



**Greenwich
Village
Society for
Historic
Preservation**

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July 16, 2012
Hon. Robert Tierney
Chair, NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission
1 Centre Street, 9th floor
New York, NY 10007

Re: 186 Spring Street, proposed South Village Historic District, and LGBT history

Dear Chair Tierney:

I write to urge you to reconsider the decision not to move ahead immediately with designation of the proposed South Village Historic District and to protect the immediately-threatened 186 Spring Street. Among the many reasons why the Commission should move right away to designate this area, including this threatened 1824 house, is its powerful and unique connection to the early gay rights movement and New York's earliest lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) communities and their struggle.

In the immediate post-Stonewall era, 186 Spring Street was home to an array of critical figures in the early gay rights movement. From this house, they helped establish some of the most important organizations working to advance the cause of equality for the LGBT community, and had a profound influence upon the present-day social, political, and cultural landscape as it relates to LGBT people.

According to Arnie Kantrowitz, one of the occupants of the house during this era and a significant figure in the early gay rights movement, the house in the early 1970's basically functioned as a gay commune, where several gay activists whose work had a profound influence on the culture lived collectively. It is no coincidence that the house was just two blocks away from the Gay Activists Alliance Firehouse at 99 Wooster Street (since destroyed), which was a center of gay activism in post-Stonewall New York. According to interviews GVSHP has conducted with Mr. Kantrowitz in recent days, the house served as a community center where the vital issues of the day were discussed and debated, and strategies which live with us today were formulated.

Jim Owles was one of those who lived at 186 Spring Street in the early 1970's. Mr. Owles was the founding president of the Gay Activists Alliance, one of the earliest and most influential gay political advocacy organizations in the post-Stonewall era, and the first openly gay candidate for political office in New York City. In December 1969, he helped found the Gay Activists Alliance in New York City with Arthur Bell, Morty Manford, Martin Robinson and others. As president of the alliance from 1970 to 1971, Mr. Owles advocated some of the very first anti-discrimination bills ever proposed, in Albany and New York City. In 1973, he became a candidate for New York City Council, becoming the first openly-gay person to do so. Owles went on to be a founder of the Gay and Lesbian Independent Democrats in 1974, the first such political club in the city. In 1985, he was one of the seven founding members of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, which today is a nation-wide organization with a profound influence upon the coverage and depiction of lesbians and gay men in the media.

Arnie Kantrowitz resided at 186 Spring Street in the early 1970's. Mr. Kantrowitz was an early secretary and vice-president of the Gay Activists Alliance, a co-founder of Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, and the author of *Under the Rainbow: Growing Up Gay*, one of the first autobiographies by a gay activist.

Dr. Bruce Voeller also lived at 186 Spring Street through the early 1980's. Bruce was a specialist on human sexuality and sexually transmitted diseases who was in the forefront of the fight against AIDS. Bruce was also an early President of the Gay Activists Alliance, which he left to found the National Gay Task Force in 1973 (now the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force), of which he was the director until 1978. The Task Force became the first and largest national political advocacy organization for gay men and lesbians. From 186 Spring Street in 1978 he also founded the Mariposa Education and Research Foundation, one of the very first such entities established to educate and change attitudes about homosexuality and to reduce the stigmas attached to sexuality generally. The Foundation commissioned the George Segal sculpture "Gay Liberation" that was placed in Christopher Park at Seventh Avenue South and Christopher Street to commemorate the Stonewall riots. One of the leaders in the late 1970's and early 1980's of the response to a mysterious deadly ailment afflicting an increasing number of gay men and others in New York, Voeller is also said to have changed the inaccurate terminology for referring to the condition from "Gay Related Immune Defense Disorder, or GRIDD, as it was initially known, to "Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome," or AIDS, the more accurate name by which it is now known.

Voeller and the Mariposa Foundation also conducted the first study in the early 1980's establishing the effectiveness of condoms in preventing the spread of AIDS; this study was published in Consumer Reports and had a profound impact upon the response to the epidemic. The research was conducted by Mr. Voeller while he lived at 186 Spring Street. It should also be noted that Mr. Voeller was also the subject of a landmark United States Supreme Court case regarding parental rights for lesbians and gay men. Mr. Voeller successfully sued for visitation rights for his children, which was considered a landmark case in establishing the legal rights of lesbians and gay men in relation to their children.

Each of these men did much of their critical early work while living at 186 Spring Street, which was also often used as the mailing address and point of contact for these groundbreaking organizations.

186 Spring Street is by no means isolated as a location in the South Village that served a critical role in the history of the LGBT community. As it was for African-Americans in the mid-19th century, Italian-Americans from the late 19th century through the mid-20th century, and a range of artists, writers, musicians, and radical thinkers from the late 19th century onward, the South Village served a key center and an incubator for the LGBT community starting in the late 19th century.

As you know from our 2006 report submitted to you, "*The South Village, A Proposal for Historic District Designation*," starting in the late 19th century the South Village was

a crucial gathering place for visible gay men, lesbians, and transgendered people when few such locations existed anywhere else in the country or the world at that time. This included "The Slide," a late 19th century bar in the basement of 157 Bleecker Street (building still extant); Eve's Place, a center of lesbian life in New York City in the 1920's located at 129 MacDougal Street (building extant); the San Remo café at 93 MacDougal Street (building still extant), a favorite hangout in the 1940's and 50's for a number of openly gay artists and writers, including James Agee, W.H. Auden, Allen Ginsberg, and Harold Norse, composer John Cage, dancer/choreographer Merce Cunningham, and painter Larry Rivers; and the Provincetown Playhouse and Apartments at 133-139 MacDougal Street (building largely destroyed, 2009), which housed several radical institutions including Polly's Restaurant, the Washington Square Bookshop, and the Liberal Club, as well as the Playhouse itself, which cultivated the talents of prominent LGBT artists including Edna St. Vincent Millay, Charles Busch, Berenice Abbot, Edward Albee, and Djuna Barnes, among others. In fact, scholar George Chauncey called MacDougal Street in the South Village in the 1920's "the most important and certainly the best-known locus of gay and lesbian commercial institutions" in New York.

The extraordinary significance of 186 Spring Street and the South Village generally to LGBT history is only one of many reasons why the Landmarks Preservation Commission should move ahead immediately to consider designation of this area, as it promised to do several years ago. As you know, the New York State Historic Preservation Office, in determining the area eligible for listing on the State and National Registers of Historic Places, said that the South Village contained "a rich array of buildings of architectural, historical, and cultural significance... Beginning in the early decades of the twentieth century and continuing beyond the post-World War II era, the South Village has been the setting of important counter-cultural movements, institutions, and trends including the bohemian-era, jazz clubs, gay bars, off-Broadway theater, Beat culture, and the folk music revival," while the Preservation League of NY State, in declaring the South Village one of the seven most historically significant endangered locations in New York State, said the South Village contained "a wealth of architecturally and historically significant buildings and sites constructed between the 1820s and 1930s... associated with the immigrant experience, bohemian and artistic achievements (especially in music) and counter-cultural movements."

In light of this additional information regarding the unique cultural significance of 186 Spring Street, which is threatened with imminent demolition, as well as the well-documented outstanding historic significance of the South Village as a whole, I urge you to move ahead to protect this site and this entire area as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Andrew Berman", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Andrew Berman
Executive Director

Cc: National Gay and Lesbian Task Force
Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation
City Council Speaker Christine Quinn
Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer
Congressman Jerrold Nadler
State Senator Tom Duane
Assemblymember Deborah Glick
City Councilmember Rosie Mendez
City Councilmember Daniel Dromm
City Councilmember James Van Bramer
Community Board #2
National Trust for Historic Preservation
Preservation League of NY State
NY State Historic Preservation Office
Jim Owles Liberal Democratic Club
Gay and Lesbian Independent Democrats
SoHo Alliance
Downtown Independent Democrats
Municipal Art Society
Place Matters/City Lore
New York Landmarks Conservancy
Historic Districts Council