



December 14, 2022

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

Re: Colored School No. 4/Grammar School 81, Chelsea, NY

Dear Chairwoman Carroll,

I write on behalf of the African American Redress Network (AARN), a collaboration among Howard University School of Law's Thurgood Marshall Civil Rights Center, and Columbia University's Institute for the Study of Human Rights, and the School of International and Public Affairs. It came to our attention that on November 3, 2021, Manhattan CB4, by a vote of 43 in favor, 0 opposed, 0 abstaining and 0 present but not eligible, voted in support of a Request for Evaluation submitted by noted historian and author Eric K. Washington to recommend that the former Colored School No. 4 at 128 15 West 17th Street be designated a Landmark of historical and cultural significance.

Historical Significance

As the borough's only known surviving "colored" schoolhouse—and perhaps the oldest extant Board of Education facility—the building evokes an official racially segregated education system for most of the nineteenth century. 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.

By the late 1870s, a movement to disestablish colored schools prompted demonstrative public appeals from black citizens—including Frederick Douglass—which influenced then New York State Governor Grover Cleveland to sign a Legislative act on May 5, 1884, that spared two separate race-based schools from closure: of those two, Colored School No. 4 was thereafter designated as Grammar Schools No. 81. Despite the new name, it remained a “colored” school into the 1890s until it's disuse. The Board of Education gave up the building circa 1894.

“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. 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.

Precedent

There is a precedent for designating 128 West 17th 100 Street as a Landmark. In January 1998, LPC designated Colored School No. 3 at 270-276 Union Avenue in Brooklyn as a Landmark. That one-and-a-half story building, located in Williamsburg, was built in 1879-81. It is the only known “colored” school remaining in Brooklyn. It evolved from Williamsburg’s original African Free School, founded prior to 1841. Similarly, Colored School No. 4 is the last remaining “colored” schoolhouse 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.”

Recommendation

AARN urges the Commission to act upon the Request for Evaluation of Colored School No. 4 for designation as an Individual Landmark that was submitted by historian Eric K. Washington. 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 Mr. Washington’s submission, 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,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Justin Hansford". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping initial "J" and "H".

Justin Hansford, Esq.
Executive Director
Thurgood Marshall Civil Rights Center
Howard University, Washington, DC

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Linda J. Mann". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Linda J. Mann
Research Scholar
School of International and Public Affairs
Columbia University, NY, NY