

FROM THE DESK OF  
**FERGUS M. BORDEWICH**

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As you know, I am the author of the standard national history of the Underground Railroad, *Bound for Canaan: The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America*. I am writing to you to lend my full support to the effort to save the Dennis Harris house at 857 Riverside Drive. This property is of potentially great importance in preserving the history of the Underground Railroad, all the more so since scarcely any traces of the underground still remain in the city, which was once a key transshipment point for northbound fugitives.

Harris's involvement in the Underground Railroad is well-documented. While the use of his Washington Heights properties as underground sites has not yet been proven, very strong circumstantial evidence suggests that they were. At the very least, further historical study is urgently called for. Destruction of the surviving building would be a travesty, and an irreparable loss to a city which has a very poor record of preserving sites related to Black and abolitionist history.

Although antebellum New York City was home to important abolitionists and a sizeable antebellum African-American population, it was also a hotbed of anti-abolitionist activity, and not a secure refuge for fugitives. There was urgent pressure to move newly arrived fugitives to safe havens upstate. Just how many fugitives passed through the city is unknowable, given the paucity of records. A reasonable estimate would be at least several hundred or perhaps as many as one thousand per year from the 1830s through the 1850s. While some continued up the coast to New England, the great majority were sent up the Hudson River to Albany and on to abolitionist strongholds in central New York or Canada.

The comparative isolation of Harris's Washington Heights properties argues for their utility as a protected, easily guarded waystation for fugitives who needed to be gotten quickly out of lower Manhattan. Harris's ownership of a steamboat strongly suggests that this vessel could well have been used, as others were, to ferry fugitive slaves, since river boats were the primary means to move freedom-seekers northward.

At a time when the nation is being called to account for its implication in the long history of slavery, and when the Underground Railroad is increasingly being recognized as a rare, sterling example of antebellum Americans bridging the color line on behalf of human rights, the Harris house deserves serious attention from preservationists and historians, not demolition.



Fergus M. Bordewich