



CITY OF NEW YORK

MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD FOUR

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JEAN-DANIEL NOLAND

Chair

ROBERT J. BENFATTO, JR., ESQ.

District Manager

Hon. Robert G. Tierney
Chair
Landmarks Preservation Commission
Municipal Building, ninth floor
One Centre Street
New York, NY 10007

Re: Potential Lamartine Place Historic District

Dear Chair Tierney:

Manhattan Community Board 4 is writing to express its support for the designation of the row houses in the western portion of the north side of West 29th Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues, known in the 19th Century as Lamartine Place, as a New York City Historic District. This row deserves protection for both its historical importance and its architectural character.

The board has long been interested in preserving the character of this area. In the Chelsea 197-a Plan we successfully proposed a substantial downzoning of this block and 30th Street to the north with the goal of preserving their character and uses. As we stated at the time, "29th Street offers an extraordinary rowhouse block-face to its south and provides the only reminder of the original context of the landmarked Church of the Holy Apostles on Ninth Avenue a little to the south." At that time most of the row houses on the block had not yet lost their historic character, but since then alterations or replacements of many of the houses east of the former French Hospital, now the French Apartments, have made it clear that zoning alone cannot ensure preservation of historic character here.

Until recently the grouping west of the French Apartments had largely maintained its character of intact row houses dating from the mid-nineteenth century, set back behind planted front yards and largely historic iron fences; but recently the start of inappropriate alterations to a member of the group, No. 339, has threatened not only this very significant house but also the setting of the historic events in which it had a major place. The research of a neighbor, Fern Luskin, has revealed this building as the home of the well-known abolitionists Abigail Hopper Gibbons, a pioneer in the nursing of Civil War soldiers, and her husband James Sloan Gibbons, author of the influential Civil War poem, "We are coming, Father Abraham." It is also that rarity, a convincingly documented station on the Underground Railroad. It was a specific target of the Draft Rioters of 1863 looking for Horace Greeley, who often stayed here, and one of the first New York City

policemen to lose his life in the line of duty was fatally wounded defending the house. We have already urged designation of this very significant building.

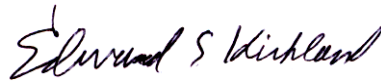
The importance of this house and the historical facts that houses nearby were owned by family members and connections of its residents, that women in the family were sheltered in these houses during the attacks on No. 339, and that the men in the building escaped over the flat roofs of the row show that is not only No. 339 that deserves preservation on historic grounds but also its neighbors. The extraordinary sense of place that still survives here provides an invaluable setting for the events that make No. 339 a witness to an important period in New York history.

Clearly the heart of the row as called out by the State Historic Preservation Office in its draft of a "Potential Lamartine Place Historic District," Nos. 333-357, forms the essential part of the setting of the significant events in the houses of the row. While including in this designation the remaining houses at the west end of the row, handsome but more altered and somewhat different in character, and the restored row houses on 30th Street that back on them should be explored, the surviving row on 29th Street should be designated without undue delay in order to preserve a grouping that forms at the same time a handsome row of a type that is becoming an endangered species in New York City and the setting of important events in the history of our city and country.

Sincerely,



Jean-Daniel Noland
Chair, Manhattan Community Board 4



Edward Kirkland
Chair, Landmarks Task Force

Cc: Local Electeds
Municipal Art Society
Historic Districts Council
New York Landmarks Conservancy