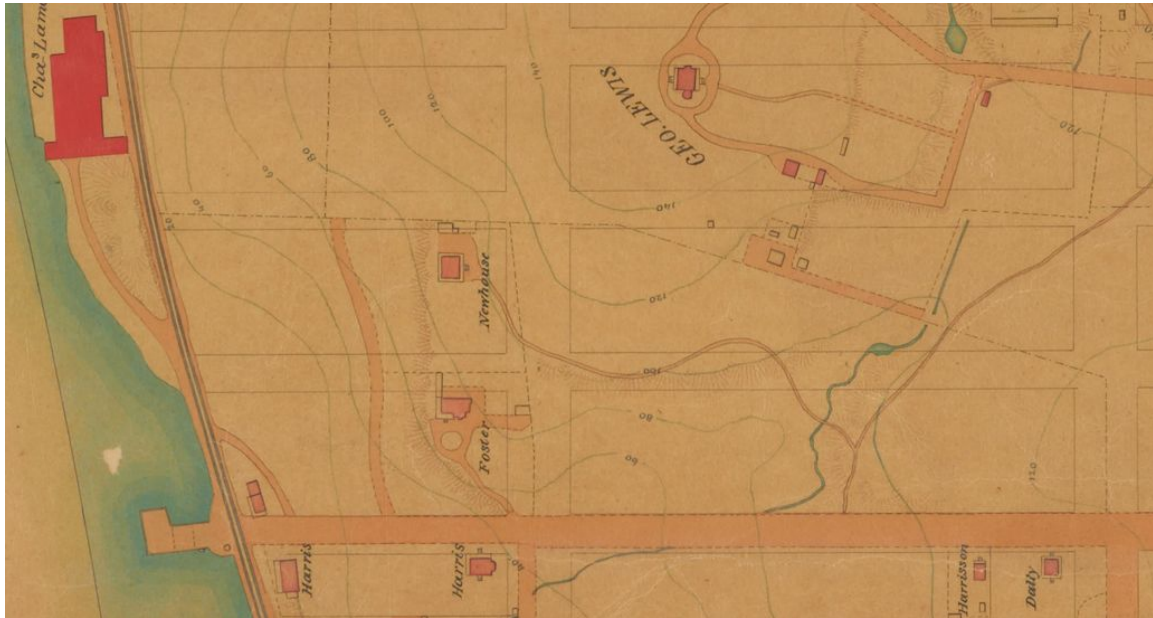
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<<https://www.brownstoner.com/history/brooklyn-history-flatbush-mansion-kouwenhoven-kings-highway/>>

<sup>38</sup> Wolfert was one of the pioneering five "head farmers," sent to New Amsterdam by the Dutch West India Company. Besides farming, he also ran a brewery on the corner of Pearl and Fulton Streets, and was a member of the "Eight Men" council, an early New Amsterdam governing body. He purchased from the Lenape Indians 3,600 acres of land in what is now Brooklyn. A document described as the oldest surviving land deed for Long Island confirms the purchase. His name lives on in today's Gerritsen Beach neighborhood in Brooklyn, and in the Stoothoff-Baxter-Kouwenhoven House, in the Flatlands section of Brooklyn, a rare surviving farmhouse from Dutch Colonial times that dates back to 1747. For info on him, see Henry Wysham Lanier, *A Century of Banking in New York, 1822-1922* (New York: The Gillis Press, 1922), 82; "Wolfert Gerritsen (Van Couwenhoven)," Historical Society of the New York Courts, <<https://history.nycourts.gov/figure/wolphert-gerritsen/>>; Landmark Preservation Commission, *Stoothoff-Baxter-Kouwenhoven House Designation Report* (LP-0919) (New York: City of New York, 1976).

<sup>39</sup> "In Court of Appeals: Samuel Orchard, Respondent, against Abraham M. Binninger and Dexter B. Britton, impleaded with James E. Brown, appellants" (New York: Howard & Stover, 1868), 123-4, <<https://books.google.com/books?id=mj9IHv783VQC&pg=RA4-PA123&lpg=RA4-PA123&dq=samuel+orchard+binninger+dennis+harris&source=bl&ots=CGp387IcK7&sig=ACfU3U1INnXS5rWGwHkKlo>>

enterprise, the refinery business in particular flourished, bringing jobs to the nascent community. And housing— George Bird Grinnell recalls in both his unpublished “Memoir” and in an article, “Audubon Park,” written for *Auk*



*Detail of the Preliminary Map of the Commissioners of Washington Heights, 1860, with West 158<sup>th</sup> Street (at bottom) stretching from what is now Broadway to the Hudson River. The Harris-Newhouse Home and barn is at center (labeled “Newhouse”), reached by a winding carriage lane. Other Harris contributions include the West 158<sup>th</sup> Street wharf serving his “Jenny Lind” steamboat, the New Congress Sugar Refinery on the river at around 160<sup>th</sup> Street, and three homes he initially built on the south side of 158<sup>th</sup>, including one for his son-in-law, lumberman John Dally, at Broadway. (The New York Public Library Digital Collections)*

magazine that John Woodhouse Audubon built “a large tenement house for occupancy by the workmen employed at what was called that ‘Sugar House.’”<sup>40</sup> The structure stood on land owned by Harris, on the east side of today’s Broadway between 157<sup>th</sup> and 158<sup>th</sup> Streets, as Grinnell recalled.

The existence of this building, with a well, privy and coal sheds located in back, is confirmed on Blackwell maps of the period. This location would have been convenient for workers and their families, as nearby 158<sup>th</sup> Street during the 1850s became something of a bustling thoroughfare, extending from today’s St.

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<sup>40</sup> George Bird Grinnell, “Memoir,” (unpublished), 10. See also “Audubon Park,” *The Auk* (July-August, 1920), 374. The building’s precise location is unclear—the structure doesn’t appear on existing maps, though the practice of employers providing housing for their employees was typical for the period.

Nicholas Avenue to the steamboat wharf—all well before the city officially opened that street in 1880.<sup>41</sup>

### POLITICAL IMPACT

Both men were initially supportive of the Democratic Whig (aka Whig) party: John Newhouse ran as a nominee for Election Inspector on the Whig ticket in 1840, and Harris served as a vice president with the 12<sup>th</sup> Ward Whigs, attending meetings at the Whig Club and helping drum up awareness and support in his community, as late as 1852. The Whigs, like their rivals, the Democrats, were split on the issue of slavery, but Northern Whigs veered more toward anti-slavery, and this was clearly a political belief both Harris and Newhouse shared.<sup>42</sup>

Ultimately, the dithering on the part of the Whigs when it came to slavery, choosing to appease their Southern supporters and endorse the Missouri Compromise rather than take a strong stand against slavery, led many Whigs to jump ship. They joined forces under a new banner, that of the decidedly anti-slavery Free Soil party.<sup>43</sup> Harris was among them.

He ran for New York City mayor as a Free Democrat (an alternate name for Free Soilers) in 1852; served as an elected delegate at the Free Democratic state convention that same year; and in 1854, Harris was dubbed an “anti-Whig abolitionist” by the outspoken anti-slavery newspaper editor Horace Greeley in an enthusiastic screed against the Whig party in the *New-York Herald Tribune*.<sup>44</sup>

### SPIRITUAL IMPACT

While John Newhouse’s party affiliation in the run-up to the Civil War has not been documented, his devotion to abolitionism is underscored by his efforts to help establish a new church in his neighborhood, one that would take a strong stand against slavery.

Harris, Newhouse and a small group of neighbors gathered to found the Washington Heights Congregational Church in 1854. It is unclear if Harris’ Wesleyan church was still operating, or if this was to replace it. While the Audubons, Eliza Jumel and others funded and attended the large Episcopal Church of the Intercession (which occupied several locations before landing at

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<sup>41</sup> Bolton, 115. See also Spady, 73; and Jennifer L. Most and Mary Beth Betts, *Audubon Park Designation Report* (New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, 2009), 10.

<sup>42</sup> “Seventeenth Ward Democratic Whig Nomination,” *Morning Herald*, April 14, 1840; and “Twelfth Ward,” *The New York Herald*, July 13, 1852.

<sup>43</sup> For info on the Whig party and its inability to effectively deal with the issue of slavery, see Corey Brooks, “What Can the Collapse of the Whig Party Tell Us About Today’s Politics?” *Smithsonianmag.com*, April 12, 2016; and Gil Troy, “How an Outsider President Killed a Party,” *Politico.com*, June 2, 2016; and Philip A. Wallach, “Prospects for Partisan Realignment: Lessons from the Demise of the Whigs,” *Brookings.edu*, March 6, 2017.

<sup>44</sup> “The Free Democrats of New York,” *National Era*, October 28, 1852; “Free Democratic General Committee,” *National Era*, September 23, 1852; and “Lying by Telegraph,” *New-York Daily Tribune*, August 19, 1854.

Broadway and 155<sup>th</sup> Street), it seems Harris, Newhouse and their fellow co-founders were looking to give their neighbors an alternative. Harris' son-in-law, lumberman John Dally, held an initial meeting at his home on the edge of Audubon Park (on what is now 158<sup>th</sup> St. and Broadway), after which the institution was incorporated. At the start, it was something of a Harris-Newhouse family effort, with Harris a co-founder, Newhouse appointed church clerk, Dally a deacon and Newhouse's son-in-law John Tonnele, who also lived in the Harris-Newhouse home, a deacon and later an elder and trustee.<sup>45</sup>

Only one question remained: *Where to build it?*

Harris had plenty of land. Three years earlier, after the death of John James Audubon, Harris had purchased from Audubon's widow, Lucy, a swath of farmland that included the entire city block lying between today's 155<sup>th</sup> and 156<sup>th</sup> Streets from Amsterdam Avenue to Broadway. Harris had divided the parcel to sell as lots, and in 1855 he chose a lot, on Amsterdam Avenue, and built a modest wooden chapel, where services were held. Harris subsequently sold the church another lot (at 155<sup>th</sup> Street and Amsterdam) where a bigger brick Romanesque church with an impressive octagonal clock tower was built. The central location would be convenient for both Audubon Park and Carmansville residents. For Harris and his family, it was a mere 10-minute stroll from the old Kingsland mansion; for Newhouse, Tonnele and their clan living in the house, just five minutes from the front porch.<sup>46</sup>

The founding of this church, in addition to serving the spiritual needs of their neighbors, seems a clear effort on the part of Harris and Newhouse to establish an enclave of progressive reformist ideals uptown. More specifically, the church would fuel the fires of anti-slavery sentiment in what was, then, a remote community removed from the more intense political atmosphere downtown.

Choosing Congregationalism was no accident. Nearly every Christian denomination was at that time struggling with the issue of slavery, adopting an ambivalent policy or in some cases finding Biblical verse to endorse the practice. By contrast, Congregationalist churches (or at least a strong percentage of them) expressed tolerance or full-fledged enthusiasm for abolitionism and its advocates, a fact of which both Harris and Newhouse would have been aware.

The church drew leading abolitionists from the region, who stumped for the cause. For instance, at a celebration for the new church in March, 1855, delegates came uptown from other Congregational churches throughout the city, including Brooklyn's Plymouth Church, an institution renowned for its anti-slavery fervor and participation in New York's Underground Railroad.

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<sup>45</sup> Rev. Charles A. Stoddard, DD, *An Historical Review of The Washington Heights Presbyterian Church* (New York: New York Institution for the Deaf & Dumb, 1877), 6-7.

<sup>46</sup> Spady, 67, and Stoddard, 8.

Abolitionist Lewis Tappan, who had attended Harris' church downtown, had helped fund the creation of Plymouth just eight years earlier, installing the famed and fiery abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher as its first pastor.<sup>47</sup>

On another occasion, James W. C. Pennington and Stephen Pembroke—African-American abolitionists, former slaves, and brothers—spoke at the church, at what must have been an emotional event.

Harris introduced the pair to the congregation, denouncing slavery as “a manifest insult to the dignity of our common human nature.” Pembroke spoke first, describing the horrors of slavery he had witnessed, of seeing fellow black men beaten, including his own father, a “kind, exemplary and affectionate” man, who was “knocked down and danced upon.” He’d seen others commit suicide by throwing themselves off a cliff.

Pennington (whose original name was Jim Pembroke) had escaped slavery in Maryland in 1827 when he was 19. The young blacksmith eventually changed his name and went on to become the first African American to take classes at Yale University. By the 1850s, he was a prominent writer, orator and pastor at Manhattan’s Shiloh Presbyterian Church (also known as the First Colored Presbyterian Church). Pennington’s brother had recently fled slavery himself with his two sons, arriving in New York, only to be apprehended by bounty hunters and dragged back. Just a few months before their appearance at Harris and Newhouse’s church, Pennington had been able to buy his brother’s freedom, but not that of his two nephews, who’d been quickly sold to slavers in the Deep South.<sup>48</sup>

Pennington provided the details of his brothers’ recent ordeal, adding that their mother was still in bondage, her location unknown. “The Rev. Dr. was so deeply affected that the tears flowed down his cheeks as he spoke,” a reporter noted. The congregation took up a collection for the cause.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Stoddard, 7. For info on Plymouth Church, see “Social Justice: The Underground Railroad,” PlymouthChurch.org < <http://www.plymouthchurch.org/underground-railroad>>; and “New York City and the Path to Freedom: Landmarks Association with Abolitionist & Underground Railroad History,” New York City Landmarks Preservation Committee, June 19, 2020, <<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/69963f59071f4ecca36e19a4a64f875c>>

<sup>48</sup> Mike Cummings, “In the Shadows No More: Divinity School Honors Minister James W.C. Pennington,” Yale News, September 30, 2016, <<https://news.yale.edu/2016/09/30/shadows-no-more-yds-honors-minister-james-wc-pennington>>; Gerald Renner, “Clergyman, Former Slave Among Giants of Abolition,” *Hartford Courant*, February 25, 1996, <<https://www.courant.com/news/connecticut/hc-xpm-1996-02-25-9602250248-story.html>>; Tim Rowland, “The Tale of Former Washington County Slaves and Their Lost Land,” *The Herald-Mail*, January 18, 2020, <[https://www.heraldmillmedia.com/opinion/tim\\_rowland/the-tale-of-former-washington-county-slaves-and-their-lost-land/article\\_0ccf98d7-176a-501d-bfec-71a8296ca89d.html](https://www.heraldmillmedia.com/opinion/tim_rowland/the-tale-of-former-washington-county-slaves-and-their-lost-land/article_0ccf98d7-176a-501d-bfec-71a8296ca89d.html)>; and Philip S. Foner and Robert James Branham, eds., *Lift Every Voice: African American Oratory, 1787-1900* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1998), 271-3.

<sup>49</sup> “Public Meetings: Anti-Slavery Meeting at Washington Hights [sic],” *New-York Daily Tribune*, August 11, 1854.

This appearance, reminiscent of the two Native American women who appeared at Harris' King Street church some years earlier, was far from standard practice at most New York churches at the time. In the antebellum period, places of worship in New York, and throughout the North, were growing increasingly segregated: Many Protestant ministers urged their African-American brethren to form all-black churches of their own. If allowed to participate, persons of color were seated in "negro pews," usually in an upstairs gallery, to



*The fledgling Washington Heights Congregational Church, founded by Harris, Newhouse, their family members and others in the community, began worshipping in a modest wooden chapel built by Harris. The congregation would eventually go on to build this more formal structure on one of Harris' lots on the northwest corner of Amsterdam Avenue and 155th Street.*

separate white and black parishioners.<sup>50</sup> If this covenant was broken the sting of reprobation was all but guaranteed, even for the rich and powerful. In 1834, the

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<sup>50</sup> Graham Russell Hodges, *Root and Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey, 1613-1863* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 238-41.

wealthy merchant and noted anti-slavery activist Arthur Tappan caused an “uproar” at the Laight Street Presbyterian Church when he invited Samuel Cornish, an “almost-white Presbyterian clergyman,” to sit with him in his ground floor pew. In response, some church members threatened to resign their membership.<sup>51</sup>

Angered by this reality, Pennington concluded that it was impossible to “get right in church” if churches condoned “man-hating principles.”<sup>52</sup> As a rule, when visiting churches, he “refused to go to gallery seating himself, preferring to stand in back,” notes Pennington biographer Christopher L. Webber.<sup>53</sup>

No records have yet been found to indicate whether this Washington Heights church had any persons of color in its congregation and, if so, where they would have been seated. What we do know is that such an appearance of two African American abolitionists, then squarely in the media spotlight, at a fledgling church in a small, up-and-coming neighborhood, was not a common practice for most houses of worship at the time. In fact, many churches were looking to downplay discussions of slavery, claiming religious services should be free from “politics.”<sup>54</sup>

We can reasonably infer from this event that the Washington Heights church and its leaders—Harris and Newhouse among them—were progressive in nature, sympathetic to the cause of abolitionism, and actively engaged in spreading the word amongst their friends and neighbors, educating the community to the horrors of slavery. Such an action by a church at the time would send a clear signal to the community, underscoring its “liberal and abolitionist” position, asserts Graham Hodges, a professor of history at Colgate University, who has written extensively on slavery, abolitionism and the Underground Railroad. “The church was taking a definite liberal position,” wrote Pennington biographer Webber.<sup>55</sup>

Despite a small congregation to start, the church would eventually draw prominent members of the community into its fold. Besides Harris, Newhouse and their sons-in-law, church elders and trustees included banker and Audubon Park resident William Wheelock, Dr. Harvey Peet (principal of the local New York Asylum for the Deaf & Dumb, located on what is now the grounds of New York-Presbyterian/Columbia University Irving Medical Center) and Isaac Peet, Harvey’s son, who would succeed his father as principal at the school. Shepherd Knapp, the well-known financier, former New York City chamberlain and outspoken anti-slavery advocate, was also affiliated with the work of the church.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Lewis Tappan and the Evangelical War Against Slavery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 176.

<sup>52</sup> Hodges, 238-9.

<sup>53</sup> Christopher L. Webber, email with author, October 20, 2020.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 238-41

<sup>55</sup> Hodges, email with author, October 20, 2020; and Webber, email with author, October 20, 2020.

<sup>56</sup> “Tribute to a Former Pastor,” *The New York Observer*, September 30, 1909. For info on some of Shepherd Knapp’s anti-slavery activities, see Benson J. Lossing, LLD, *History of New York City*:



Wheelock's mansion was located on a lot facing the Hudson River that backed onto the Harris-Newhouse home. It, too, was photographed for *Changing New York* by Berenice Abbott, who assumed correctly in this case that the house would not survive. It was torn down in 1941, to make way for the 240-unit Riverside House as the current River Arts co-operative was called when it was first built.

Though the Grinnell family was largely associated with the Church of the Intercession, where they were members, George Blake Grinnell and his wife, Helen Lansing Grinnell, also attended services at the Washington Heights church co-founded by Harris and Newhouse. Helen Grinnell frequently mentioned in her journals their devotion to this church, which seems to have espoused a spiritual and political worldview, at least regarding slavery, in keeping with both George and Helen's upbringing. George's father, George Grinnell Jr., a Congressman and Whig party member from Massachusetts, had argued in favor of abolishing slavery in the District of Columbia, and in 1838 on the floor of Congress advocated that the U.S. disavow "national distinctions founded on color" and open international relations with the Haitian Republic, the first country in the world to abolish slavery outright.<sup>57</sup> Helen Grinnell's father, the Rev. Dirck Cornelius Lansing, helped found the Auburn Theological Seminary, an institution noted for its anti-slavery activism, and one of the first seminaries in the nation to admit African Americans.<sup>58</sup>

This made for an intriguing cluster of families—the Harrises, Newhouses, Dalleys, Tonneles, Knapps, and Grinnells, among others in the area—all linked to this church and the ideals of racial justice espoused there. This documented cluster of families friendly to abolitionism, if not outright anti-slavery activists, is arguably the only such community linked to a neighborhood today that is primarily inhabited by persons of color, making a landmark designation here particularly relevant and poignant.

## **THEIR FINAL YEARS**

Like the church, the neighborhood would eventually grow, forsaking its rural beginnings. Alas, Harris would not be there to witness it. His idealism and strong

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*Embracing an Outline Sketch of Events from 1609 to 1830, and a Full Account of Its Development from 1830 to 1884* (New York: The Perine Engraving and Publishing Co., 1884), 651-3; and "Nebraska Territory: Defense of the Missouri Compromise, Protest Against Its Violation," *New York Daily Times*, January 31, 1854.

<sup>57</sup>Henry Whittemore, *Our New England Ancestors and Their Descendants, 1620-1900: Historical, Genealogical, Biographical* (New York: New England Ancestral Publishing Co., 1900), 36

<sup>58</sup>"Auburn's History," Auburn Seminary website, <https://auburnseminary.org/history/>

moral compass were perhaps more finely hewn than his business acumen. By the late 1850s, he was stretched thin financially. He lost a considerable sum when he was duped into investing in a shady business deal, and went bankrupt with the financial Panic of 1857, forcing him to give up his riverfront mansion and shut down the refinery at Sugarhouse Point.

He continued to work as a sugar-refiner and, no doubt, was quite aware of the irony of an abolitionist making his fortune in part from sugar, an industry reliant on slave labor. His mentor, Samuel Blackwell, had also struggled with that issue, as did others in the Blackwell clan. After Blackwell's death, Harris tried to teach the business to Blackwell's son, Samuel, but the would-be protégé quickly gave up, unable to square his ideals with what his father called the "dreadful system." Harris taught the trade to another Blackwell son, Henry (married to suffragist Lucy Stone), who tried to invent ways to extract sugar from beets, hoping to make a profit while putting slave-dependent sugar-cane plantations out of business.<sup>59</sup>

Harris' apprentice would eventually go even further, advocating for the annexation of Santo Domingo (now the Dominican Republic) as a U.S. territory, a fact that might be of special interest to the many local Dominican immigrants who live in Washington Heights near the Harris-Newhouse home today. After travels to the Caribbean, Blackwell became fascinated by Dominican culture, and eagerly supported the young nation, only the second country to outlaw slavery, following Haiti. Writing for *The Independent*, a noted national magazine that championed abolitionism and published the views of Henry Ward Beecher, Blackwell argued for closer ties to this nation, rather than import sugar, coffee, chocolate, ginger, spices and fruits from places like Cuba and Brazil, where "slavery and despotism" thrived.

Blackwell had been intrigued by what he perceived as an absence of discrimination among the mixed-race population there, a somewhat rosy and unrealistic view, scholars have since noted. Still, Blackwell saw annexation as a win-win, and far from just another imperialistic overreach. He believed the multi-racial Dominican society "had something to teach the United States."<sup>60</sup> His views were surely a product of his upbringing, having grown up hearing the conscientious ideology of his father and family friends like Harris. For his part, Harris invented a new evaporator in 1863 that promised to make sugar-refining from beets more economical, another attempt to undermine slave-holders. Yet it

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<sup>59</sup> Hélène Quanquin, "Innovation as Moral Victory: Henry Blackwell and Sugar," *Driving Innovation in Anglo-Saxon Economies: Comparative Perspectives*, Vol. 4, no. 1, 220-33

<<https://journals.openedition.org/lisa/2276?lang=en>>

<sup>60</sup> *The Independent*, founded by three Congregationalist ministers in 1848, actively endorsed abolitionism and women's suffrage. Contributors included Henry Ward Beecher (who served as editor from 1861 to 1883, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. For Blackwell's views on annexation, see Henry B. Blackwell, "Santo Domingo—The Case Stated," *The Independent*, April 20, 1871; and Nicholas Guyatt, "America's Conservatory: Race, Reconstruction and the Santo Domingo Debate," *The Journal of American History*, vol. 97, issue 4 (March, 2011).

was all to no avail: No annexation would be forthcoming, and their attempts at innovation would not change the sugar industry.<sup>61</sup>

The Civil War did.

Harris lived out the war years away from Washington Heights. The collapse of his finances necessitated a move to smaller quarters on West 45<sup>th</sup> Street. After the death of his first wife sometime in the 1850s, he lived for a time with his elder sister and two servants, eventually remarrying. He died in New York on March 27, 1868, in his mid-sixties, leaving what little remained of his estate to his second wife, Sarah. Longtime friend Henry Blackwell signed as a witness to his last will and testament.<sup>62</sup>

John Newhouse appears to have lived out his remaining years in the clapboard house overlooking the Hudson. The 1870 U.S. Census lists him as head of a still-packed house, with his wife, his daughters Mary (with her husband, lawyer Charles Whelp, and their baby boy, Charles Jr.), and Emma, a well-known figure in New York's society circles (with her husband, Zimri West, a baker, and two young children), plus two "domestics."

Newhouse died on May 12, 1877, at age 67, but the house continued to be occupied by the Newhouse family for at least another decade. By 1880, most of the Newhouse children and their families had decamped to other parts of the city, leaving just Newhouse's widow, Annie, the Whelp family and one servant, in what must have seemed a much quieter home.

What happened to them is unclear. They appear to have left the house, perhaps in 1894, when Charles Whelp Jr. made headlines by eloping with a Long Island society girl.<sup>63</sup> The marriage was short-lived—future census reports list Charles Jr. as divorced and living with his widowed mother and grandmother in Harlem for several decades. That same year, Emma Newhouse West and her husband Zimri transferred the property to their daughter Ada, but how long she lived there or maintained ownership is unclear.<sup>64</sup> It is here, around the turn of the last century, that the house's link to any Harris or Newhouse descendants is lost.

## **MORE RECENT RESIDENTS**

At an undetermined date, ownership of the house passed to Niels and Emma Buck. According to an indenture dated March 13, 1905, who were living in Chicago at the time, to Bell Hemphill, then about 41, and her husband, Alberto, 46, an overalls salesman in downtown Manhattan. The document refers to the home by what at the time were its various street names, noting it was situated on "the Westerly side of the Public Drive, sometimes known as the French

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<sup>61</sup> "New Sugar Evaporator," *The New York Times*, April 2, 1863.

<sup>62</sup> Dennis Harris will. See also "New York, New York City Municipal Deaths, 1795-1949," database, *FamilySearch.org*.

<sup>63</sup> "A Huntington (L.I.) Girl Missing: Belle Ward Is Supposed to Have Eloped with Charles Whelp," *The New York Times*, February 10, 1894.

<sup>64</sup> Spady, email with author, September 30, 2020. See also U.S. Census records for 1900 and 1910.

Boulevard (now known as Boulevard Lafayette).” By this time the home, which once sat alone on farmland, linked to what is now Broadway via a carriage path, was now located on an increasingly busy street, with neighbors living in nearby Beaux Arts townhouses springing up to the north.<sup>65</sup>

The Hemphills remained in the house for at least 15 years, according to the U.S. Census of 1910 and 1920, and the New York State Census of 1915. In 1910, they bought two additional lots nearby, from Rapid-Transit Commissioner Eugene L Bushe, a mayoral appointee engaged in the civic project that would cause the rapid urbanization of neighborhoods like Audubon Park. By 1930, the Hemphills had moved to San Francisco.<sup>66</sup>

By 1940, the house was occupied by Daniel and Catharine Donovan, and later that decade ownership passed to Floyd Bell and his wife, Otis Dean Bell. Shortly after purchasing the house, the Bells decided to separate. A separation agreement dated September 21, 1947, indicates that the property was already on the market at that time and they planned to divide the proceeds of the sale equally.<sup>67</sup>

At some point in the latter half of the 20th century, Ethel Lee Nelson came to purchase the property with her husband. The Nelsons lived in the home for many years. According to interviews with neighbors, the home under their care retained much of its original appearance, with an array of large rhododendron bushes and other manicured landscaping on the small yard out front.<sup>68</sup>

A title search reveals that the home was sold after Ethel’s death in 1994, and then again in 2002, when it was purchased by Al Wright and his wife, Doreen Green. The couple have since divorced. Wright, a retired New York City Subways maintenance worker, was badly affected by the 2008 financial and mortgage crisis, and lost the home to developers in a short sale in 2019.

## **DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS**

The Harris-Newhouse Home at what is now 857 Riverside Drive (Block 2135, Lot 23) is a two-story, wood-frame dwelling built circa 1851, incorporating transitional Greek Revival–Italianate motifs. Both styles were popular in the mid nineteenth century, and multiple Italianate villas were popping up in the 1850s on nearby Minnie’s Land (what was soon to be called Audubon Park), built by John Woodhouse Audubon.

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<sup>65</sup> "United States Census, 1900," database with images, *FamilySearch*, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MSKH-49Q>, accessed October 10, 2020.

<sup>66</sup> United States Census, 1920," database with images, *FamilySearch*, <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:33SQ-GRF7-X1K?cc=1488411&wc=QZJT-ZJ2%3A1036473601%2C1039156701%2C1040173901%2C1589341177>, accessed October 7, 2020.

<sup>67</sup> New York, NY Conveyance, Book 4558, pp. 515-21.

<sup>68</sup> Lenora Taitt-Magubane, community resident for 33 years and a Nelson neighbor, interview with author, October 11, 2020.

Initially located on three acres of hilly farmland overlooking the Hudson, the house was soon overtaken by urbanization. In the 1870s, construction began on a winding thoroughfare (first called Public Drive, then Boulevard Lafayette, and later linked to Riverside Drive) that extended north from Broadway and 157<sup>th</sup> Street and crossed in front of the house.

Sitting on a trapezoidal lot, the building is positioned at a 45-degree angle to the street. It has a modest single entrance door and two double-hung windows on the first floor, and three symmetrical double-hung windows on the second floor. The original design also included an octagonal windowed cupola on top, and a wraparound porch that surrounded all four sides of the house, according to indications on early maps. The porch was covered by a shallow roof supported on thin wooden columns, and banded by a graceful, low jigsaw railing.

A 1937 image of the house by acclaimed photographer Berenice Abbott reveals various Greek-Revival details, including square transom lights over the windows, a square fanlight over the door, neat door and window architraves, and the octagonal lantern topped by an acorn finial. Italianate features include the wraparound porch with jigsaw railing, scroll-sawn brackets, fretwork, and bracketed eaves. Ironically, Abbott photographed the house as part of her *Changing New York* exhibition and book which highlighted the remnants of another era in the streetscapes of 1937, which she predicted would soon be lost. 857 Riverside Drive is one of the houses that Abbott photographed that has actually survived until this day.



*Berenice Abbott photo, taken in 1937, revealing what was at the time a relatively new townhouse next door (859 Riverside Drive), and the house's former river view (seen through the side porch).*

Many of those details captured by Abbott remain. Alterations include the dismantling of the right-side porch, to accommodate the construction of a townhouse next door. (The wraparound porch had not been a problem when the

house sat on its original three-acre property, but after the parcel was divided



857 Riverside Drive today. The side and rear porches are intact, as is the original clapboard or lapstrake siding, which has been covered in stucco on the front of the house. *Photo by URRA*

into individual lots, it was discovered that the right-side porch extended over the lot line into lot 24, and was removed when the adjoining townhouse was built at the turn of the last century.) In the late 1990s, a stucco facade was applied to the front of the house, on top of the original wood, intended to improve insulation. The wood exterior remains visible on the sides and rear. Around this same period, the front porch and cupola were removed.

Despite these alterations, the home retains the bulk of its Greek Revival and Italianate features. It immediately conveys its identity as a mid nineteenth-century country house. By contrast, the row of Beaux-Arts townhouses directly north of the house are built like standard townhouses of their period: flush with the sidewalk, with high stoops to an elevated entrance, and facades of limestone and brick. The Harris-Newhouse home—with its wood frame, wraparound porch (extant at side and rear), its various Greek-Revival and Italianate details and its unique position in the lot, set back at a diagonal to the gently curving street, with a small, neat yard in front—is more suggestive of the rural background of Washington Heights than of the urban area it became.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **LONE SURVIVOR OF FORGOTTEN TIME, FORGOTTEN MEN**

Today, almost no evidence survives of Dennis Harris' and John Newhouse's mighty contributions to Washington Heights.

The refinery at Sugarhouse Point, closed in 1857, was briefly used as a training ground for the Fire Department, but fell into decay and was razed in 1896. The *Jenny Lind* steamboat, perhaps ahead of its time, never attracted enough customers and went out of business after several years, concluding the only attempt made to provide a commuter line-by-water between Upper and Lower Manhattan.<sup>69</sup> The old Kingsland mansion, where the Harris family lived, is long gone, and the Congregationalist church that Harris and Newhouse helped build eventually switched to a Presbyterian denomination and was sold when parishioners moved to a newer church down the block—the once proud building with its noble clock tower was used to store balloons, and burned to the ground in 1908.<sup>70</sup>

Only the house at 857 Riverside still stands, altered and dwarfed by its newer neighbors, yet just as proud and significant a symbol of an earlier time as the nearby Little Red Lighthouse in Fort Washington Park. That plucky lighthouse, bearing up in the shadows of its Goliath neighbor, the George Washington Bridge, inspired the best-selling children's book, *The Little Red Lighthouse and the Great Gray Bridge* by [Hildegard Swift](#), illustrated by [Lynd Ward](#). The little house on Riverside Drive still attracts the curious gaze of passersby, with its intriguing and anachronistic appeal.

The march of progress has not been kind to cultural landmarks relevant to persons of color in Upper Manhattan. That, and the fact that there are far fewer landmarked structures north of 96th Street than there are downtown. Among the historically deserving uptown structures that were never landmarked are Harlem's famed Cotton Club and Savoy Ballroom, Inwood's slave burial ground, and more recent losses including the legendary jazz hotspot Lenox Lounge. All are now gone. Many of Harlem's traditionally African-American churches are also being torn down or converted to luxury apartments with a rapidity that is both astonishing and troubling to local historians, preservationists and residents committed to maintaining the character of these long-underserved and under-recognized neighborhoods.<sup>71</sup>

With the Harris-Newhouse home, New York City has a chance to right that wrong. Whether or not the house itself was used as a stop on the

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<sup>69</sup> Bolton, 115.

<sup>70</sup> "The Washington Heights Church Burns," *The New York Times*, March 27, 1908.

<sup>71</sup> Peter Green, "Keeping the Faith," *Crain's New York Business*, March 18, 2019.  
[https://s3.amazonaws.com/external\\_clips/3217204/Crian's\\_Churches\\_Print\\_Version.pdf?15713447](https://s3.amazonaws.com/external_clips/3217204/Crian's_Churches_Print_Version.pdf?15713447)  
67



Underground Railroad is still an open question. What is unequivocal is the house's direct link to Dennis Harris, a stalwart worker on the Underground Railroad, and his friend and colleague, John Newhouse. Through the history of the church, both Harris and Newhouse are documented as having brought their abolitionist idealism with them when they moved from Lower Manhattan to Washington Heights.

The house which Harris built and Newhouse 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 one might assume given the location of other sites of conscience—such as Brooklyn's Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims—currently landmarked by the Commission.

Now more than ever, we need to expand the historic record to include a domestic building in a neighborhood known for its thriving communities of color. The Harris-Newhouse Home will give all New Yorkers—most *especially* those communities of color—a fuller, more nuanced and inspiring perspective of what is arguably the most important human rights movement in American history.

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## **APPENDIX A: Contemporary Photographs of 857 Riverside Drive**









