

Wednesday, November 18, 2020.  
NYC Parks Oversight Committee Hearing:  
*The State of Historic Houses Under the Jurisdiction of the Parks Department*

Testimonial delivered by:  
Maria R. Becce,  
Trustee of The Queens Historical Society  
[mbecce@mbstubbs.com](mailto:mbecce@mbstubbs.com)

Distinguished Committee Members,

Thank you for this opportunity to speak today as a newly elected Trustee of the Queens Historical Society. We need your assistance to continue being a leading borough-wide organization. From John Bowne's courageous defense of the Quakers' right to worship, to Kingsland Homestead in the post-revolutionary period, and the landmarked Weeping Beech, a reminder of the nurseries that flourished in Flushing up through the 19th century, this cluster of landmarks unites three centuries of Queens' history.

QHS is the only historical society impacting all the Borough's 15 districts. The Society documents, preserves and presents the borough's history through exhibitions, community outreach programs and various volunteer opportunities. In the past 50 years, we have offered: satellite exhibits, community gatherings and programs to underserved public school students. To accomplish our mission we are meeting with the cultural needs of audiences in each and every community in the Borough. Whether at the major visitor venues such as LaGuardia and Kennedy Airports, The NY Hall of Science, or in local senior centers, schools, libraries, parks – we strive to be accessible to all. We respectfully request your consideration in the following matters:

- Improve the efficiency of the Capital Budget process between Parks Dept and Historic House Museums. More transparency in the Capital Budget funds allocation process. QHS works hard each fiscal year to present the renovation needs of its 230-year-old historic museum located at Kingsland Homestead in the landmarked Weeping Beech Park, in Flushing. The allocated projects frequently get shifted away from the Parks Dept to other City Agencies (Dept of Design & Construction). These are taxpayers funds allocated for the purpose of serving the cultural and educational needs our museum and research center can provide. Many City funded projects are neglected for years and have left our many other historic buildings to rapidly deteriorate.
- Kingsland Homestead has been located for over 50 years on the premises of the **historic Weeping Beech Park**. The Weeping Beech tree that once rooted itself in this park lived for 151 years, from 1847 to 1998 — one of the City's few trees to be landmarked. The tree originated at a nobleman's estate in Belgium from whence it was transported to New York City by the efforts of one enterprising gardener: Samuel Bowne Parsons (1819-1907), a prominent horticulturist and father of Parks Superintendent Samuel Parsons Jr. In its maturity, its branches touched the ground and re-rooted, creating a ring of offspring surrounding its immense canopy. In the years before it finally succumbed to old age, it reached sixty feet in height with a "leaf curtain" of eighty feet in diameter. Legend has it that this tree gave rise to generations of Weeping Beeches in America.

- The Weeping Beech Tree and its descendants represent the focal point of the park's integrity. However, the area has been long neglected and needs professional ongoing maintenance. With limited resources and expertise, our staff performs routine maintenance of the park, but it requires the expertise of trained arborists in Forestry to oversee and maintain the historic trees within the public space of Weeping Beech Park. As we struggle to maintain operations with an operating budget and reduced staff hours during the COVID-19 crisis, the burden of pruning trees and general upkeep of the park falls on willing but unqualified museum staff to substitute for the skills provided by professional staff in Forestry.

#### Capital Funding Requests:

- Decorative Metal Gate - the park's surrounding metal gate has not been re-painted or replaced in over three decades. Instead of enhancing the property, it directs the visitors' perception of the park as a dilapidated and neglected public green space. We have been using our privately raised funds to provide the much-needed beautification to grounds surrounding Kingsland Homestead. The work has been noticed in the community and has generated positive and renewed interest in the museum and public green space. Modest and sporadic stipends previously provided by the HHT were not nearly sufficient to cover the annual expenses needed for general Weeping Beech park upkeep.
- Driveway - the Museum's driveway remains to be a constant concern for much of 2017 up to the present. Parks management has been placing mulch for years, which resulted in over 6 inches of debris, debilitating any staff or visitors' vehicles from parking at the museum's premises. Each autumn and winter season, due to heavy rainfall and snow, the mulch-covered driveway created heaps of mud, and caused vehicles to get stuck with only the hope AAA's aid in being recovered from the site. We respectfully request additional funds to be allocated for an appropriately paved entrance/driveway.
- Forestry - multiple requests have been made and work orders submitted over the last five years to remove dead tree branches looming over the park, creating hazardous conditions for children and adults visiting the park. We continue to wait for appropriate Parks maintenance staff for cleanup.

#### Expense Budget Requests:

- With City and State-wide museum closures during the pandemic, many organizations including our site have been struggling to keep up with the financial burdens of maintaining staff and transitioning to the virtual format of our programs. QHS has successfully implemented free, and in some cases very nominally charged online events for families, seniors and public school students - many of which have been in partnership with the Queens & NY Public Library and local grassroots community groups. Each month we offer workshops to underserved communities in four world languages: Spanish, English, Mandarin Chinese and Korean. We ask that the committee considers additional operating budget allocations for our educational and community outreach programs.

In closing, Queens Historical Society aims to build upon and enhance the goals and aspirations of Historic House Trust through greater transparency and clearly defined methods of procurement. This will ensure the necessary and ongoing support of Kingsland Homestead as well as the surrounding public green space to protect the historic Weeping Beech Trees.

Thank you –

Maria R. Becce



On behalf of The Alice Austen House, thank you to the New York City Council for calling a hearing on the State of the Historic Houses under the Jurisdiction of the Parks Department.

The Alice Austen House is the only historic house museum in America dedicated to the work of a single female photographer, Alice Austen, providing changing exhibitions of her groundbreaking photographs, contemporary photography exhibitions and public education programs.

In June of 2017 the Alice Austen House marked its national designation as a site of LGBTQ history. This was an achievement in collaboration with the National Parks Service and the New York LGBT Historic Sites Project. Integrating Alice Austen and her partner, Gertrude Tate's loving relationship story into the museum's core interpretation bridges a gap between the institutional narrative of Austen's story and the truth that the LGBTQ community has long known about her life.

In the past 18 months the non-profit organization Friends of Alice Austen House renovated all of its public galleries to include '*New Eyes on Alice Austen*' to better contextualize, expand, and update the presentation Austen's core story. Incorporating current scholarship, The Alice Austen House re-envisioned and renovated its permanent installation to comprehensively demonstrate Austen's contributions to photographic, immigration, women's and LGBTQ history. The new permanent installation which was funded by foundations and the National Endowment for the Humanities was unveiled to the public at the end of May 2019, coinciding with New York City's World Pride celebrations.

During the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, the Alice Austen House quickly pivoted to creating accessible programming for our audiences at a local, national and international level supported by Cares funding from NYCT, NEA, NEH and HNY. We installed a new exhibition "*Powerful and Dangerous: The Words and Images of Audre Lorde*" which was made available virtually through digital tours and community partnerships with the Brooklyn, Queens and New York Public libraries culture pass programs as well as a newly launched web site. We quickly adapted staff roles to ensure full staff retention and completed the launch of our online collections database to enable public access to our historic materials. Executive Director, Victoria Munro headed the re-opening task force for the 23 historic sites working closely with HHT, House Directors and Parks departments and was one of the first of the historic homes to re-open its doors for booked tours for the public.

We are working tirelessly to virtually adapt all of our council initiative programs with a skilled team of teaching artists and videographers. One of the key new programs that we provide is to LGBTQ+ teenagers in collaboration with New York City's Gender and Sexuality Alliances. We held our first virtual meetup with 23 teens from Stuyvesant High School on November 19, 2020. This program is currently unfunded and we are pursuing support for its ongoing success.

Over the past 3 years the Alice Austen House has expanded its staff to 9 members, committed to ongoing DEI trainings for all staff and board, revision of all staffing/hiring policies and has implemented a racial equity action plan.



The 501c3 that is Friends of Alice Austen House takes care of maintenance of our historic gardens and public programming of the interior and exterior spaces that make up the Alice Austen Park. We work to maintain funding and gather new support to expand our programs. The Covid-19 pandemic has shone a light on the needs of our communities to access outdoor public space and its connection the health and wellness needs of families, individuals and partner community organizations. As we look to the future, we hope that Parks and HHT can play a clear role in the support of our programs and partnerships and support the essential ongoing work to provide historic and contemporary interpretation both inside our doors and in the landmarked park.

I would like to once again thank all in attendance at this important hearing.

Sincerely

Victoria Munro  
Executive Director  
Alice Austen House



November 20, 2020

On behalf of the Bartow-Pell Mansion Museum, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony to the New York City Council's Parks Committee on "*The State of Historic Houses Under the Jurisdiction of the Parks Department.*"

Both a New York City and National Landmark, Bartow-Pell Mansion Museum is located in Pelham Bay Park just north of Orchard Beach. It is situated within a 60-acre LPC-designated historic district. The museum maintains nine of those acres including the mansion and carriage house, a walled garden, teaching and herb gardens, a memorial site, and an apple orchard. These nine acres are surrounded by what the Parks Department calls a "Forever Wild" zone.

Since Bartow-Pell's 100th anniversary year in 2014, both the museum's operating budget and public attendance have doubled (pre-COVID). Each year, approximately 18,000 visitors pass through the mansion's doors, stroll its gardens and grounds, and participate in programs and special events that speak to contemporary life, connect the past to the present, and cultivate an appreciation for the site's natural, historical, and cultural resources. Through Bartow-Pell's five distinct student programs, its museum educators see just under 8,500 New York City students from the Bronx, Queens, Manhattan, and Brooklyn annually (pre-COVID).

A recent accomplishment was opening the third floor to the public in 2018. The attic space had provided the living quarters for the many Irish immigrant women who worked at the mansion and served the Bartow family between 1840 and 1880. The third floor, which is a sharp contrast to the elegantly furnished rooms on the first and second floors, speaks to immigration issues where visitors can make connections between historical events and today. Family life, leaving home for a better future, and the struggles of daily work, resonate with both new immigrant populations as well as those who have called America home for generations.

In 2019, Bartow-Pell established a fruit tree orchard on the south side of the mansion which reflects the agrarian character of this country estate. The orchard serves as a teaching tool, a link to place and heritage, and a gathering space within the landscape.

During this fiscal year, and as a result of the pandemic, Bartow-Pell will become a DYCD Learning Lab, a Mayor's initiative that seeks to create remote learning opportunities for students in grades K through 12. It has been acknowledged through the 2017 Social Impact



**BARTOW-PELL MANSION MUSEUM**

of the Arts Project (SIAP) that Bartow-Pell is located in an area of low economic well-being, and the museum is committed to remaining an important resource and community anchor during this current crisis and well into the future.

Bartow-Pell is both a cultural destination and an educational resource. The site is multi-layered in its mission and history. The museum strives to reflect upon its past while encouraging all to recognize their roles as active community members. By studying the past, the museum encourages visitors to be aware of their place within history and the community in which they live. We hope to have them realize that they are a part of their community's future, and by extension, Bartow-Pell, and its continuing story.

The list of the museum's immediate needs is long, and although money has been allocated, work has not yet begun. The museum is not handicapped accessible, and there is only one public restroom in the building. Although exterior restoration and repointing were completed in 2016, the entire scope of that work is not yet finished, and payment to the contractor has still not been issued by DPR.

Since the winter of 2014 there have been 50 temporary support jacks holding up the building. In 2019, the FDNY fined DPR for having these temporary supports in place for over six years. In addition, the second-story floor-joist restoration work has yet to begin. During the time the museum has waited for that work to commence, a tree fell on the carriage house resulting in tens of thousands of dollars' worth of damage. The restoration of the carriage house from that felled tree is now part of the larger capital project which also includes the restoration of both the interior and exterior of the orangerie.

As an educational resource and cultural destination, Bartow-Pell is grateful to the New York City Council and the Department of Cultural Affairs as they support the lion's share of the museum's annual operating budget together with the Council members' discretionary funding and other initiatives. This support, together with earned income generated by admissions, workshop and tuition fees, fundraisers, and contracted services allows Bartow-Pell to provide meaningful programmatic content for students, scholars, and community members of all ages. Bartow-Pell also receives support from several foundations, corporations, and other public sources including New York State Council of the Arts (NYSCA), Humanities NY, and Con Edison. Most recently, The New York Community Trust provided GOS (salaries and technology) during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Individuals and other private donations help Bartow-Pell take responsibility for the maintenance of its nine-acre site including lawn mowing, gardeners' salaries, plantings,



pruning, fertilizing, as well as the irrigation and lighting systems. Yet, this private funding does not just maintain the site; Bartow-Pell has over the years funded many projects, large and small, that preserve and restore the buildings and grounds. The projects include, mostly recently, the restoration of the front stoop, the installation of an award-winning front entrance floor cloth, and the restoration of its landmarked walled garden which was funded by American Express and its Partners in Preservation program.

Thank you again for this opportunity to present testimony.

Alison McKay  
Executive Director  
Bartow-Pell Mansion Museum



## **Dyckman Farmhouse Museum Testimony**

Meredith S. Horsford, Executive Director

Inwood, Manhattan

November 18, 2020 City Council Hearing – Parks Committee

Thank you for calling this hearing to talk about these important historic structures that reside in New York City Parks. Built in 1784, the Dyckman Farmhouse Museum (DFM) is the last remaining farmhouse in Manhattan and today is part of the vibrant neighborhood of Inwood in Upper Manhattan. DFM is the only museum in Inwood and serves a multilingual community. Annual visitation is approximately 10,000, while through social media, we serve a large community virtually with nearly 6,000 followers across three platforms and an average of 30,000 social media impressions monthly.

Over the last six years, we were able to raise nearly \$7M in capital funds from City Council Member Ydanis Rodriguez and Manhattan Borough President Gale A. Brewer for the numerous restoration projects that are greatly needed at the Dyckman Farmhouse Museum. These projects include a new roof, interior wood restoration, an ADA compliant ramp onto the property, ADA compliant bathrooms, exterior lighting and landscape work. The Dyckman Farmhouse Museum Alliance (DFMA) raises all funds at the site to operate the museum and run all of the educational programs at the site. Because we are in a very underserved area of the city, the museum is free of charge and the majority of our public programs are also free.

Throughout the last six years and under new leadership, the Dyckman Farmhouse Museum, which had been a very traditional historic site with little relationship to its community, was a successful applicant to a grant program that enabled staff and leadership to rethink how historic house museums can be relevant to their present-day community. Through this grant, the Dyckman Farmhouse removed all of the room barriers that previously prevented visitors from entering the period spaces, installed bilingual labels and signage and began offering bilingual programs, promotional materials and visitor services. This not only impacted the audience that we serve, as neighborhood residents began visiting the museum for the first time, but it also helped the organization reshape public programs to feature those that connected the history of the site and its rural roots to the present-day urban community. Additionally, in the past six years, visitation to the museum has increased by nearly 70%. We have also developed strong relationships with local businesses and peer organizations in the arts and culture sectors. These partnerships enable us to serve a wider audience within the community and beyond and to introduce the museum to new potential visitors.

While a significant amount of progress has been made at the Dyckman Farmhouse over the last six years, one of our challenges continues to be maintaining the safety of the site, it's visitors and staff, who have experienced unnerving experiences at the museum. We greatly appreciate the support of the Parks Department and the Historic House Trust in getting us temporary Parks Police on site and their assistance in establishing meetings with elected officials and pushing for safety measures at the site. There is still work to be done. Dyckman Farmhouse has 15 benches outside of the property along the sidewalk, many more benches than other parks of its size. Five of these benches are along 204 Street which is dimly lit and home to a group of drug dealers day and night. They watch the comings and goings of the museum staff (a staff of 3 women, one of whom is often there alone), they store drugs on



the property and weapons in the sidewalk tree pits. People also climb onto these benches and over the low fence to break onto the property during the day and night. We have come into work in the morning to find someone passed out in the park with a needle in their arm. In summer 2019, the museum was broken into twice. The security alarm alerted Parks when it was tripped and, in both instances, neither NYPD nor myself were called, which means that staff could've walked into an active crime scene when they arrived at work in the morning. One of the museum windows is still boarded up from one of these break ins, which took place in July 2019.

As a steward of the site, I have been advocating for cameras, lighting and to have the benches along 204 removed for several years and partnered with the Historic House Trust to meet with Parks and elected officials regarding this matter. Along Broadway, there are 10 benches, several of which are used by regulars to openly drink alcohol and do drugs all day. They have threatened our volunteers and exposed themselves to us and we are diagonally across the street from a school. As the restroom can only be accessed from the outside of the building, safety measures are greatly needed as we have no idea what is on the other side of the door when we are going to the restroom. I had an on-site meeting with Parks Labor Relations, which expressed real concerns about the safety of our work environment. I have also spoken with several divisions within the Parks Department, submitted incident reports, and spoken with NYPD regarding these safety concerns. I also receive complaints from people living in neighboring apartment buildings about their safety concerns and I have to explain to them that we too want safety for the community. My hope is that complaints from local residents will effect some change.

In March 2020, DFM shifted quickly to offer virtual programming for children and adults, which we continue today, in addition to being open to the public on an abbreviated and safe basis. With a grant from The New York Community Trust, DFM was able to hire a part time Research Assistant to conduct extensive research on the people that were enslaved on the Dyckman Farm, an important piece of the history of the site that was missing. We are utilizing this information in public programs and are currently fundraising for the next phase of the project, a new interpretation, that would infuse this research throughout the entire museum, exhibitions and programs in order to offer our visitors a more inclusive history of the site and their community. To that end, in August, DFM offered a virtual lecture series with thought leaders in their fields on the topic of race from the perspectives of history, anthropology and archaeology, as we feel that the enslaved history of the historic site closely correlates to the racial tension in our country today. Through a grant from the Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone, DFM currently has on display, *Unspoken Voices: Honoring the Legacy of Black America*, a site-specific art installation which engaged three local artists that created works in response to the enslaved research that the organization is conducting. Additionally, DFM had a pilot round of, *Growing Uptown*, a partnership with New York Common Pantry through which DFM disseminated Grow Kits including pots, soil and seedlings, in an effort to assist families in need as food insecurity in our community increases due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This program also included bilingual print and video to show and encourage New Yorkers in our community to grow their own crops on their windowsills.

Thank you for your time.



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Jamaica, NY 11432

Thank you to the New York City Council and Chairman Koo for calling a hearing on the State of the Historic Houses under the Jurisdiction of the Parks Department.

King Manor (c.1805) has been open to the public as a museum for 120 years since 1900, making it the longest running museum in Queens. While the museum has gone through several interpretive and ideological iterations, our civic mission has remained the same, in honor of Founding Father Rufus King, who fought to improve this country and make it more equal for all, regardless of race. King Manor is the only museum in the exceptionally diverse community of Southeast Queens, serving over 11,000 annual visitors from long-time Queens residents to newly immigrated families.

We have grown to be an active community member, teaching critical thinking for a healthier democracy by facilitating meaningful opportunities for our neighbors to make their own cultural connections to the ongoing process of history. King Manor offers a variety of school programs, family days, concerts and lectures for adults, and history-based festivals, tours, and exhibits. We tie our programming very closely to our collection and our mission. For example, some of our concerts use our c. 1800 fortepiano, while our new jazz series connects to more recent local history. Our highly interactive school tours use hands-on-, game-, and inquiry-based learning to foster critical thinking at all grades, from kindergarten to graduate school and returning adult learners. One 1st grade teacher said it was “the best I’ve ever seen, so accessible without dumbing it down.” These school programs bring in roughly half of our annual attendance and continue to grow in popularity. All of our school tours ask students to think about the ramifications of the past on the present and connect the class curriculum to the museum’s history in an engaging and meaningful way.

While our chronically underserved neighborhood undergoes rapid growth thanks to being targeted for development in the Cultural Plan, we too have grown immensely. Within the last three years we opened three new interpretive spaces, including a rotating exhibition space that allows us to put more of our collection on public display and host collaborative exhibits with local artists. We are also in the second growing season of our new ethnobotany community garden. The researched varieties of herbs, medicinal plants, and vegetables in our garden tell the larger history of King Manor and its community: plants reflect the original peoples of this land, the African diaspora, and European colonists. Visitors often say how happy they are to have King Manor as a green “oasis” and we are happy to be able to add to this experience by enhancing our grounds to bring both beauty and enrichment to our neighbors.

This past year, we were awarded a grant to publish the first major academic catalogue by a small historic house museum in New York City. Titled *Pink Collar Preservation*, the book uses the story of the founding of King Manor by a group of women in 1900 to take a comprehensive look at the field’s history and the ramifications this has for the narratives told by historic houses and their labor issues over the past century. We cannot provide quality resources for our community unless we value our human resources. The COVID-19 pandemic has made it a struggle to both fulfil our mission to our community and do the right thing by our dedicated staff.

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King Manor has a small and lean staff, but unlike many museums, we pay a living wage and offer comprehensive benefits in order to promote equitable employment practices in the field. The US branch of the International Council of Museums flew me to Kyoto, Japan in September 2019 to speak about the importance of pay equity in the museum field at the Council's biennial conference. Fair pay and good benefits is how we maintain a dedicated workforce that is able to teach higher-level concepts like critical thinking that are crucial to our mission and to better serving our community. The importance of a dedicated staff has never been more apparent than during the pandemic, when a deep knowledge of our museum and our community was critical in putting on virtual programming that actually meets the needs of our neighborhood.

The lack of earned income, and drastic cuts to government support, especially from valued Council Initiatives make our long-term financial situation tenuous. We are doing our best to harness our limited resources to help others during this difficult time. During the pandemic we became a hub for essential supply distribution, actively reaching out to partners ranging from grassroots to city government. We also developed a wide range of easily-implemented at-home learning materials ranging home-schooling activities geared toward families with children of multiple ages, a computer game for the little ones to learn about community and cultures through music, virtual crafting, and even an audiobook series to help kids relax and give busy caregivers a break. We look forward to an enhanced working relationship with the City Parks department in order to keep providing much-needed resources to our community while protecting this important landmarked building, one of only two Founding Father homes in the five boroughs and the second-longest operating house museum in New York City.

Thank you again for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kelsey Brow".

Kelsey Brow  
Executive Director  
King Manor Museum



November 18, 2020

Dear New York City Council Parks Committee, Chair Koo and Committee Members,

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.

As the only historic house museum owned by and named after an African American on New York City Parks land, the Lewis Latimer House Museum celebrates the legacy of its namesake inventor, who was also a son of fugitive slaves, a self-taught poet and painter. His historic Victorian home in Flushing, Queens is now a New York City Landmark that calls attention to Latimer and other People of Color's contributions to American life. Its signature initiative, Tinker Lab, teaches STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math) educational programs. Public programs across disciplines of poetry, history, science, and arts, are conducted with local partners to support and enrich the cultural life in Queens and NYC. Seasonal events are fully subscribed. Till 2020 spring, about 58% of LLHM's educational program participants came from Queens, 40% of the participants are African American, 17% Asian, and 17% Hispanic. Latimer's life story is used as a point of departure from which to examine issues of race, class, immigration and contemporary events.

Although the physical site is closed, we never stopped serving NYC's diverse communities, in addressing racial justice through the cultural lens and providing equitable STEAM education. During this challenging time, we especially need support from the City and the Department of Parks and Recreation, in addressing ongoing and incidental maintenance and preservation efforts, including urgent interior wall repair in the attic, better internet access for the house, and assistance with regular trash collection. This unique site celebrating African American heritage and the achievements of People of Color requires our investment. The Museum sincerely hopes to collaborate with the Council's Parks Committee, the Parks Department, and the Historic House Trust in helping to ensure that the Lewis Latimer House Museum is preserved with the upmost care, so it continues to tell the singular story of unsung hero Lewis Latimer to the public.

Thank you,

Ran Yan  
Executive Director  
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Lewis Latimer  
House Museum



November 23, 2020

**Merchant's House Museum**  
**Margaret Halsey Gardiner, Executive Director**

**Testimony / November 18, 2020, City Council Hearing – Parks Committee**

Thank you to the New York City Council for calling a hearing on the State of the Historic Houses under the Jurisdiction of the Parks Department.

**About the Merchant's House Museum**

The Merchant's House was built in 1832 and was home to a prosperous merchant-class family, the Tredwells, and their Irish servants for nearly 100 years. Opened to the public as a museum in 1936, it survives, and thrives, as the only 19<sup>th</sup>-century home in NYC preserved intact inside and out, complete with the family's original furniture, decorative arts, and personal possessions.

The cultural and architectural significance of the Merchant's House and its impact in contributing to our understanding of our historic past cannot be overstated. The intact Greek Revival interior in concert with the family's personal effects present tell the story of domestic life in 19<sup>th</sup>-century New York City that is unparalleled in its authenticity. The servants' fourth floor bedroom has been called "the oldest intact site of Irish habitation in New York City."

The Merchant's House was the first building designated a landmark in Manhattan at the first meeting of the newly formed Landmarks Preservation Commission in 1965. It was designated an interior landmark in 1981. The Merchant's House deeded the building to the Parks department and joined the Historic House Trust (the 16<sup>th</sup> historic house) in 1998, just a decade after formation of the Trust, in 1989.

The Museum welcomes over 14,000 visitors annually including heritage tourists (national and international), scholars, students, and New Yorkers. *On Trip Advisor.com, the Merchant's House is ranked in the Top 10% of All Attractions Worldwide.*

Each year, MHM offers a calendar of dynamic education programs that include living history events, lectures, seasonal and historic dress exhibitions, concerts, historic NoHo walking tours, and historic performances and reenactments. In 2020, the MHM has increased its online presence dramatically, offering virtual exhibitions to illustrated talks on Zoom, increased social media presence to live streamed performances, allowing it to reach larger and more varied audiences. Virtual programs have been attracting attendees from around the nation and the world.

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**MERCHANT'S HOUSE MUSEUM**

29 East Fourth Street, New York, NY 10003  
212.777.1089 [www.merchantshouse.org](http://www.merchantshouse.org)

## **Protection against Adjacent Development & the Ravages of Time**

I would like to highlight the critical challenges we face in protecting our historic houses from damage – due to adjacent construction and from the ravages of time.

For eight years, since 2012, the Merchant’s House Museum has been working to protect its extremely fragile landmark building from the proposed development of an eight-story hotel next door. According to multiple engineering studies undertaken by the Merchant’s House, construction would dangerously compromise the structural stability of the museum’s 188-year-old building, risking complete collapse.

I would like to reiterate the words of our Councilmember, Carlina Rivera, who has been our champion throughout (1:09:42 - 1:13:13):

*“I am concerned that the Parks Department really didn’t take a strong enough role in ensuring that the museum was protected from any adjacent construction. While the Parks Department did send a letter saying the Merchant’s House Museum should be protected, buildings like this should have real Parks oversight and access to resources ... instead of what is essentially happening: relying on the benevolence of others and private donors.”*

HHT Executive Director John Krawchuk’s response: *“The resources did not exist within Parks and definitely needed to go outside of the city for that.”*

Suffice to say, the Merchant’s House has not had “access to resources” from Parks/HHT and has, in just the past two years alone, spent \$250,000 on lawyers, engineering studies, etc. (funds that should have gone to, for example, education programs and caring for our original collections.) And, of critical importance, it begs the question: *what if the Merchant’s House did NOT have “the benevolence of others and private donors”?*

As we look to the future, it is our hope that Parks and HHT take to heart their essential role in the long-term protection of their member houses, which are owned by the city and, hence their responsibility – from damage adjacent construction, as well as simply the ravages of time. Old houses require ongoing and timely maintenance, which seems to get clogged in city bureaucracy. For example, in 2005, the Merchant’s House undertook its own critical restoration of the rear two-story addition, at a cost of \$175,000. In 2008, Councilmember Rosie Mendez allocated capital funds of \$598,000 for restoration of the rear façade. The work was not completed until 2014. Sadly, the building suffered extensive additional damage in the intervening six years. Water damage to the west wall continues apace, in spite of our having in hand the \$350,000 (again from Rosie Mendez) necessary to start the work. The west wall (original plaster!) of the 4<sup>th</sup> floor servants’ bedroom, which we restored in 2013, has been damaged and will need to be re-restored.

My thanks, again. Your support of the city’s 22 historic houses could not be more important.

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**MERCHANT’S HOUSE MUSEUM**

29 East Fourth Street, New York, NY 10003

212.777.1089 [www.merchantshouse.org](http://www.merchantshouse.org)

The Morris-Jumel Mansion, constructed in 1765, is Manhattan's oldest surviving residence. Opened as a museum in 1904, the organization has grown its operations to serve over 20,000 on-site visitors a year, providing high-quality arts and cultural programming to the surrounding community of Washington Heights, in Upper Manhattan. In addition to its exterior having Landmark designation status, the Mansion is one of only 120 buildings designated as an Interior Landmark by the City's Landmarks Preservation Commission (1975).

Morris-Jumel Mansion Inc. (MJM), the independent nonprofit that manages the museum's operations, was first accredited by the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) in 1983, six years prior to the founding of the Historic House Trust (HHT). This honor serves as the museum field's mark of distinction and offers high profile, peer-based validation of a museum's operations and impact. Only 3% of American museums are accredited; of that group, MJM is one of only 86 historic house museums in the country with this award.

The most recent exterior restoration of MJM's historic building was completed in 1991 through the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) Capital Division in conjunction with HHT. Since 2005, the leadership of MJM has been vigorously advocating to city leaders for funding to provide desperately-needed attention to the building's exterior envelope and ADA-accessibility.

Over the past several years, \$2.7M in funds were allocated for the aforementioned exterior restoration and barrier-free access project, which is to be registered through HHT's Sole-Source contract in early 2021. Additionally, in fiscal year '20 the museum was awarded capital funds for a technology and electrical upgrade through the Department of Cultural Affairs (DCLA). Despite having been awarded the funds, neither DPR or DCLA are able to register this project due to their current agency guidelines. Completing these projects in a streamlined and efficient manner is critical for the museum to continue its mission-critical work as a key provider of arts and cultural programming in Upper Manhattan and for all New Yorkers.

Since 2015, the museum has been developing and implementing a privately-funded and widely-acclaimed reinterpretation plan of its historic interiors which house a world-class decorative arts collection. As a platform to provide more comprehensive and accurate narratives, this project positions the museum as a defining cultural anchor and educational asset in the community - a goal which aligns to the museum's current strategic plan.

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted the museum and its operations. Given the estimated 61% drop in earned revenue from fiscal year '20 to '21, a corresponding decrease of 20% is expected in the organization's budget. Additional operating support is needed to sustain and increase public access to the museum and park. While the museum is open to the public four days a week, the park is open daily. As a destination park, the museum's site is highly valued by neighborhood residents, which in the face of COVID restrictions has seen an increase in use. This demand presents additional challenges to the organization's operating budget as the museum must be staffed while the park is open to ensure the safeguarding of the building and the valuable collections owned by the private nonprofit.

The museum's responsive and dynamic programming is exemplified by a recently unveiled living memorial at Roger Morris Park created by local artist Andrea Arroyo honoring those who have passed away from COVID-19. This internationally recognized project both affirms the resilience of our community and recognizes the courage of essential workers still on the front lines. It is on view until December 31, 2020.

**Testimony of Maria Carrasco, Vice President of Public Programs, Prospect Park Alliance  
New York City Council Committee on Parks and Recreation Hearing:  
The State of Historic Houses Under the Jurisdiction of the Parks Department  
November 18, 2020**

Thank you Chair Koo and all committee members. I am Maria Carrasco, Vice President of Public Programs with Prospect Park Alliance, the non-profit organization that operates Prospect Park in partnership with the City, as well as Lefferts Historic House in Prospect Park in partnership with the Historic House Trust.

Lefferts Historic House Museum is an 18th-century farmhouse that features a working garden, historic artifacts, period rooms and interactive exhibits. Located in Prospect Park and nestled between the Carousel and Zoo, the museum welcomes over 30,000 visitors a year, with families with young children representing a large part of our audience. At the museum, Prospect Park Alliance sheds light on the rich history of Brooklyn, and the lives of the people that lived and worked on the land, including the Lenape, Dutch and enslaved Africans. Visitors explore history through hands-on experiences, cultural performances and imaginative play, and also gather to celebrate the diversity of our community today.

In addition to our seasonal programs, which take place April through December, the Alliance also partners with many community organizations to present free cultural programs. In the past several years, this has included *We Are Brooklyn: Immigrant Voices*, a multimedia exhibition based on immigrant oral histories from The Brooklyn College Listening Project; *Nothing About Us*, an exploration of educational segregation written and performed by NYC public high school students through the support of New York Appleseed, Live Here, Learn Here and the Epic Theater Ensemble; the *Brooklyn Roots Festival*, a day of performances and workshops by the borough's many diverse cultural and ethnic groups, presented in partnership with the Brooklyn Arts Council; and *caribBEING Prospect Park*, an exhibit and program series celebrating Caribbean-American Awareness Month.

When faced with the COVID-19 pandemic, Prospect Park Alliance launched a Virtual Prospect Park website portal, filled with activities, online programs and self-guided tours that park lovers could enjoy from the comfort of their home. To date, this portal has received more than 22,000 views. When the restrictions began to be lifted, we quickly pivoted our program back to the park, but in a safe and socially distanced manner, with the launch of Pop-Up Lefferts Play-and-Go Kits. This program was developed as a mobile education station where families and children were given the opportunity to explore the leisure time activities of the Lenape, Dutch and enslaved Africans. Participants also were given kits that had materials and instruction to make a few historic games at home. The Alliance popped-up in locations throughout the park, as well as Jackie Robinson Park in Bedford Stuyvesant and the New Lots Library in East New York. The program served 1,519 visitors over the course of eight events, who borrowed 2,500 games and activities.

Prospect Park Alliance is incredibly grateful to have received \$2.5 million in funding from former Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito and the Brooklyn Delegation of the New York City Council to restore Lefferts Historic House. This funding is critical to stabilizing the house to ensure it is able to serve families for many decades to come. The restoration will enable the Alliance to replace the roof and restore the exterior, which have significantly deteriorated over time. The house was slated to kick off construction in the spring, when construction was

halted citywide. Unfortunately, when restrictions were lifted, the City did not release the funds so that work can start on the project. We are asking for the City Council's support in lobbying for the release of these funds with the Office of Management and Budget, so that work can start on this project before the house falls into further and more severe disrepair.

In conjunction with the restoration, the Alliance will re-envision the programming and mission of the museum, rethinking the purpose of a historic house museum, and how it can shed light on the experiences of our ancestors, but also serve as a community hub and a space for dialogue in today's Brooklyn. We look forward to partnering with our local electeds, community partners and house museum scholars on this work in the coming years.



**Testimonial Letter to the  
New York City Council  
November 23, 2020**

Thank you to the City Council for the opportunity to submit written testimony to the Committee on Parks and Recreation regarding “The State of Historic Houses Under the Jurisdiction of the Parks Department.” My name is Kimberly Maier and I am the Executive Director of the Old Stone House of Brooklyn, located in Washington Park on 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue between 5<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Streets bordering the Gowanus and Park Slope neighborhoods.

The Old Stone House (OSH) is a 1934 Robert Moses reconstruction of the Vechte farm, originally constructed on the site in 1699 after the land was taken from the Lenape by the British in 1653. The OSH building and surrounding park have been an active education and recreation space for nearly 90 years.

During the past 15 years, OSH, as an independent non-profit organization, has overseen nearly \$10 million in renovations to the 3.5 acre surrounding space in partnership with NYC Parks that is now utilized by more than 500,000 users annually, as well as a new, \$365,000 permanent exhibit focused on the Battle of Brooklyn and the Occupation, which was funded through individual donations and grants raised by OSH.

OSH education programs, overseen by OSH Director of Education Margaret Weber, (pre-COVID) serve more than 6,000 NYC school children from all five boroughs, focusing on the pre-Colonial and Revolutionary War eras. During the pandemic, environmental programs based out of our 1.5 acres of gardens, overseen by OSH Director of Gardens Samuel Lewis, are supplying local free food fridges and food pantries, and supporting an “earn-to-learn” program with the Manhattan-based Ali Forney Center for LGBTQ youth. (Pre-COVID) more than 200 events annually bring 40,000 visitors to OSH, helping to support dozens of visual and performing artists and our neighboring small businesses.

During the 16 years that I have served as executive director at OSH, we have partnered with Brooklyn Parks to develop an over-arching plan to transform the public space. OSH received an initial planning grant from the JM Kaplan Fund. Working with Borough Commissioner Martin Maher, then Chief of Staff, we hosted listening sessions that evolved into a 5-phase capital plan that included more than \$10 million in capital improvements to the park space surrounding OSH, with an emphasis on highlighting the historic nature of the site. To date, three of these phases have been completed. Moving forward, plans include an accessible building that will provide much needed space for community programming, and a final phase will include capital repairs to the current OSH building.

We have not embarked on any capital projects for the OSH building to date, but the OSH board has raised funds for the following projects:

- \$350,000 permanent exhibit, which included the purchase of HVAC equipment for the entire OSH building
- Replacement of the Heat Timer equipment to run the OSH boiler

Brooklyn Parks has:

- Replaced the OSH boiler
- Repaired and replaced windows, windowsills, shutters, light fixtures toilets, floorboards and radiators.
- Worked with OSH to complete electrical wiring for the building that was never properly connected during a 1980's renovation – an extensive project that required OSH to run on a generator for approximately six months.

OSH works directly with Brooklyn District 6 and Brooklyn Shops to file work orders for necessary repairs and maintenance that are tracked on a spreadsheet that we provide to HHT. In our experience, these matters have been handled in a timely fashion. We are extremely appreciative of the effort that has been made over the years to increase both Brooklyn Shop's and District 6's efficiency and response time.

In 2004, at the beginning of my work with OSH, the neighborhood had not gentrified to the extent that it has today. There was an active drug trade in the handball courts along 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue, and the benches along 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue housed an entrenched homeless encampment.

To help resolve the homeless issue, we reached out to local service organizations, and Parks District 6 removed the benches from the 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue area. We organized regular meetings with Parks District 6 and the 78<sup>th</sup> Precinct to address the drug dealing, which was also mitigated by increased public programming in the park. Our Parks district supervisor at the time played a strong leadership role in working with OSH to improve the safety of the public space.

Our approximately \$350,000 annual budget is funded through rental income, public programs, individual donations, private grants, and approximately \$60,000 total in funding from City Council discretionary funding, and competitive grant funding from DCLA and NYSCA. Salaries (ED=\$70,000; Director of Education=\$54,000, Director of Gardens=\$35,000, Program Director=\$30,000, Part-Time General Manager-\$23,000) are a little over half of our budget.

While OSH as an organization has grown in its programmatic and fundraising ability, leadership support from Commissioner Martin Maher and Brooklyn Parks has paved the way for our success. This partnership is essential to our stability and well-being as an organization.

Respectfully submitted,

Kimberly Maier  
Executive Director  
[www.theoldstonehouse.org](http://www.theoldstonehouse.org)

The Bowne House Historical Society, Inc.  
Flushing, NY  
Testimony re November 18, 2020 City Council Hearing  
Rosemary Vietor, Vice President of the Board

Thank you for holding this hearing, the first since 2005. It is an opportunity to talk about the historic houses across the five boroughs under the purview of Historic House Trust.

Bowne House is the oldest surviving building in Queens, dating from 1661. We are a city, state and national landmark. The house was occupied by nine generations of the Bowne and Parsons family, whose stewardship allowed the house to survive. We have been a museum open to the public since 1945. At the dedication of the house that October, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia gave an address from the house, highlighting the important role it had played in securing the right to religious freedom and liberty of conscience that we, as Americans, enjoy today. This WNYC video may be seen online.

I would like to highlight some of the challenges we face in securing and maintaining the security of the site. The museum has an important and unique collection of furnishings original to the house and the Bowne family; some of these items date from the 17<sup>th</sup> century and some are fine examples of local craftsmen in early New York. This makes us quite unusual among historic houses; most do not have their original furnishings. In addition, we have over 300 years of archival materials: deeds, maps, diaries and letters from the Bowne and Parsons families. These require special care and oversight. Most have not been in the public domain.

We are a wood frame structure, located adjacent to a public park, the Margaret I. Carman Green. The park has large trees which overhang the roof of the house, and park benches that are a few feet from the fence separating the Bowne property from the park. This section of the larger park was scheduled for a restoration; the farther end of the park was renovated with a playground which is used by families. Our section of the park has become a hangout for the occasional drug dealer, and has had homeless encampments. The parks employees have made efforts to control the debris and garbage, but it is a constant battle. Smoking is an additional hazard for the house, and we have had bottles and bottle rockets thrown at us.

The park has been the scene of an occasional assault. Removal of the benches to a location just 10-12 feet further into the park, or along the public walkway, would help. Benches in Central Park and other locations are placed along pathways – this provides better security for those who use the bench. Dark corners of a park are a hazard.

CM Koo is well aware of many of these problems, and has raised them at this hearing. We have asked NYC DPR on several occasions over a period of years about moving these benches and have submitted written requests to both HHT and DPR for trimming of some large and old trees, but no action has been taken.

We have inquired about security lights but have been discouraged from having them placed at our site. Installation of security lights and the relocation of the park benches would go a long way towards improving security. The museum does have its own central station monitored alarm system, maintained and paid for by the Historical Society. This has provided a measure of security for the house, but the grounds and outbuildings need the additional protection provided by security lights. Fire is always a risk for a frame structure.

Thank you again for the time you have given to these hearings.