

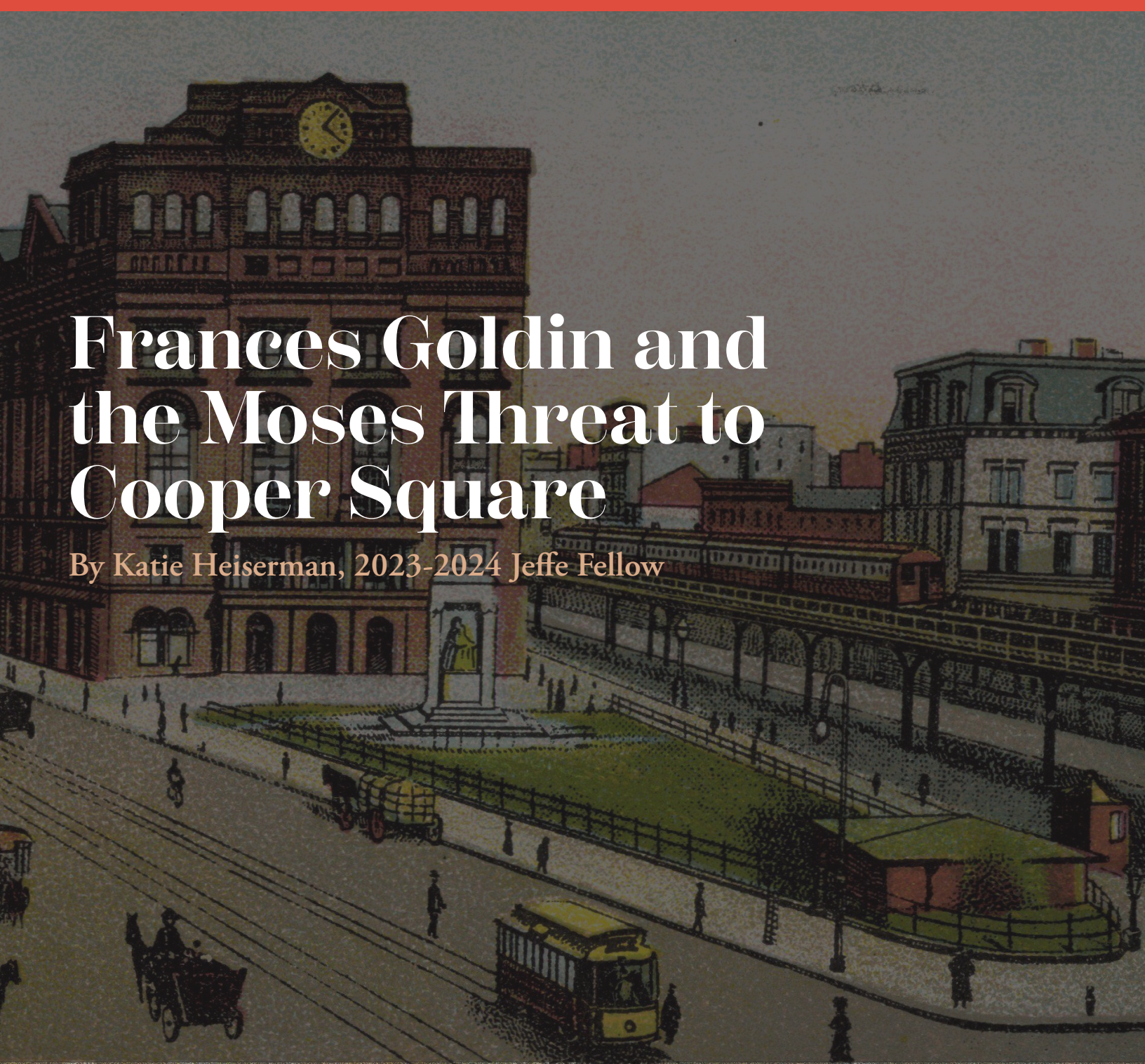
**The New York
Preservation
Archive Project**

NEWSLETTER

39th Edition - Spring 2024

Frances Goldin and the Moses Threat to Cooper Square

By Katie Heiserman, 2023-2024 Jeffe Fellow



C. V. 124 - COOPER SQUARE. NEW YORK.

Welcome to the 39th edition of the New York Preservation Archive Project's newsletter.

The mission of the New York Preservation Archive Project is to protect and raise awareness of the narratives of historic preservation in New York.

Through public programs, outreach, celebration, and the creation of public access to information, the Archive Project hopes to bring these stories to light.

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COVER PHOTO Postcard of Cooper Square, c. 1906

Spring 2024 Archive Project News

2024 is off to an exciting start for the New York Preservation Archive Project. You may have noticed our new newsletter design. Here are some other key updates:

Board of Directors

The Archive Project welcomes Christopher Jeannopoulos, President & CEO of the Woodlawn Cemetery & Conservancy, to our Board of Directors. Chris brings a wealth of experience in financial management, museum administration, and historic preservation to the Board.

We also thank Richard Moylan and Paul Onyx Lozito for their commitment to the New York Preservation Archive Project during their terms on the Board. Their contributions to the organization's work will be missed.

Scholars & Fellows

Reisinger Scholar

We are thrilled to introduce Olivia Chaudhury as our 2024 Reisinger Scholar for Preservation Research and Writing. Olivia recently earned her M.A. in Historic Preservation Planning from Cornell University and has a museum background spanning from small historical societies to large nonprofits. Selected from nearly 50 applicants in our most competitive hiring cycle yet, Olivia is now writing entries for our Preservation History Database. The Reisinger Scholarship is made possible through the support of Pat Reisinger.

Jeffe Fellow

Katie Heiserman has been hired for a second year as our Jeffe Fellow. A graduate of New York University's Archives & Public History program, Katie's commitment to making history accessible and leadership during the executive transition has proved invaluable to the organization. The Jeffe Fellowship is made possible by the generosity of the Robert A. and Elizabeth R. Jeffe Foundation.



New York Preservation Archive Project board member
Christopher Jeannopoulos |

Shelby White & Leon Levy Archival Assistance Initiative

Thanks to the generosity of the Leon Levy Foundation, the Archive Project is offering another round of the Shelby White & Leon Levy Archival Assistance Initiative Grant this year. These small grants support archival assessments, digitization, and other projects designed to make the history of the preservation movement in New York City accessible to the public. Applications have already been submitted for this new grant round, and winners will be announced in the summer. The new round revitalizes the Archive Project's longstanding Archival Assistance Initiative, which dates back to an initial set of grants awarded in 2013.

Special Projects

Bard Book

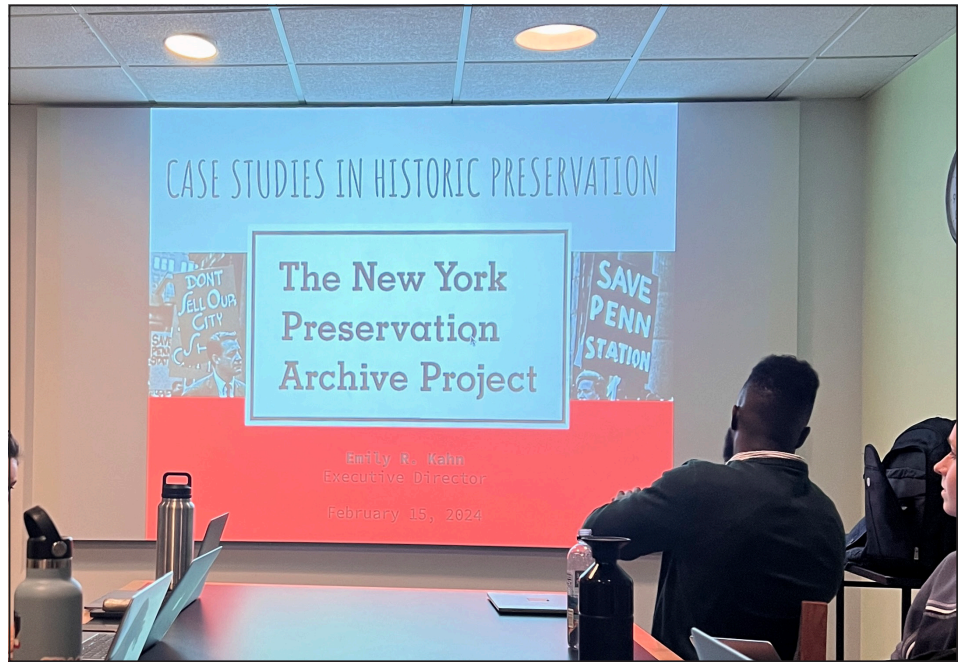
For two decades the Archive Project's founder and Chair Emeritus Anthony C. Wood has been conducting research into the life of Albert Sprague Bard, the "grandfather" of New York's Landmarks Law, as a special Archive Project activity. The culmination of his effort is the upcoming publication of *Servant of Beauty: Landmarks, Love, and the Unimagined Life of Albert Sprague Bard*. It tells the story of Bard's two passions: one for civic beauty, that would forever change New York City, and the other for a younger man, who would forever change Bard. It was while researching *Preserving New York: Winning the Right to Protect a City's Landmarks* (Routledge, 2008), Wood's book on the origins of New York's Landmarks Law, that he became aware of Bard's larger civic footprint and his unconventional private life. The anticipated publication date is 2025, the 60th Anniversary of the Landmarks Law. The publisher is Rowman & Littlefield.

Podcast

The Archive Project is conducting a series of conceptual planning meetings for a podcast based on the existing oral history collection. This podcast will make preservation history more accessible to all New Yorkers and ensure that the Archive Project can highlight the diverse yet interconnected stories of the oral history narrators. This work is made possible through a Vision Grant from Humanities New York.

Public Outreach

A goal of 2024 is highlighting the importance of preserving preservation's history to broader audiences; therefore, the Archive Project has actively engaged with other preservation enthusiasts across the City. In February, Executive Director Emily Kahn gave a guest lecture on her career path and the work of the Archive Project to Gregory Dietrich's "Case Studies in Historic Preservation" class in the Urban Design and Architecture Studies program at New York University. In March, the Archive Project participated in the Preservation Fair at the Historic Districts Council's Preservation Conference (the same fair at which Emily first learned about the Archive Project in 2020). Later that month, staff, board members, and consultants from the Archive Project came together to cele-



Case Studies in Historic Preservation presentation at New York University | Courtesy of Emily Kahn



Reisinger Scholar Olivia Chaudhury (left), Executive Director Emily Kahn (center), and consulting archivist Caroline Williams (right) at the Pillars of New York Awards | Courtesy of Caroline Pasion

brate former board member Richard Moylan and oral history narrator Peggy King Jorde at the Preservation League of New York State's 2024 Pillar of New York Awards. In April, Emily Kahn attended the National Council

on Public History's conference in Salt Lake City, Utah, joining approximately 750 public historians, preservationists, archivists, and museum professionals for four days of conversation on historical urgency. §

Historical Society of the New York Courts

By Adrian Untermyer, Board Member



As stated in the Society's legal history of Manhattan, New York's "iconic courthouses define the look of American law in television, film, and literature." Here, the New York County Courthouse stands guard over Foley Square, where it has been featured in productions ranging from *Miracle on 34th Street* to *The Godfather* and *Law & Order* | Courtesy of Adrian Untermyer



Chief Judge Judith S. Kaye (right), founder of the Historical Society of the New York Courts, interviewing Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg at a Society event in 2011. By preserving conversations with history makers, the Society works to document the legacy of an important court system | Courtesy of the Historical Society of the New York Courts

New York's courts are in the business of making preservation history. From hosting two "trials of the century" after architect Stanford White's murder, to providing a forum for the case that saved Grand Central, to facilitating modern litigation involving structures, relics, and landscapes, the Empire State's judicial system is home to a veritable trove of stories from the annals of historic preservation.

And when it comes to the equally-important business of preserving this legacy for future generations, a nonprofit group called the Historical Society of the New York Courts commands the witness stand. Founded in 2002 by Judith S. Kaye, the first female Chief Judge of the State of New York, the Society's mission is to "preserve, protect and promote the legal history of New York, including the proud heritage of its courts."

The Society's work often overlaps with the Archive Project's mission, including by maintaining a robust oral history program to capture preservation vignettes which would otherwise be lost. For example, the Society's 2009 oral history with Norman Goodman, New York County's longest-serving County Clerk, details how Goodman joined forces

with his deputy, John Werner, to save the New York County Courthouse's Tiffany chandeliers from the dumpster in 1971.

In his oral history, Goodman recalls "put[ting] a stop" to the City's plan to jettison the Tiffanys in favor of garish fluorescents. With the help of Edward R. Dudley, New York's first Black Administrative Judge, and a fresh-faced Landmarks Preservation Commission then less than a decade old, Goodman successfully snuffed out what he dubbed a "totally inane" plan. The New York County Courthouse became an interior landmark in 1981, and the chandeliers remain a highlight of the space to this day.

The Society keeps other preservation flames flickering by showcasing historic courthouses across the state. It regularly hosts programs within landmarked judicial facilities, including a 2023 panel that I moderated at the Appellate Division Courthouse off Madison Square Park. The panel included my fellow Archive Project board member Michele Bogart. Society publications feature these historical buildings as well. Among them are *Judicial Notice*, an extensive online legal history database, and a beloved annual historic wall calendar that graces many judges' chambers.

Podcasting is among the Society's more recent preservation forays. I created and host the Society's new audio series entitled "Wrecking Ball" featuring stories from the crossroads of historic preservation, the law, and the great City and State of New York. The inaugural episode featured Anthony C. Wood, the Archive Project's Founder & Chair Emeritus, in lively discussion with Fordham University's Dr. Christina Greer on the origins of the Landmarks Law. Other episodes delve into the stories of Foley Square, the High Line, Albany's Empire State Plaza, and the Village Preservation advocacy organization.

The Historical Society of the New York Courts celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 2022, and will continue highlighting the legal system's contributions to historic preservation over the decades to come. The Archive Project looks forward to "gaveling-in" a new era of collaboration with this important and oft-overlooked group. §

Adrian Untermyer is an attorney, urbanist, and historian. In addition to his service on the Archive Project's Board, he serves as a Trustee of the Historical Society of the New York Courts. For more information about the Society, visit history.nycourts.gov.

The Archive Project Squared: Looking Inwards at Our Institutional Archives

By Caroline Williams, Consulting Archivist



Caroline Williams works on Archive Project Squared | Courtesy of the New York Preservation Archive Project

My experience with the New York Preservation Archive Project began in my hometown of Baltimore, Maryland, during a period of career exploration. I lived in New York City before the pandemic but spent the last year back home working on a project cataloging and organizing over 30 boxes of my family's documents that had been in storage for more than 50 years. Little did I know that this familial archive project would lead me to the Archive Project.

The Archive Project's vice chair, Will Cook, is based in Maryland and originally met with me about my environmental interests. Will quickly identified my archival passion and encouraged me to pursue it as a career. I received a fellowship working on the archives at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory on Long Island, and within a couple of months found myself back in New York City enrolled at the Pratt School of Information.

Weeks after moving back to New York, I met with Emily Kahn, then just starting her new job as the Archive Project's executive director. Emily talked about how the Archive Project is known for saving preservation papers and for dispersing grants to other organizations stewarding preservation-related archives. Yet she expressed a desire for the Archive Project to invest more deeply in its own institutional archives, containing nearly three decades of information about the founding and work of the organization.

Together, with a shared passion for preservation and promoting public access to information, we launched the Archive Project's own institutional archive project, referred to as the Archive Project Squared. The outcomes of this project will include cataloging, documenting, organizing, creating a finding aid, and presenting a long-term storage and preservation plan for the Archive Project's institutional archive. This work will allow the Archive Project to preserve institutional memory, better understand the organization's work as part of the broader story of historic preservation, demonstrate best practices in preserving preservation archives, and become an even more dynamic educational resource.

When I first visited the Archive Project's office at the Kress Foundation townhouse on the Upper East Side, Emily asked if I wanted to see the archives. Excitedly, I said "yes" and followed Emily down one flight of stairs to the basement, where she unlocked a door to a storage room. Inside, she pulled back a big tarp which uncovered over 25 boxes of archives relating to the Archive Project's activities over the past 25 years.

When I returned to the Archive Project's office a couple of weeks later, this time in an official capacity as a consulting archivist, I surveyed, took notes on, and wrote descriptions of all of the materials. Since then, I have been archiving the Archive Project's collection using the hierarchical method. This type

of archiving follows a systematic structure (series, date, title) to help users locate and understand the context of the archival materials. This hierarchical arrangement is used commonly in archival and library settings to create finding aids that guide researchers and users through the collection. The structure allows for a logical and systematic approach to managing diverse materials, ultimately facilitating efficient retrieval and navigation.

Currently, the Archive Project's institutional archive is used for the organization's own recordkeeping and management, and is not available to the public. However, with additional funding, Emily and I hope to launch a second phase of the Archive Project Squared to digitize and make publicly accessible key portions of the collection. I have lost track of the number of times that I have eagerly called Emily over to see an exciting document that has been tucked away for decades, and we know that others would benefit from having access to these vital preservation history resources.

Many people would describe sifting sheet by sheet through boxes of papers as tedious, but Emily and I have found this process both fun and rewarding. Although we are relatively new to the Archive Project, this work has allowed us to transport back in time to the start of the organization and witness the decisions that transformed it into the City's leading advocate for preservation history. Each day that passes, more stories from the Archive Project emerge, and we look forward to sharing these stories with the public in the near future. §

Frances Goldin and the Moses Threat to Cooper Square

By Katie Heiserman, 2023-2024 Jeffe Fellow

Beginnings

For over a century, progressive politics have surrounded Cooper Square, the triangle-shaped juncture connecting four lower Manhattan neighborhoods. In the 1950s, however, Robert Moses threatened the historic fabric of Cooper Square, eliciting a preservation advocacy response invigorated by local leftist politics.

Once known as Stuyvesant Square, the area bordered by Astor Place, St. Marks Place, and East 4th Street, was renamed after Peter Cooper in 1883. Cooper founded the Cooper Union at the northern end of what would become Cooper Square 24 years prior to the renaming. A tuition-free, racially integrated, and co-ed institution, the college was radically egalitarian for its time. Cooper Square also remains home to the widely-circulated alternative newspaper *The Village Voice*. Adjacent to the square stands the Public Theater.

Cooper Square's preservation-related history has progressive strains. When Robert Moses' Slum Clearance Commission developed a plan in 1959 to level a dozen city blocks from East 9th Street to Delancey Street, a community-led opposition movement quickly formed. The development would have demolished 2,400 housing units, which became the primary focus of the anti-slum clearance preservation organizers. Under Moses' plan, significant buildings that would become New York City landmarks, including the Metropolitan Savings Bank on East 7th Street and the Nicholas and Elizabeth Stuyvesant Fish House, would have been lost.

Forming the Cooper Square Committee

At the head of the anti-Moses organizing effort stood Frances Goldin, a spirited Queens-born literary agent who moved to 11th Street



Frances Goldin at a rally in front of City Hall, c. 1980s | Courtesy of the Cooper Square Committee

at age 21 and ran for state senate on the American Labor Party ballot, sharing the 1950 ticket with W.E.B. DuBois, at age 26. The fight at Cooper Square was not Goldin's first battle with Moses over his urban renewal programs. She had been involved in unsuccessful efforts to stop urban renewal at Lincoln Center and Seward Park.

Goldin brought lessons from these past campaigns to the first meeting of the Cooper Square Community Development Committee and Businessmen's Association, later renamed to the Cooper Square Committee (CSC). In her previous preservation battles, she had focused on halting Moses' bulldozers, but by 1959, her strategy had evolved into a more generalized community preservation approach that embraced building development and prioritized tenant protection from displacement. As Goldin said, "We learned that you don't go in and fight and say, 'go away, go away, bad, bad, bad.' We went

in and we said 'we want urban renewal, but we want it to benefit the neighborhood, not victimize them.'"

Presenting an Alternative to Moses' Plan

Shortly after CSC's first meeting in 1959, community planner and CSC co-founder Walter Thabit surveyed residents of Cooper Square's old-law tenements and small-scale lofts, asking tenants if they would be able to afford Moses' housing plan. The survey found that 93 percent of residents would not be able to afford the new rents or co-op buy-ins planned for Cooper Square. Drawing on Thabit's expertise as a planner, CSC delivered lithograph-printed copies of "The Alternate Plan for Cooper Square" to the New York

City Planning Commission and other city agencies in 1961. The document outlined a way to rebuild Cooper Square without displacing tenants. In Goldin's words, "This plan will basically 'take care of the people who live here.' And that's what made it different from any other plan. You might be relocated from the front of the building to the back while the front was being renovated, but you were not out of the neighborhood. You might have gone from this building to one next door while yours was being renovated, but you would not go out of the neighborhood. And we kept that promise. Anybody who lived there still lives there or died there."

The Alternate Plan proposed clever use of a vacant lot on Houston Street. Construction of public housing would begin on the vacant lot and tenants of a to-be-demolished building would be moved into the new building. The rest of the public housing developments would follow in this checkerboard fashion. As a new building went up, the next would come down, with tenants shuffling over. The Alternate Plan was popular not just locally but citywide. The president of the Greenwich Village-Chelsea branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) praised the plan for providing "on-site new housing for the Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Italians and other poor people displaced by Urban Renewal in this area."

Initially, the City responded to the Alternate Plan with radio silence. Moses, however, fought back, attempting to sell the Houston Street lot to the San Gennaro Association to scuttle the plan. CSC fought adamantly and successfully, employing community-centered organizing tactics such as attending public hearings, leading demonstrations and rent strikes, and pursuing media attention. Goldin also elevated the issue to the state level by lobbying weekly in Albany. In 1965, CSC secured a meeting with Mayor Robert F. Wagner. Actions on the street grabbed attention and often resulted in arrests. One protest involved organizers gluing shut the locks on city offices, requiring the removal of doors.

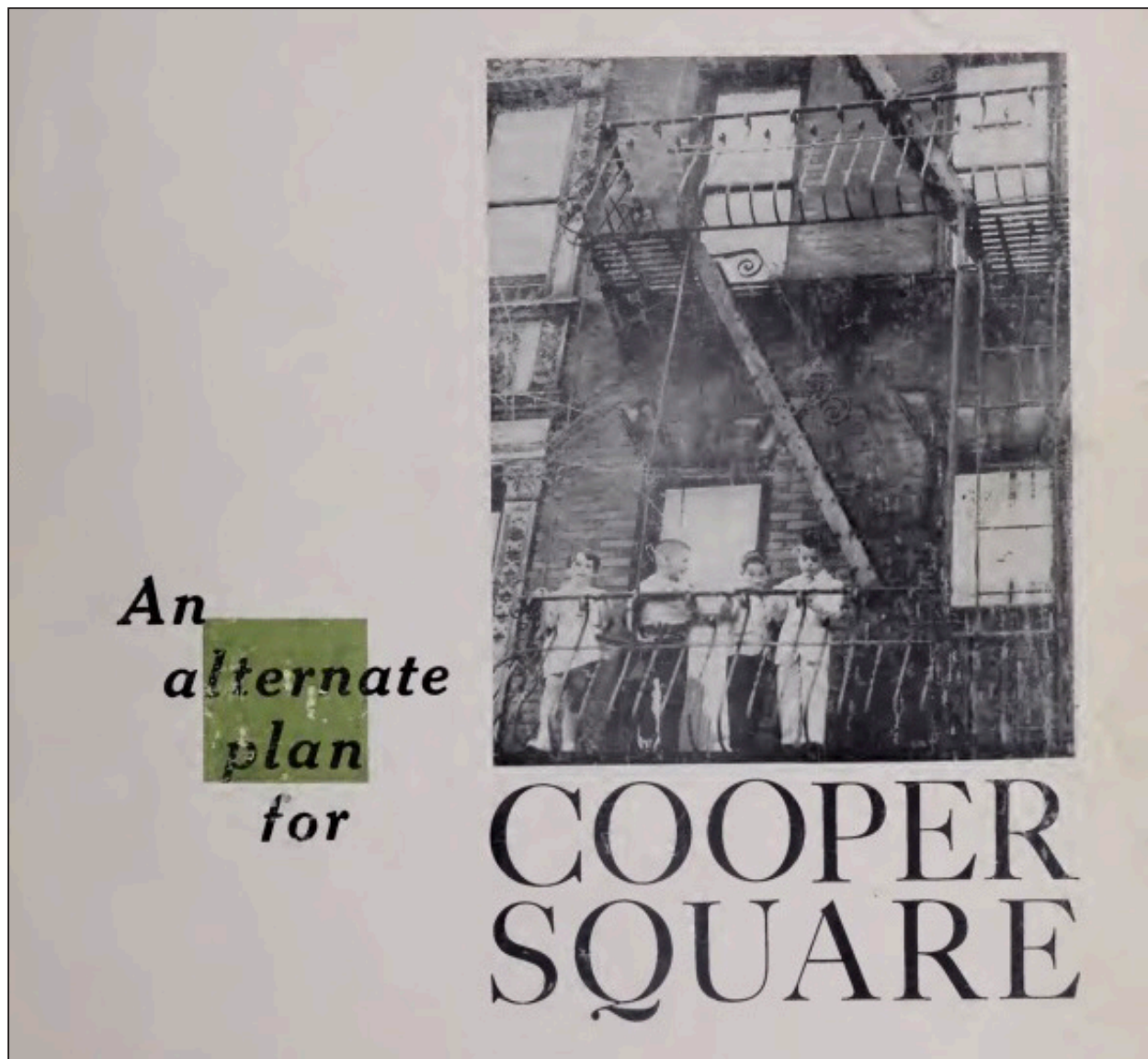
Beyond such efforts, CSC drew crowds at rallies both by appealing to the local community's interest in protecting themselves from displacement and by ensuring political actions doubled as recreational events. A CSC flier from August 1970 held in New York University's Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives reads, "Come to a block party and rally. Tenants bring your friends! Home cooked food."



Photograph of the old Metropolitan Savings Bank building located at 61 Cooper Square, now used by the First Ukrainian Evangelical Pentecostal Church | Courtesy of Wiki Commons

“When Robert Moses came to the Lower East Side, we were really ready for him. Boy, did he pick the wrong neighborhood.”

Frances Goldin



Cover of *An alternate plan for Cooper Square* | Courtesy of Columbia University's Seymour B. Durst Old York Library Collection

Goldin knew well that effective grassroots efforts relied on people's power, sustained through community-building, often more than political appeals: "Food is so important. It's a wonderful organizing tool."

Beyond the Alternate Plan

In 1970, after nine years of activism, the City accepted the Alternate Plan. Yet the plan quickly stalled when President Nixon's administration pulled federal funding for public housing, leaving CSC without the support of anticipated federal funds. New York subsequently fell into a financial crisis and municipal support dried up. Even though the Alternate Plan had yet to be realized, CSC

succeeded in stopping Moses' plan to demolish Cooper Square. In 1986, long after the Moses era, CSC published a new plan which detailed a rehabilitation of Cooper Square's tenements under a mutual housing association, which officially formed in 1991. By this time, threats of gentrification supplanted urban renewal threats leftover from Moses.

Over several decades, CSC continued to devise and fight for affordable housing plans across the East Village and the Lower East Side. The organization's victories included the preservation of 328 tenement apartments in Cooper Square. CSC continues to preserve and develop affordable housing and community spaces, and still operates out of an office on East 4th Street.

Although less remembered than her West Village counterpart Jane Jacobs, Frances Goldin deserves attention and further study as a model of fortitude, endurance, and joyful neighborhood organizing. An activist with a distinctive style, she brought the community together and sustained engagement over many years. In her 2014 oral history interview with Village Preservation, Goldin highlighted the egalitarian, community-centered approach at the core of her work with CSC: "Fifty-nine years ago, dues were a dollar a year, and today, dues are a dollar a year."

§

The Gotham Center for New York City History published a condensed version of this article in March 2024.

Bard Birthday Breakfast Benefit 2023

By Lisa Ackerman, Chair



From left: Tony Wood, Lisa Ackerman, Peter Samton, Emily Kahn, and Sam White at the 2023 Bard Birthday Breakfast Benefit | Courtesy of the New York Preservation Archive Project



Guests attend the Bard Birthday Breakfast Benefit at the Players Club | Courtesy of the New York Preservation Archive Project

The winter holiday season has a preservation event each year that I anticipate with great joy—despite needing to arrive at eight in the morning! The Bard Birthday Breakfast Benefit started as the annual event for the New York Preservation Archive Project to gather its friends and supporters, offer a discussion focused on a recent book or research project that highlights the importance of archives, and, with any luck, raise much of the funding needed to fuel the work of the organization for the coming year.

While all of that remains true, this breakfast has most importantly become an annual event that offers a great chance to catch up with friends and colleagues and to impart a bit of wisdom from luminaries in the field. Over the years, the Bard Breakfast has given me a reason to read terrific books, think about issues in new ways, and enjoy the company of people I do not see often enough throughout the year. And once we added the chance to name tables in memory of inspiring preservationists no longer with us, this event became an opportunity to remember some of the seminal figures who have touched our lives and shaped our profession.

The 2023 Bard Breakfast exceeded my expectations for how meaningful and enjoyable our morning together could be. Remarks

from architect Sam White offered a reminder of the great legacy of McKim, Mead & White, reinforced why the fight for Penn Station had been so significant, and provided a glimpse into the thoughtful approach to architecture and design that Sam has practiced throughout his career.

We tasked Sam with introducing honoree Peter Samton and offering the context for the struggles in the 1960s and the ongoing challenges of balancing preservation, design excellence, and the ever-evolving needs of the City. From the picturesque to the practical, Sam introduced Peter with great skill.

It was so important to acknowledge Peter Samton for his enduring contributions to the field, his front-line view of the loss of the McKim, Mead & White designed Penn Station, and his memories of the battle, what it meant to him, and how it shaped his activities for the decades to come. As New York City engages in a new battle for the soul of the area surrounding Penn Station, the remarks of Sam White and Peter Samton could not have been more meaningful.

Fiona Davis, an author who places New York, its iconic architecture, and the streetscape very prominently as characters in her books, was our featured speaker. I was already a

great fan of her novels before we invited her to speak, pleasantly astonished when she accepted the Archive Project's invitation to join us at the Bard Breakfast, and completely overwhelmed by her presence with us that morning. She offered great testimony on the power of archives to inform and delight the researcher, and she made clear the ways in which she passes these discoveries to her readers. I know we boosted her sales in December. I have lost count of the number of attendees who told me they bought one of Fiona's books after the Bard Breakfast. Success all around!

Most importantly, the Bard Breakfast is a gathering of friends who all share a passion for New York City, its preservation, its dynamic personality, and the people who make it so interesting. And we were lucky to share our morning coffee with all of you—and especially Sam, Peter, and Fiona. §

Matt Dellinger

By Matt Dellinger

I joined the board of the New York Preservation Archive Project just over a year ago, after meeting the former executive director, Brad Vogel, through a mutual friend. We were at a picnic on Governors Island (one of New York's recently revitalized historic spaces), and I innocently described the weird little career I had carved out. I had done research and reporting, interviewing and editing, analysis and storytelling, writing and podcasting, and lots of work creating digital archives. Brad told me about his work at the New York Preservation Archive Project, and a connection formed.

Though I am a native midwesterner, New York City has been my chosen home for 27 years. I spent the first 11 of those at *The New Yorker* magazine, where I somehow had the responsibility of managing the magazine's earliest digital efforts. In 2004, I oversaw the creation of *The Complete New Yorker* digital archive, even driving a truck packed with 80 years of weekly issues to a scanning facility in Kansas City. The archive is now available online as part of a subscription, but in those olden days it launched as a set of DVD-ROMs, published by Random House—a physical artifact that itself is now hard to find and worthy of being preserved and archived.

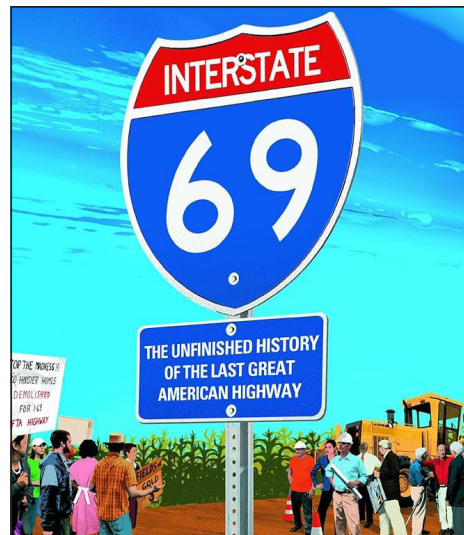


New York Preservation Archive Project board member
Matt Dellinger | Courtesy of Matt Dellinger

The process of transforming a magazine's back catalog into a searchable digital archive is arcane and complex enough that doing it once made me something of an expert. *Vogue* wanted to be next. Then *Aperture*. Then *Esquire*. I handled *Aviation Week*, and finally the venerable Canadian title *Maclean's*, in 2016. On a work trip to Toronto, a skeptical Canadian border agent asked why an American needed to do that work. Was there no one in her country who knew how to digitize a magazine? "Eh," I said, "I'm kind of the guy." Entry approved.

There is a real satisfaction to shepherding dusty paper stacks into new digital discoverability. Because they are rendered as electronic back issues, the ads and cartoons and layouts remain part of the experience. Instead of encountering cold, scraped text floating on the Internet, the reader gets transported into another world. A previous version of the familiar world. Or no, it is a rendering of the old world made new again through context and juxtaposition. The experience is not unlike hustling through Grand Central or walking certain blocks of Greenwich Village.


Preservation can sound like "keeping something old the same." But more often than not, preservation has the effect of maintaining something old so it can be part of something new. This little koan about old and new was present in a book I wrote, *Interstate 69: The Unfinished History of the Last Great American Highway*, which tells the story of a long-languishing infrastructure project that will likely never be completed, a new superhighway from Indianapolis to the Texas border with Mexico. Over seven years (thank you to the patient folks at Scribner), I met with people up and down the proposed corridor who had worked for decades to try to build it. I also got to know people who had worked almost as long to try to stop it. On both sides were people you might call preservationists trying to save a place they held dear. Mayors, whose small towns were born in the railroad



Cropped cover photo of *Interstate 69* |
Courtesy of Matt Dellinger

era, were trying to reconnect their communities economically so they could survive and thrive, while environmentalists and rural-loving people rejected the highway-centric model and hoped to protect what they saw as a slower, more local, and more idyllic way of life.

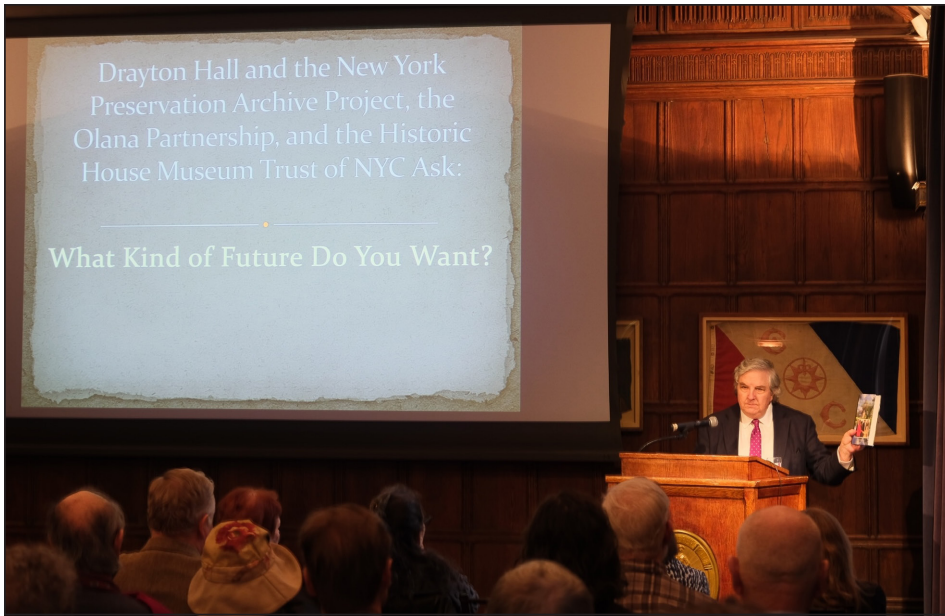
The story of how America gets built is a story of the people who make it their business to shape the places we inhabit. They are not just planners and politicians, but citizens and activists who have something to say about the interplay between commerce and culture, preservation and progress. In the end, I could not bring myself to write a polemic for or against Interstate 69. To me, the important work was to capture the stories of the passionate people who dedicated their time and energy, successfully or not, to assert what is worth saving.

As a board member of the New York Preservation Archive Project, I welcome the chance to lend support and expertise to an organization dedicated to telling exactly that kind of story. 

EVENT RECAP

A Model for New York Sites: Documenting Recent History and Promoting Healing at Drayton Hall

By Emily Kahn, Executive Director



George McDaniel speaks at the Explorers Club | Courtesy of Caroline Williams

On April 3, 2024, nearly 60 people trekked to the Explorers Club during a coastal flood for a public lecture by George McDaniel on documenting recent history and promoting healing at historic sites using Drayton Hall as an example. George McDaniel served as the executive director of Drayton Hall, a National Trust for Historic Preservation historic site located in Charleston, South Carolina, for over 25 years and published *Drayton Hall Stories: A Place and Its People* in 2022. The first of its kind, this book uses oral histories with descendants of the Drayton family and their enslaved people as well as the people responsible for the preservation of Drayton Hall since it became a historic site in the 1970s. *Drayton Hall Stories* reveals never-before-shared family moments, major preservation and stewardship decisions, and pioneering efforts to transform a Southern plantation into a site for racial conciliation.

In the days leading up to the lecture, many people asked why the New York Preservation

Archive Project, an organization typically focused on New York City preservation history, would host an event about a historic site in South Carolina. Just as our work saving local preservation history can be replicated in cities and towns across the country, there is great preservation and public history work nationwide that can be implemented at home in New York City. As the lecture proved, McDaniel's experience documenting recent history at Drayton Hall through oral histories serves as a perfect example of a project that could be applied to local work.

McDaniel began his lecture with a dedication to Archive Project founder (and former chair of the Drayton Hall Site Council) Tony Wood and a universal question "what do you want for the future?" He then offered an answer: "Preservation is not about mothballing, not backward looking. We do look backward, but we also look to the future." Major themes of McDaniel's lecture included the importance of documenting the history of this historic site since it became a museum

(and the role of oral history in doing so), the ability of sites with challenging histories to serve as places for discussion and healing, and the role of preservation in highlighting both people and place. Each of these themes provides guidance on how preservation can be a tool for shaping a better future. McDaniel, a former educator, concluded the lecture with actionable tips on applying his work, including advocating for history education and building trust with narrators through first identifying the interviewer's reasons for conducting the oral history.

Following the lecture, participants joined McDaniel for a book signing and a reception filled with robust conversations about the application of his work to New York-based projects. We look forward to building upon McDaniel's work as we expand our collection of over 150 oral histories focused on preservation history from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and to seeing how our peer institutions also implement what they learned from McDaniel's lecture at their historic sites and organizations through research and practice. §

Thank you to our event co-sponsors!

Scan the QR code to watch a recording of McDaniel's lecture

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Your Spring 2024 Newsletter Has Arrived!

The Archive Project would like to thank the Leon Levy Foundation, the J.M. Kaplan Fund, the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, the Achelis and Bodman Foundation, the New York Community Trust, the New York State Council on the Arts, the Gerry Charitable Trust, Humanities New York, Kay Ciganovic, Patrick Reisinger, and the Robert A. and Elizabeth R. Jeffe Foundation for their generous support. Our work could not be accomplished without their—and your—contributions.

We hope you will consider making a donation to support the documentation and celebration of the history of preservation in New York City. Donations can be made in the form of checks mailed to our office via the enclosed remittance envelope, securely online via Bloomerang on our website (www.nypap.org), or by credit card over the phone at 212-988-8379.