



# Preservation League of NYS

August 13, 2020

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New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission  
David M. Dinkins Municipal Building  
1 Centre Street, 9<sup>th</sup> Floor  
New York, NY 10007

Re: Janta-Polczynska residence & Elmhurst African American Burial Ground—  
Landmark Designations

Dear Chairwoman Carroll,

On behalf of the Preservation League of New York State, I write in support of the individual landmarking of both the Elmhurst African American Burial Ground and the Janta-Polczynska residence. These sites are significant to local, state, national, and international history and deserve protection under the rule of the Landmarks Preservation Commission. Preservation has long sought to recognize sites affiliated with diverse cultural groups, particularly those that have historically been marginalized. We continue to hear this call for equality loud and clear in the recent days, weeks, and months across the nation.

The Elmhurst African American Burial Ground was designated a Preservation League Seven to Save for 2020-2021, due to development pressure and a lack of public awareness surrounding this site. During construction in a vacant lot in 2011, workers discovered the over 100-year-old grave of a woman in an iron coffin. Research revealed her identity and the existence of many unmarked graves of citizens of Newtown, a community of freed African Americans established in 1828. Development threatens to erase this history altogether. The league has been working to help promote Newtown’s forgotten history and bring attention to the Elmhurst African American Burial Ground as well as similar burial grounds across New York State, to highlight the conversation around significant aspects of our shared and diverse history.

Located at 88-28 43rd Avenue in Elmhurst, stands the 1911 Gambrel former longtime home of Walentyna Janta-Polczynska, the “First Lady of Polish Americans”. Walentyna, a WWII Polish War Heroine, resided at this residence until she passed away on April 2, 2020 at 107 years old. She was the last living member of the Polish Government-in-Exile and from 1940 to 1943 she served as a confidante and secretary of the prime minister and commander in chief, General Wladyslaw Sikorski. As chief translator, she translated from Polish to English the first eyewitness accounts by the Polish resistance fighter Jan Karski of the Nazi destruction of the Warsaw ghetto and the extermination of Polish Jews and also attended meetings with foreign leaders, including Winston Churchill. Later during WWII, she helped to both organize and also worked as an announcer for a secret

radio station that broadcast to occupied Poland. Following the war, Walentyna was assigned to the Women's Auxiliary Service and given the rank of second lieutenant in the Polish Army. Stationed in Frankfurt, Germany, she debriefed Polish former prisoners of war and concentration camp inmates who had been victims of medical experiments. She also witnessed two days of the Nuremberg trials. After moving to Elmhurst, Queens in 1955, Walentyna and her husband shared their passion in humanitarian, philanthropic and civic work along with documenting and preserving culture and history and opened an antiquarian bookstore in their home that specialized in Slavic culture and history. Their home became an important stopping place for Polish emigre elite fleeing Communist Poland as well as distinguished scholars, professors and dignitaries. This cultural site is a rare example of significance not only for Polish and Polish American culture but on the accomplishments of a modern female war heroine.

When considering the cultural significance of these two Elmhurst sites, it is evident these physical locations mark important places in our history and are worthy of preservation. Granting these properties, the full protection of the NYC Landmarks Preservation Law will ensure that these stories are continuously told and that these physical spaces remain safe from insensitive development or demolition because their history is valued. We applaud the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission for considering landmarking for these significant properties and we fully support the efforts of designating the Janta-Polczynska residence and Elmhurst African American Burial Ground.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions you might have.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jay DiLorenzo".

Jay DiLorenzo  
President