



CITY OF NEW YORK

MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD FOUR

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BURT LAZARIN
Chair

JESSE R. BODINE
District Manager

June 11, 2019

Hon. Sarah Carroll
Chair
Landmarks Preservation Commission
Municipal Building, 9th Floor
One Center Street
New York, NY 10007

**Re: 342 West 53rd Street
St. Benedict the Moor Church**

Dear Chair Carroll,

At the April 10, 2019 meeting of Manhattan Community Board 4's (MCB4) Clinton/Hell's Kitchen Land Use Committee, Board members and members of the community discussed the St. Benedict the Moor Church building ("Church") at 342 West 53rd Street.

The Church has been an important landmark to New York City's cultural, ethnic, and religious history. The property is now for sale and at risk for redevelopment.

On June 5, 2019, following the counsel of its Clinton/Hell's Kitchen Land Use Committee, Manhattan Community Board 4, by a vote of 44 in favor, 0 opposed, 1 abstaining, and 0 present but not eligible, voted to recommend that St. Benedict the Moor be designated a landmark and a Request for Evaluation be submitted to the NYC Landmarks and Preservation Commission (LPC).

Background

The St. Benedict the Moor Church building has served the community as a Catholic church since the last half of the 1800s. As part of the Western Rail Yards Rezoning in 2009, the building was designated as an architectural resource within the Western Rail Yards 2009 Final Environmental

Impact Statement¹. In that statement, the St. Benedict the Moor Church was deemed to be New York City Landmark-eligible (NYCL-eligible) by the LPC on March 18, 2009 and State/National Register-eligible (S/NR-eligible) by the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation on March 19, 2009. MCB4 had responded to this by recommending and requesting its designation as a landmark as part of the MCB4 Western Rail Yards Resolution on July 27, 2009². However, the building was not designated as a landmark.

On June 30, 2017, the Church was deconsecrated³, which opened up the possibility of the Church being sold and redeveloped. The property is now for sale and the community is at risk for losing a significant part of its history.

History

St. Benedict the Moor Church was the first African-American mission church north of the Mason Dixon line. The mission was founded in 1883 at the former Third Universalist Church located at 210 Bleecker Street. Due to financial difficulties, an agreement was made for “Mount Loretto”, a Catholic organization caring for orphaned and destitute children, to take over all St. Benedict properties. May 1, 1898 was the last service at the Bleecker Street location.

Father John Burke then persuaded the Archdiocese of New York to buy the Second Evangelical Church on 342-344 West 53rd Street, a building designed by R.C. McLane & Sons and erected in 1869. The church was consecrated as St. Benedict the Moor and continued its mission to serve African-American Catholics. For many years St. Benedict the Moor Church primarily served the African-American population of Clinton/Hell's Kitchen.

When purchased, according to a history of the Church by George Coll, “The premises, unchanged from the time of its construction, show at the street level a medium-sized hall above which the church proper is located, following the common design of many of the Protestant buildings of that era. With a capacity for about 250 people, plus 40 or so more in the choir loft, the interior of the temple is reached by a double stairway, one in its original spiral fashion, the other modified during Fr. O’Keefe’s time, as a matter of convenience. At the main entrance, outside, a small enclosed garden, now gone, added character to the building. Upstairs, two small doors provided access to the interior, one of simple lines and beauty, enhanced by large stained-glass windows on each side, installed after the building was purchased from its former occupants⁴.” The Catholic News on November 25, 1933 noted that “Father Shanley has erected a convent at 322 West 53 Street for the colored Sisters teaching in the school. This building is a memorial to Monsignor Burke and Monsignor O’Keefe.”

¹ [2009. Western Rail Yard Project- Final Environmental Impact Statement. Chapter 8 - Historic Resources](#)

² [July 27th 2009 - MCB4 Western Rail Yards Resolution](#)

³ [S. Benedict the Moor Church Archdiocese Decree of Deconsecration](#)

⁴ Based on the book: A Pioneer Church: Brief history of the church of St. Benedict the Moor in the city of New York, U.S.A by George Coll. 1993.

In 1936, the resident priest was transferred and St Benedict's had no resident priest and a minimum of religious services until 1953 when Archdiocese turned administration over to Spanish T.O.R. Franciscans. The Spanish order of Franciscans was assigned to the church and the Church was rededicated in 1954.

Two buildings owned by the Archdiocese and adjacent to the church were torn down in 1958. In 1967 they built a 3-story residence, connected with the church and the old quarters.

Architectural Distinction

The Property

The St. Benedict the Moor Church is an important New York City landmark, noted for its rich history and significance to the African-American church population. Located on the midblock of 53rd Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues, the property has a 40 foot frontage and a lot area of 6,016 square feet. The property is located within the Preservation Area A of the Special Clinton District in an R8/C1-5 district. The existing 2-story building covers the full lot.

Western Rail Yards FEIS Excerpt

The St. Benedict the Moor Church (NYCL-eligible, S/NR-eligible), at 342 West 53rd Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues, was erected in 1869 and designed by R.C. McLane & Sons. The Church has a temple-front façade with a pediment pierced by an ocular window (now covered) and framed by a modillioned cornice. On the first and second floors, there are round arched openings set within recessed and corbelled areas (see view 17 of Figure 8-11). The Church has seen various congregations and parishioners over its more than 100-year history, yet most famously served at the first black Roman Catholic Church north of the Mason Dixon line. The St. Benedict the Moor mission was founded in 1883, and originally occupied a church in Greenwich Village. As the black population of New York City migrated farther uptown, St. Benedict moved as well, and established itself in this church on West 53rd Street in 1898, which had been formerly occupied as the Second Church of the Evangelical Association. In 1921, again due to black migration to the north, the congregation moved to Harlem and the Church was reassigned to the Spanish order of Franciscans in 1954, who have occupied the site ever since. The Church stands as a vestige of the days when the neighborhood of Clinton/Hell's Kitchen was a thriving African-American neighborhood. OPRHP found the Church eligible for listing on the S/NR under Criterion A in the areas of ethnic and religious history as the first black Roman Catholic Church north of the Mason Dixon line⁵.

Conclusion

⁵ [2009. Western Rail Yard Project- Final Environmental Impact Statement. Chapter 8 - Historic Resources](#)

The Board urges the Commission to carefully consider its Request for Evaluation of the St. Benedict the Moor Church. It is vital to preserve the Church to acknowledge and commemorate its significance in the City's – and the Hell's Kitchen Community's – cultural, ethnic, and religious history.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Burt Lazarin". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Burt Lazarin
Chair
Manhattan Community Board 4

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jd". The signature is simple and stylized, consisting of a few loops and a long horizontal stroke.

Jean-Daniel Noland
Chair
Clinton/Hell's Kitchen Land Use Committee