

It Was an All-Black School in 1860. Today It's a Manhattan Landmark.

New York City will provide \$6 million in funding to rehabilitate the newly landmarked building, which for 34 years was home to a school for Black children during segregation.



By Lola Fadulu

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For years, New York City Department of Sanitation workers ate their lunch in a three-story yellow brick building on West 17th Street in Chelsea without knowing its history: It was once a “colored” school that served Black Americans during racial segregation in New York City public schools.

On Tuesday, the city’s Landmarks Preservation Commission voted to designate the building, which had been known as Colored School No. 4, a protected landmark, and city officials said they would provide \$6 million to rehabilitate it.

“We stand on the shoulders of the young men and women that attended this school, and while they may be gone, I am honored to ensure they will never be forgotten,” Mayor Eric Adams said in a statement.

The schoolhouse, at 128 West 17th Street, was built around 1849, and in 1860 it became one of eight public primary schools for Black students in Manhattan; the schools served a total of 2,377 students. The building also housed an evening school for Black adults.

It was renamed Grammar School No. 81 in 1884, when the city’s Board of Education stopped using the term “colored” in school names, but it continued to serve Black children exclusively until the city closed segregated public schools 10 years later.

The landmark designation comes as cities and states are grappling with how to address unsavory parts of American history, particularly Black history, as modern-day inequities persist in education and elsewhere.

While cities like New York appear to be moving toward speaking openly about the past, other places are heading in the opposite direction, fighting against the surfacing of such history by limiting how slavery and race are taught in American classrooms. Florida’s education department, for example, rejected dozens of social studies textbooks this month in an effort to remove material on contested topics surrounding race and social justice.

Sarah Carroll, the chair of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, said in a statement that the former Colored School No. 4 represented “a difficult, and often overlooked, period in our city’s history.”

The decision to landmark it, she said, demonstrated “the importance of preserving the sites that tell the complete, sometimes challenging, story of our city.”

The school closed in 1894, but the building remained city property and has been used for various purposes, including as a clubhouse for Civil War veterans. From 1936 through 2015, it was a satellite office and locker facility for the Sanitation Department.

City officials estimated that repairs to the building, which has water damage, would take until 2027. They said they would work with agencies and local stakeholders to decide how it would be used.

The landmark designation and funding for rehabilitation comes years after Eric K. Washington, a historian, began urging the city to protect the building. More than 2,800 people signed a petition in support.



The building has been used for a variety of purposes since it was home to the school, including as a clubhouse for Civil War

veterans and as an office for sanitation workers. Municipal
Archives, City of New York

Mr. Washington learned about the school while researching James H. Williams, the chief porter of Grand Central Terminal's Red Caps, a group of Black men who worked at the station.

Mr. Williams attended the former Colored School No. 4 and would have been one of its last students before it closed, Mr. Washington said.

"I feel delightfully exhausted," Mr. Washington said. He filed two requests with the landmarks commission to evaluate the site, the first in 2018, and heard very little. "My fingers are sore from being crossed all of this time," he said.

Mr. Washington said that he was glad that the city was protecting the building at a time when others were making "really concerted, mean efforts" to erase and ban the teaching of Black history, which he described as an essential part of American history.

"I think that the fact that this school and what it represents is being landmarked in this major city will serve as an example to locales across the country, so I'm thrilled in that regard," Mr. Washington said.

While the Sanitation Department had expressed support for rehabilitating the school, a spokesman said last year that there were no funds to do so.

Jessica Tisch, the sanitation commissioner, praised Mr. Adams for making "a critical investment" to preserve the school. She said officials would work to ensure "future generations know both about the harm caused at this site and about the resilience of the New Yorkers who resisted it."

A mob of working-class white people upset by the first federal draft, and the fact that wealthier people were being allowed to evade it, attacked the schoolhouse during the Draft Riots of July 1863, according to The New-York Tribune. Teachers barricaded doors, and the rioters eventually gave up.

Sarah J.S. Tompkins Garnet, the school's principal, was instrumental in fighting back against that mob. She was one of the first Black female principals in the New York City public school system.

The school had several notable graduates, including Susan Elizabeth Frazier, who became the first Black teacher working in an integrated public school, and Walter F. Craig, a classical violinist.

"At a time when states are trying to erase Black history, we're celebrating it," Councilman Erik Bottcher, whose Manhattan district includes Chelsea, said, adding that saving the building had been one of the neighborhood's "top priorities."

Another former "colored" school, No. 3 in Brooklyn, became a landmark in the late 1990s.

Lola Fadulu is a general assignment reporter on the Metro desk of The Times. She was previously a local reporter for The Washington Post.

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