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July 14, 2020

Ms. Sarah Carroll, Chair
New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission
David N. Dinkins Municipal Building
1 Centre Street, 9th Floor
New York, NY 10007

Re: Support for Individual Landmark Designation of 227 Duffield Street in Brooklyn

Dear Ms. Carroll:

I write today to request that the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) designate 227 Duffield Street on Abolitionist Place as an individual New York City landmark. 227 Duffield Street's social significance is profoundly important. This 19th century structure is more than just a building--it is a significant contributor to the area's historic character as it is the last known standing historic site in Brooklyn where well-known abolitionists lived and where people found freedom through the Underground Railroad. I join residents, neighbors, my colleagues, and advocates in expressing support for this designation.

I applaud the June 30, 2020 vote by the Commissioners recognizing that the structure's social significance is important and should be saved, despite alterations to the original building. The preservation of this historic site is significant to the African American community and to the City of New York. The home embodies the role that people in Brooklyn and New York City played in the Abolitionist movement at a time when the punitive Fugitive Slave Act was the law throughout the country. 227 Duffield Street was home to two prominent African American Abolitionists, Thomas and Harriet Truesdell, who hosted noted Abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. We must preserve this invaluable piece of our history so that future generations can learn about those who fought against racism and slavery. With a severe lack of African American historical sites in Brooklyn, we must protect the social movements and structures that commemorate the anti-slavery resistance. The site's significance was enhanced through the work of the last owner, Joy "Mama Joy" Chatel, who turned 227 Duffield into a political and cultural center and whose passion for history and vision for designation and preservation as a museum and cultural center still lives on today.

The structure is in the heart of the downtown district in Brooklyn, an area which is visited by millions of Brooklynites, New Yorkers and tourists every year. The rezoning of Downtown Brooklyn has demolished all of the other buildings on this block, including others to which it was physically linked via tunnels so as to hide the enslaved people travelling on the Underground Railroad north to Canada. It is therefore essential to maintain this structure as a living document of Brooklyn's history and a true landmark of our city for future generations.

As chair of the Boerum Hill Association's land use committee and co-convenor of the Downtown Brooklyn Coalition's opposition to the City's inadequate plan for rezoning Downtown Brooklyn beginning in 2003, I recall visiting the property and supporting the efforts to learn more about its history and significance. I spent many hours at that time speaking and rallying with Mama Joy and her neighbor, Louis Greenstein, who owned 233 Duffield to which 227 Duffield was joined by the above-referenced tunnel. While my memories of the Downtown Plan and its passage in June 2004 are vivid and videos of the time document those memories, some are more vivid than others. Certainly some of those memories include visiting 227 and 233 Duffield and seeing the door to the tunnel and location of hidey holes where enslaved African Americans could hide from authorities. As it turns out, the significant history of this location was intentionally hidden from the public in 2003-2004, but the truth came out.

Opportunities for community voices to be heard are limited to the role assigned to public comment in the Uniform Land Use Review Process (ULURP). Thus many of these memories centered around meetings and hearings in connection with the mandatory Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), reviewing and organizing for the communities' testimony. I recall clearly that the Downtown Brooklyn Draft EIS indicated that there was no history of Underground Railroad activity at that site, despite its geographic location directly between Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church in Ft. Greene and Henry Ward Beecher's Plymouth Church in Brooklyn Heights. Even more stunning was the author's indication in testimony that they had sought advice from the Schomberg Center, who we were told confirmed that there was no such activity in the area. The authors of the EIS suggested that because there were few Black homeowners in that area at the time, Underground Railroad activity was highly unlikely. It had apparently never dawned on them that abolitionists who protected escaping enslaved African Americans were also white people who believed that human beings should not own other human beings.¹ Riveting City Council testimony by the Schomberg Center put paid to this notion and the Center testified that contrary to the EIS, this area was a veritable hotbed of abolitionist history and the location was highly likely to have been part of the Underground Railroad.


Therefore, I was dismayed to learn that the building was set for demolition last year and joined my colleagues and the community in advocating for its preservation.

¹ Many abolitionists were active in other social justice efforts including the movement for women's suffrage. As we have come to learn and more fully appreciate intersectional influences, in this year of the 100th anniversary of the passage of the 19th Amendment giving women the right to vote, it is important to call attention to the work of local abolitionists such as Harriet Truesdell. Her activism in the suffrage movement was also important in organizing for the movement to abolish slavery.

The proposal to designate this structure as a New York City landmark has received the significant support of area residents and thousands of people through an online petition. This includes Circle for Justice Innovations, Families United for Racial and Economic Equality (FUREE), Equality for Flatbush, The Friends of Abolitionist Place, and many others. This was truly a community led effort from the very beginning. The proposal also has the widespread support of many elected officials, per our request to LPC in 2019.

Preserving this building is the right way to document and connect our city to its past, as we continue to move forward. I urge the Landmarks Preservation Commission to designate 227 Duffield Street as a New York City landmark as quickly as possible.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jo Anne Simon". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "J".

Jo Anne Simon
Member of Assembly