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SENATOR THOMAS K. DUANE

29th SENATORIAL DISTRICT • NEW YORK STATE SENATE



TESTIMONY BY NEW YORK STATE SENATOR THOMAS K. DUANE
BEFORE THE NEW YORK CITY LANDMARKS PRESERVATION COMMISSION
REGARDING THE PROPOSED DESIGNATION OF THE LAMARTINE PLACE
HISTORIC DISTRICT

January 26, 2010

My name is Thomas K. Duane and I represent New York State's 29th Senate District, in which the proposed Lamartine Place Historic District is located. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony to the New York City Council Subcommittee on Landmarks, Public Siting & Maritime Uses regarding this designation.

The row houses included within the proposed Lamartine Place Historic District (333 to 355 West 29th Street) in Chelsea are historically significant and architecturally meritorious. Dating back to the late 1840s and early 1850s, when they were developed by the Reverend Dr. Cyrus Mason and William Torrey, the houses sit on what was known until the end of the 19th Century as "Lamartine Place." They were built in the Greek Revival style with Renaissance Revival elements and in the Renaissance Revival style with neo-Grec elements. Although some of these houses have undergone significant alteration from their original condition over the last 160 years, as a group, they are notable for their period details, brick and brownstone facades, and their front gardens as well. Even with later additions, the buildings compose one of the few remaining examples of mid-19th Century architecture in the city.

Beyond its architectural merits, Lamartine Place is particularly significant for its role in the history of our City and nation. The Hopper Gibbons Family, including famed abolitionist Abigail Hopper Gibbons and her husband James Sloan Gibbons, was a prominent abolitionist and social reformist family that lived at Lamartine Place, briefly residing at 337 West 29th Street before making a permanent move to 339 West 29th Street. The building was well-known among opponents of slavery, and the family hosted a number of leading abolitionists there, including Isaac Tatem Hopper, Horace Greeley, John Brown, and Joseph Choate. In 2008, Ms. Fern Luskin, historian and Lamartine Place resident, uncovered personal correspondence of Joseph Choate confirming that the building was a Station in the Underground Railroad. The fact that evidence confirms 339 West 29th Street's place in history added tremendously to the case for the establishment of the Lamartine Place Historic District. Preserved and documented Underground Railroad Stations are a rarity in New York City, and federal legislation recognizes the need to preserve these incredibly important reminders of our nation's history.

Lamartine Place has further significance in New York City history as a focal point in the Civil

War Draft Riots of 1863. During the Riots, a number of the block's buildings were attacked due to the owners' supposed or real abolitionist ties. Attacks occurred against the home of the Hopper Gibbons Family, 339 West 29th Street, and their neighbors Mr. Wilson and Samuel Sinclair, who lived at 343 and 353 West 29th Street, respectively. Members of the Hopper Gibbons family were forced to flee for their lives, running along the contiguous rooftops of the block's buildings to reach and escape through the Herrman Family residence at 355 West 29th Street. It is exceptional that the buildings survived the Civil War Draft Riots largely intact, since many targets of the angry mobs were burned to the ground. We should seize this opportunity to ensure their continued preservation.

Clearly there is a strong case for the designation of the Lamartine Place historic district. Architecturally, these handsome Greek Revival and Renaissance Revival row houses date from the 1840's, a period from which there are few remnants left in the City. Culturally, they are rooted in the abolitionist movement and the safe passage of fugitive slaves on the Underground Railroad, and they are a testament to the Chelsea community's deep history of social and political activism and progressivism.

For these reasons, I urge the City Council to look favorably upon the designation of the proposed Lamartine Place Historic District. Thank you for your consideration of my thoughts on this matter.