

THE BOROUGH



In the 1850s, the Cunards, who emigrated from England, built a grand Italianate villa on Grymes Hill where they lived for about 20 years. Today, the home sits in the center of Wagner College's bucolic campus, housing business offices. (COURTESY OF WAGNER COLLEGE)

STATEN ISLAND

Landmark backlog plan meets resistance

Cultural groups, medical center, want buildings removed from consideration

By Tracey Porpora  
porpora@siadvance.com

In the 1850s, the Cunards, who emigrated from England, built a grand Italianate villa on Grymes Hill where they lived for about 20 years. Today, the home sits in the center of Wagner College's bucolic campus housing business offices.

In 1966, there was an application filed with the city Landmark Preservation Commission (LPC) to have the home landmarked, said Richard Guarasci, Wagner College president. "Somewhere in the late 1960s we tried to get it off Landmarks' calendar," he said.

But that didn't happen.

Now, nearly 50 years later, the property is one of 26 Staten Island properties that are part of the city's Landmark Preservation Commission's plan, launched in July, to address a landmarking backlog of 95 properties citywide.

"The Landmarks Commission's mission is to preserve historic sites with an eye for public buildings that can have tourism and can be learning places. But this is on a private campus and serves totally different purposes," said Guarasci. "The functional use of the building is different from what it was 100 years ago. Today, the Cunard house doesn't qualify (for a landmark) and we want to take it off (the list)."

And Guarasci, who recently expressed these sentiments at a special LPC hearing to address the Staten Island properties, is not alone.

Snug Harbor

Lynn Kelly, president and CEO of Snug Harbor Cultural



The Music Hall at Snug Harbor Cultural Center and Botanical Garden. (STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE/BILL LYONS)

Center & Botanical Garden in Livingston, also attended the LPC special hearing last week about an application — made in 1984 — to landmark the campuses' 32 buildings.

"While Snug Harbor appreciates the spirit behind this application, we are against the proposal," said Kelly at the hearing.

"Snug Harbor is already subject to numerous city regulatory agencies that protect its history, use and function. As a member of the Cultural Institutions Group we operate the campus under a master license agreement with the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs and the NYC Parks Department. We are also subject to design review by the Public Design Commission. Even basic repairs or modifications can be stalled by potentially months of bureaucracy, which puts the buildings and the public at additional potential risk," stated Kelly in her LPC hearing testimony that was provided to the Advance.

Kelly, who asked the commission to remember that Snug Harbor Cultural Institution is a not-for-profit, also mentioned in her testimony that "adequate safeguards are already in place to prevent commercial development."

Richmond University Medical Center

Like Snug Harbor and Wagner's Cunard house, Richmond University Medical Center has an application before the LPC to landmark a building on its campus. The circa 1860s Garner Mansion, which faces Castleton Avenue in West Brighton, is used as an administrative building.

The building was added to the Landmarks calendar around 1966, according to Brian Moody, vice president of legal affairs for Richmond University Medical Center.

"The building has an annex to it. And we are asking that both the Garner mansion and its respective annex, which was put on between 1903 and 1906, be taken off the Landmarks list," said Daniel J. Messina, hospital president and CEO.

He noted that one of the reasons he is against the landmark status is the hospital is working on a renovation plan.

"We are looking to do a major addition to the hospital and replace our emergency trauma department, which was built over 23 years ago for 25,000 patients and we now see over 65,000 patients," he

said.

He said the Garner Mansion is an integral piece of the campus. "We are committed to maintaining the Garner building in its original form without any modifications, other than renovating the annex piece and reconnecting the new emergency trauma department to that point," he added.

Dorothy Day retreat

Landmarking of the Dorothy Day homes at the former Spanish Camp in Anadale is also on the LPC's agenda. The only problem is the entire community was bulldozed in 2001 by a developer who planned to build upscale homes that never materialized.

Day, a candidate for sainthood and co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement, was also an author who lived on the property.

However, unlike Wagner, Snug Harbor and Richmond University Medical Center officials, local preservationists still want the property landmarked despite major changes to the site over the years. "This site still has merit and it was given a boost by the Pope, who mentioned Dorothy Day on his visit to New York," said Nick Downen, secretary of the Preservation League of Staten Island. "Historic sites can also be landmarked even if the building isn't there," he added.

Anyone who wishes to address the commission about any of the Staten Island properties on the LPC list has until Nov. 5 to do so in writing, said Damaris Olivo, LPC director of communications.

"We will make commission decisions at public meetings that will take place in early 2016," she said. "We will take a vote among the commissioners about whether we should designate each property."