



**New York City Council  
Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International Intergroup Relations**

**February 18, 2021, 10:00AM – Virtual Hearing**

**Testimony Presented by New York City Department of Cultural Affairs (DCLA)  
Commissioner Gonzalo Casals**

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Good morning, I am Gonzalo Casals, Commissioner of the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, here to testify regarding the proposed legislation. I am joined today by Kendal Henry, Director of the Percent for Art program at DCLA.

I'll begin with Intro 1814 of 2019, which would require at least half of all art works funded through the Percent for Art program be installed outdoors. We are grateful for Chair Van Bramer's and Majority Leader Cumbo's advocacy for the Percent for Art program in recent years. You've spearheaded an updated funding formula for the first time in the program's history and expanded the community's voice in the art selection process.

Percent for Art has commissioned some 400 artworks in the last 35 years. One driving inspiration for all Percent projects is commissioning art that is publicly accessible. Sometimes this is indoors, like in libraries and schools. Other times this is outdoors, in a park or plaza. Looking back, about 40% of all projects commissioned through Percent for Art are outdoors. That figure increases to 70% when looking only at Percent projects not including school buildings, where much of the art is located indoors. All of them are publicly accessible. This results from the Percent for Art team working in close collaboration with the construction agency and local communities throughout the program's history. The flexibility to integrate artworks into each project has been a cornerstone of the program's success. Not only do indoor installations make more sense in many sites, but commissioning work outdoors drastically increases project costs, from fabricating with materials that are exposed to the elements, installation, and maintenance needs. The diversity of media – from mosaics to murals to standalone

sculptures and even innovative, interactive works – also means that an ability to select between indoor and outdoor locations is critical to working with artists and residents to realize their visions. Thanks to Council legislation, Percent for Art panels include robust representation from arts workers, community members, architects, engineers, and more. The current approach puts faith in their expertise to work with artists on selecting artworks that respond to each unique site.

We are always happy to have conversations about how to improve this program, but we have reservations about a broad mandate to locate certain artworks outdoors. We look forward to discussing with you ways to ensure that Percent for Art pieces remain open and accessible to New Yorkers.

I'll now turn to Intro 293 of 2018, which proposes establishing a task force to consider the creation of a Freedom Trail in the city. New York State fully abolished slavery in 1821. While we are still fighting for racial justice in our city even today, New York became a hotbed of activism for slavery abolition, and civil rights. Black New Yorkers have changed not only our city, but the whole world, through their collective creative energy over the decades. Sites like Weeksville in Brooklyn and the location of the former Seneca Village were nearly forgotten, but have in recent decades been better understood for their important role in American history. My colleagues at the Landmarks Preservation Commission have created a dynamic website that commemorates much of New York's known history related to abolition and civil rights as it's reflected in our landscape. The digital map, called "New York City and the Path to Freedom," was published last year and contains a remarkable collection of information that brings the courage and resilience of these figures, places, and moments in history to life. Exploring ways to build on and amplify this amazing resource may be a more effective path forward. My colleagues from the Landmarks Preservation Commission will say more about their work in this area later in today's hearing.

Finally, I'll turn to Intro 2048 of 2020, which proposes creating a task force for a memorial to front line workers who died from COVID-19. New Yorkers have all suffered and fought together for months against the isolation, fear, financial hardship, and loss

brought by the pandemic. Our frontline workers helped us get through the toughest times – staffing hospitals, feeding us, and keeping our city moving. Far too many of them gave their lives to meet our society's most basic needs. We owe them and their families a debt of gratitude that can never be fully repaid.

We have no doubt that permanent memorials will help New Yorkers mark, remember, and process the times we're living through. While we have every reason to believe the end is in sight, the pandemic continues to rage around us. Memorials are one way we collectively remember key events and periods of time – often traumatic ones. From the General Slocum disaster to the September 11 attacks, our city has carved out space for remembering and reflecting on these painful, transformative moments.

Is now the right time to establish a memorial task force while we are still trying to make sense of the ways different communities have been affected? While I'm not sure of the timeline in this legislation, I look forward to collaborating on efforts to commemorate those lost to the pandemic as the full scope becomes clearer in the months and years ahead.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.

Sarah Carroll  
Chair

**Testimony by Lisa Kersavage, Executive Director, Landmarks Preservation Commission  
New York City Council, Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International Intergroup  
Relations**

**Regarding Intro 0293 of 2018**

**February 18, 2021**

Good morning Chair Van Bramer and members of the Committee, I am Lisa Kersavage, Executive Director of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, here to testify regarding the proposed legislation Int 0293 of 2018. I am joined today by my colleagues Timothy Frye, Director of Special Projects and Strategic Planning, and Anthony Fabre, Director of Community and Intergovernmental Affairs.

The Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) is an expert agency responsible for protecting New York City's architecturally, historically, and culturally significant buildings and sites by granting them landmark or historic district status and regulating them after designation. LPC's Research Department is responsible for identifying and documenting New York City's historic places. The nationally regarded Department is committed to the highest standards of historical scholarship and archival research, and to bringing complex issues to light. They have done a considerable amount of research on the important role New York City played in the effort to abolish slavery nationwide, and to assist those seeking to escape it, and the places that best tell that story.

Int 0293 proposes establishing a task force to consider the creation of a Freedom Trail in the city. We agree that New York City's places related to abolitionist history, the Underground Railroad and 19<sup>th</sup> century free Black communities are worthy of enhanced recognition. We believe that building on existing efforts to preserve and interpret these places would be a more effective path forward than the legislation.

Throughout the years LPC has designated an impressive collection of sites that help tell the story of abolitionism and the Underground Railroad. The Commission has designated 18 places with documented associations to the abolitionist movement, which are intact to that period, including the First Free Congregational Church in Brooklyn, Plymouth Church in the Brooklyn Heights Historic District, the Brooklyn Friends Meeting House, the Lamartine Place Historic District in Manhattan, and the Curtis House on Staten Island, among others. The Commission recently designated 227 Duffield Street in Downtown Brooklyn for its long and documented association with noted abolitionists, Harriet and Thomas Truesdell.

In addition to its important role of identifying, documenting and protecting such places, LPC has increasingly focused energies on raising public awareness of the histories embodied by designated landmarks and historic districts. In December 2019, LPC launched "New York City and the Path to Freedom," which documents designated buildings associated with the multiple ways people and



Sarah Carroll  
Chair

institutions engaged with the anti-slavery movement before the Civil War. It is highly visual and interactive and includes a 3-mile walking tour in Downtown Brooklyn, a neighborhood that was very active in abolitionist activities and contains an incredible concentration of resources. We created this multimedia tool in the hopes that New Yorkers would be inspired by the stories of abolitionists who took great personal risks to house enslaved individuals and to publicly advocate for abolition.

Finally, the National Park Service has already developed guidance for evaluating sites and properties with Underground Railroad history and LPC has adopted them as part of our evaluation. Further, the National Park Service has criteria for inclusion in the NPS's National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program. It is important that these standards are applied in the identification of properties believed to have ties to the Underground Railroad, and LPC is adept at incorporating those important federal standards into its own evaluation of New York City's abolitionist and Underground Railroad sites.

Given LPC's expertise and extensive work in this area, we think future efforts to further recognize and interpret this important history should build upon our work, and the proposed legislation is not necessary to pursuing those important goals.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on Int 0293 of 2018.

Thank you for your time.



PUBLIC ADVOCATE FOR THE CITY OF NEW YORK

**Jumaane D. Williams**

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**TESTIMONY OF PUBLIC ADVOCATE JUMAANE D. WILLIAMS  
TO THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON CULTURAL AFFAIRS,  
LIBRARIES, AND INTERNATIONAL INTERGROUP RELATIONS  
FEBRUARY 18, 2021**

Good morning,

My name is Jumaane D. Williams, and I am the Public Advocate for the City of New York. I would like to thank Chair Van Bramer and members of the Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International Intergroup Relations for holding this hearing today. The legislation being heard today focuses on commemorating New York City's role in the abolitionist movement, showcasing artworks outdoors, and creating a memorial to honor frontline workers – all of which are relevant to the times we are living in. I support the efforts of my Council colleagues and I thank them for introducing these bills.

Intro 0293, sponsored by Councilmember Rodriguez, would establish a task force to consider the creation of a Freedom Trail in our City. I strongly support this bill, as it is important to acknowledge the important sites in this City that played a pivotal role in the abolition of slavery. Moreover, these sites should be collectively linked through signs, pamphlets, and other informational materials. If the heightened activism against police brutality and racism over the past year has taught us anything, it is that we need to acknowledge the work of Black Americans, both presently and historically. Recently, it was announced that 227 Duffield Street in Brooklyn, the home of abolitionists Harriet and Thomas Truesdell, would be preserved and designated as a landmark. My Office testified during the Landmarks Preservation Commission hearing last year to argue on behalf of this designation, so I am happy to see the Commission made the right decision in the end. Now named 227 Abolitionist Place, this site has been officially cemented in the history of the Abolitionist movement. Just as it was crucial to designate the shameful history of our City's slave market on Wall Street several years ago, it is our responsibility to preserve and uplift the efforts made locally to abolish that horrific practice.

In addition to preserving history, our City must also put forth an effort to promote arts and culture. Intro 1814, sponsored by Councilmember Van Bramer, would require at least 50 percent of all chosen art works funded through the Percent for Art program during each fiscal year, be installed outdoors. I fully support this bill. Given the hit our arts and culture industry has taken due to the Coronavirus pandemic, this legislation to exhibit more of the art work funded through the Percent for Art program would provide a much needed boost to the industry. It would also

re-enforce current public health protocols, as it would lead to less congregation indoors to view artwork.

Intro 2048, sponsored by Councilmember Levine, would create a task force to examine the various factors in creating a memorial for frontline workers who died as a direct result of COVID-19, and to issue recommendations in furtherance of that objective. I applaud Councilmember Levine's effort to make this memorial come to fruition, as this is something the City should have already been working on. Just as the City had done with the 9/11 Memorial and Museum, the Administration needs to create something that tells the story of the Coronavirus pandemic, documents its impact, and commemorates our frontline workers who were killed by the virus. Our frontline workers have been our City's unsung heroes during this pandemic, and it would be morally wrong to not honor those who have lost their lives to ensure that we are able to continue living ours.

Over the past year, we have experienced a national racial reckoning, an economic decline, and a public health crisis that has severely impacted every community – especially those that are most marginalized. Each piece of legislation being heard today acknowledges each of those challenges that we are so desperately trying to overcome. Once again, I commend my Council colleagues for introducing these bills, and I hope they are passed without delay. Thank you.

COMMUNITY BOARD #1 – MANHATTAN  
RESOLUTION

DATE: MARCH 27, 2012

COMMITTEE OF ORIGIN: YOUTH & EDUCATION

COMMITTEE VOTE:	7 In Favor	0 Opposed	0 Abstained	0 Recused
PUBLIC MEMBERS:	1 In Favor	0 Opposed	0 Abstained	0 Recused
BOARD VOTE:	38 In Favor	0 Opposed	0 Abstained	0 Recused

RE: CB1 supports the establishment of a “Freedom Trail” in Lower Manhattan

WHEREAS: Lower Manhattan is home to many important historical sites relating to the American journey toward freedom – both the national war for independence from Britain after 1776, and the struggle against slavery two generations later; and

WHEREAS: These fascinating sites are in some cases marked and acknowledged, in others cases unmarked and nearly forgotten; and

WHEREAS: These Lower Manhattan sites, whether individually marked or not, have never been linked through maps, programs, and unifying signage into a single coherent accessible “story” – a walkable educational tour in the manner of the Freedom Trail in Boston; and

WHEREAS: The Boston Freedom Trail, established 1958, is an immensely successful tourist and educational destination, garnering 3 million visits per year, including 20,000 school trips by area children and teachers; and

WHEREAS: The Boston Freedom Trail adds million of dollars to the local economy, especially aiding smaller shops, cafes and vendors along the route – precisely the types of small businesses most in need of assistance in our community; and

WHEREAS: Other cities have acknowledged the value of the “Freedom Trail” model, and are seeking to duplicate it; in Philadelphia, for example, a commission is actively studying the creation of a “Constitutional Trial” to create a valued tourist venue and, in effect, an “outdoor classroom” for young people studying our nation’s history; and

WHEREAS: The Lower Manhattan sites include some famous locations and others less known but equally fascinating and important, including:

- The New York slave market established in 1709 near the corner of Wall and Pearl Streets;
- Fraunces Tavern at 54 Pearl Street where the New York Sons of Liberty met to discuss the dumping of tea in New York Harbor before the Revolution and



where General George Washington gave his farewell address to his officers after the American victory;

- The Methodist Church at 44 John Street, among the first Methodist churches in America;
- The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church at Church and Leonard Streets, an important center of early abolitionism;
- A former wharf site at Chambers Street in present Battery Park City where in 1838, a runaway slave later known as Frederick Douglass took his first steps as a free man;
- A brick home at 36 Lispenard where abolitionist newspaper editor and activist David Ruggles ran a “station” on the Underground Railroad and published an important abolitionist newspaper, aiding Douglass and hundreds of others fleeing slavery; and

WHEREAS: Linking these sites together in a thematic story of the human struggle, against great odds, for freedom and self-determination, would create a rich, inspiring addition to the street life of Downtown; now

THEREFORE

BE IT

RESOLVED

THAT: Community Board One strongly supports the idea of the creation of Lower Manhattan Freedom trail in our community.

# Green-Wood Cemetery

February 18, 2021

Testimony for the New York City Council Committee  
on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International  
Intergroup Relations on  
Int 0293-2018

Good morning and thank you to the esteemed members of the Committee and others at this meeting, especially chair Van Bramer and Councilman Rodriguez.

My name is Rachel Walman, and I am the director of education at The Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn. I'm speaking here to share Green-Wood's support for the creation of a New York City Freedom Trail, some resources we could bring to bear towards this initiative, and how we already interpret this history.

For those unfamiliar with Green-Wood it is a 183-year old, active cemetery, a national historic landmark, a public art space, and the most highly accredited arboretum in New York City. And admission is free 365 days a year.

Abolitionist history runs deep at Green-Wood. The "Freedom Lots" section of the cemetery contains the remains of 1300 Black New Yorkers whose lives spanned the nineteenth century. We believe it is the largest-known, undisturbed Black burial ground in the northern United States. High school interns helped restore the area in 2015 and gave it its moniker. Visitors to the Freedom Lots can read interpretive panels, and a free virtual tour of the area is available [on our website](#).

Black and white abolitionist "permanent residents" are interred throughout the rest of Green-Wood. Among them are: Samuel Cornish, founder and co-editor of *Freedom's Journal*, the first Black-owned and operated newspaper in the United States; Elizabeth Gloucester, a Black real estate magnate who gave funds to John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry; and Abby Hopper Gibbons, a white abolitionist whose home was a safe haven for self-emancipated people on the Underground Railroad. Their's and others' monuments and gravesites are worthy of public acknowledgement.

We tell the stories of these pioneers regularly. More than 60% of Green-Wood's programs for Pre-K-12<sup>th</sup> grade discuss abolitionism and slavery. Green-Wood also features abolitionists in public programs such as "History Revisited: Celebrating Green-Wood's Black Residents" featuring City Councilman Robert E. Cornegy Jr coming up on February 24th.

Finally, Green-Wood's archives include burial records that can assist scholars in researching Black New Yorkers of the nineteenth century in unique ways, Burial files and cemetery chronological books can indicate family and community relationships that might not appear in other sources.

Green-Wood appreciates the need to preserve and interpret the history of abolitionism in New York City in a larger way. We hope to be a partner in this initiative, and we thank the committee for their time.



Thank you, members of the Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International Intergroup Relations, for hearing my testimony. My name is Dominique Hood and I am an educator at Historic Richmond Town and a dedicated student of afro-originated history, specifically on Staten Island. Historic Richmond Town has long been a preeminent catalyst for historical and preservation programming and I rise to speak today on behalf of our willingness and ability to provide research, consultation and participation in the work laid out before this proposed task force should this committee see fit to include the following site of Staten Island's key role in afro-originated history and its connection to the Underground Railroad and those who sought the trail to their self-emancipated freedom.

Afro-originated oystering communities were popular among 'free black' settlements all along the east coast during the 17th and 18th centuries of our nation's history, and the familial bonds and economic links between these towns are what laid the groundwork for the inherent solidarity of the underground resistance and smuggling to freedom which developed among these communities leading up to the Civil War. One particular example of this I wish to make known to this committee today is the village of Sandy Ground in the neighbourhood of Rossville on Staten Island. Several prominent Afro-originated families moved to Sandy Ground in the 1840s from Maryland's Chesapeake Bay area as local laws in their old state continued to draw clear distinctions of economic prosperity along racial lines. This community became an indisputable hub of major abolitionist activity in the decades to follow as a result. The local church, in particular, played host to such integral figures as Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth; becoming an important stop for thousands of formerly-enslaved peoples reaching their freedom through the Underground Railroad as it passed through Sandy Ground through the years.

The historical significance of this landmark is undeniable in connection with the creation of a walkable Freedom Trail exhibit within our city; there may be few other locations within our body of New York City knowledge which have such an original link to diverse communities during the early colonial period. Stark is our island's political history of abolitionist rhetoric and actuation as well as an unquestionable connection to the Underground Railroad and those who worked, fought, bled and died for the emancipation of their fellow human beings. I submit this

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[historicrichmondtown.org](http://historicrichmondtown.org)

testimony in the name of this resilience, and I implore you to include Sandy Ground within the framework of this task force which is to be created.

To the City Council:

Creating a Freedom Trail in New York City would not only give New Yorkers and tourists a better feeling for the past, it would potentially create better feeling in the present. For too long, Black agency in the Abolitionist movement and the Underground Railroad has been downplayed or virtually eliminated from sight.

Just a few people that few people know include Peter Croger, a Black Presbyterian minister and founder of Brooklyn's AME Church, and his brother Benjamin from Pearl Street in Brooklyn, who, according to the Center for Brooklyn History, "birthed" the anti-slavery movement in Brooklyn. There is also Louis Napoleon, a Black conductor on the Underground Railroad, who with great strategic talent and daring, helped approximately 3,000 people to freedom and spent his last days in Brooklyn. There is Harriet Jacobs, who was once a frightened runaway fleeing to Brooklyn and Manhattan. She became an agent for Quakers in Alexandria, Virginia just after emancipation, helping to distribute clothing and supplies, and wrote an explosive anti-slavery memoir with a "#metoo" point of view. There are, of course, the Truesdales, Black abolitionists who worked with William Lloyd Garrison, among others. There are so many more fascinating people to highlight.

And in this comes an important point, of why accurately pointing up the past can help the present and future. The truth of the Underground Railroad that is emerging is that it was not an orderly system run primarily by white people. That is a myth, established in about 1898 by Professor Wilbur H. Siebert. The understanding we have today is that Black agency was very important in the antebellum period, and that Black and white people worked together in a worthy cause. This is so critical to get across. As Quaker historian Christopher Densmore states, "Somehow, the emphasis shifted from the story of the enslaved seeking their own freedom, largely and almost exclusively without help from the Underground Railroad, to stories of how white people, often Quakers, aided fugitive [enslaved people]. By mid-20th Century, the Underground Railroad story was often told as if the only actors were white and the freedom seekers themselves were passed from safe house to safe house like so much cargo.....One must be suspicious of 'feel good history.'"

So, we truly welcome the development of a Freedom Trail in New York, in that it may allow all of us to understand the true history of the anti-slavery movement, and will help all of us to become a little more more free. The truth does that.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Linda Gnat-Mullin  
Member,  
Library & History Committee  
Brooklyn Monthly Meeting of  
the Religious Society of Friends  
(Quakers)

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“Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.” -Rumi

## ADVANCE | MORE OPERA

The Association for the Development of Vocal Artistry and Neighborhood Cultural Enrichment  
Manhattan Opera Repertory Ensemble  
Ansonia Station Box 231152, New York, NY 10023

### Testimony to the New York City Council Cultural Affairs Hearing Oversight

Submitted by

Cheryl Warfield

Professional Opera Singer, Teaching Artist, Producer and Founder of ADVANCE/MORE Opera

Thursday, February 18, 2021

Greetings. Thank you, Chair Van Bramer, Majority Leader Cumbo, Council Member Rodriguez, and Members of City Council for this hearing. I am writing in support of Council Member Ydanis A. Rodriguez' introduction of legislation # 0293-2018, a local law in relation to establishing a freedom trail task force in New York City.

I am Cheryl Warfield, a professional opera singer, concert producer, teaching artist and the founder and artistic director of ADVANCE/MORE Opera for more than 20 years.

ADVANCE (The Association for the Development of Vocal Artistry and Neighborhood Cultural Enrichment) is a 501(c3) not-for-profit organization that I founded to provide performing opportunities for talented classically trained singers, particularly artists of color and to provide outreach to underserved communities. To that end, ADVANCE presents educational programs that contribute to the musical education of young people, showcase black themes, and spotlight diversity. Our first endeavor was a historical exploration of African American spirituals titled "Paul Robeson: A Celebration of Culture" that focused on the life and significant research of spirituals that Robeson documented while black-listed. This program has been presented in many formats and iterations, including a 7-week residency on spirituals for grades 4 through 8. Musical clips from a New York performance can be found at <https://youtu.be/djkGk0kCRfk>.

Preservation of African American history is important for all Americans and all New Yorkers. I strongly encourage the inclusion of the performance of spirituals, which provide the only historical account of life, hope and aspirations from the enslaved workers' perspective in any programming for the freedom trail. To support the inclusion of this music properly, African American classical music artists should be a part of the conversation and must be represented on the freedom trail task force. I believe very positive outcomes may be attained through artists' perspectives in support of the freedom trail's ultimate mission, strategy, and program activities.

Thank you reading my testimony.

Respectfully submitted,

Cheryl Warfield

Singer, Educator, Producer and Founder, ADVANCE/MORE Opera  
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[www.moreopera.com](http://www.moreopera.com)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MW2yGc7iTkg>