



CITY OF NEW YORK
MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD FOUR

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Chair

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November 10, 2021

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

re: Former Colored School No. 4 at 128 West 17th Street

Dear Chair Carroll,

On November 3, 2021, reflecting the unanimous vote of Chelsea Land Use Committee, Manhattan Community Board 4 (CB4), by a vote of 43 in favor, 0 opposed, 0 abstaining and 0 present but not eligible, voted to recommend that the former Colored School No. 4 at 128 West 17th Street be designated a Landmark of historical and cultural significance. A Request for Evaluation to LPC was submitted by noted historian Eric Washington in 2018, and re-submitted in 2021. Designation of this significant site would align with LPC's commitment to the Equity Framework instituted this year, specifically recognizing African American history in the City.

Architectural, Historical and Cultural Importance

Colored School No. 4/Grammar School 81 was one of a series of schoolhouses to develop from the African Free-Schools, established in 1787, to educate Black children. This three-story brick building, built circa 1870, represents the Model Primary School House plan adopted in 1844 by the Public School Society, which later merged with the Board of Education. It reflects the official racially segregated education system in New York City for most of the 19th century. The term "colored" was used then to describe both people of African descent and the racially segregated facilities designated for their use. This school building is the only remaining "colored" school in Manhattan.

"Colored" schools were the cultural centers of New York's African American communities in those times. There was a concentration of working-class African American families in Chelsea

during the post-Civil War Reconstruction era. This school became a pillar to the immediate community. It also was integral to an informal network of other African American schools, churches, enterprises, missions and societies that anchored the growing Black enclaves of lower Manhattan.

Graduating from grammar school was an important milestone for African American children who were otherwise often pulled from school to work and help support their families. Colored School No. 4 graduated many noteworthy students who became leaders and community builders who later settled uptown, helping to establish Harlem as the 20th -century capital of Black America.

Notable figures associated with the school include:

- Longtime principal Sarah J. Tompkins, famous educator, suffragist and community leader
- Teacher J. Imogen Howard, the first black World's Fair manager at Chicago's Columbian Exposition of 1893, representing New York women
- Graduate Susan Elizabeth Frazier, New York City's first African American teacher assigned to a mixed public school
- Graduate Walter F. Craig, acclaimed violinist and composer, prominent orchestra leader
- Graduate James H. Williams, organized black college men as an essential work force for Grand Central Terminal

Recent History

The Board of Education relinquished this “colored” school building in around 1897. The City retained possession of the building and leased the ground floor to Civil War veterans for a clubhouse. In the 1920's the upper floors were leased to the Veteran Fire Association. These two organizations remained in the building into the 1930's. The New York City Department of Sanitation then took over the space for administrative purposes.

The Property

The lot area of the site is 2,300 square feet, with a frontage of 25 feet. The three-story building covers the entire lot area and has a total gross area of 6,900 square feet. A small basement living space was for the janitress. The building's facade is remarkably intact, retaining even the small-paned windows seen in historic photos. The building appears to be vacant. It is between a large school building on the east and a residential building on the west. The site is in a C6-2A district which permits commercial uses (6.0 FAR), residential uses (6.02 FAR) and community facility uses (6.5 FAR). It is under-built for these as-of-right uses.

Analysis

Colored School No. 4 could be an excellent learning environment for New York City's children and families to understand the heritage and migratory path of black residents over the centuries.

It could illustrate the segregated policies in the city's educational system in the 1800's while providing examples of African Americans who made important contributions to the society. The building's history could be linked to other nearby sites that tell important stories of local Black history:

- The townhouse on West 29th Street between Eight and Ninth Avenue, Lamartine Place, was an underground railroad stop in Civil War days. The abolitionist family who lived there provided shelter for slaves running away to save their lives. In 1863, the family escaped from a New York Draft Riots mob by going to the roof and running to adjoining buildings to safety.
- In 1863 the Draft Riots mob set fire to the Colored Orphan Asylum, located at Fifth Avenue between 42nd and 43rd Streets. The asylum building was destroyed; fortunately, all of the children escaped harm. The Draft Riots were thought to have resulted in the deaths of nearly a hundred New Yorkers, many of whom were free African Americans who were targeted by the mob.
- North of Chelsea in Hell's Kitchen, the St. Benedict the Moor Church was established in 1898 at 342 West 53rd Street. It is noted for its rich history and significance to the African Americans. The church served as the first Black Roman Catholic Church north of the Mason Dixon line. It reflects the days when Clinton/Hell's Kitchen was a thriving African American neighborhood. CB4 has submitted to LPC a Request for Evaluation of this church and a designation as an individual Landmark.

There is a precedent for designating 128 West 17th Street as a Landmark. In January 1998, LPC designated Colored School No. 3 at 270-276 Union Avenue in Brooklyn as a Landmark. This one-and-half story building, located in Williamsburg, was built in 1879-81. It is the only known "colored" school remaining in Brooklyn. It calls forth the city's policy of race-based school segregation policy. It evolved from Williamsburg's original African Free School, founded prior to 1841. Similarly, Colored School No. 4 is the last remaining "colored" school in Manhattan and started from the same roots.

Designating 128 West 17th Street as an Individual Landmark would be consistent with the current goals of LPC to make decisions within a framework for equity and diversity. In April 2021 LPC created "an interactive story map to celebrate New York City's African American history through its designated places." In introducing this new map, LPC stated "New York City's diversity is its greatest strength, essential to its significance as a thriving cultural, intellectual, artistic, and economic center. The African American experience has been central to New York City since its earliest colonial settlement, and the lives, history, and culture of New York's Black residents and leaders are recognized in landmarks and historic districts throughout the city."

CB4 Recommendation

CB4 urges the Commission to act upon the Request for Evaluation of Colored School No. 4 for designation as an Individual Landmark. The school is a critical reminder of the City's segregationist education policy and history, which is not yet widely discussed or well-

understood. It is vital to preserve this last remaining “colored” school in Manhattan to commemorate African Americans’ heritage in the City. In response to the submission of a Request for Evaluation by noted historian and author Eric Washington, LPC has stated that the study is on-going. We urge LPC to expedite this evaluation in order to move towards Landmark designation of the building.

Sincerely,



Lowell D. Kern
Chair
Manhattan Community Board 4



Betty Mackintosh
Co-chair
Chelsea Land Use Committee



Paul Devlin
Co-chair
Chelsea Land Use Committee

cc: Hon. Corey Johnson, Speaker, City Council
Hon. Gale A. Brewer, Manhattan Borough President
Eric Washington
New York Landmarks Conservancy
Save Chelsea