

Consultative Comment on AB_167_1189X NHPA Section 106 Review

On the relationship between the Harsimus Stem Embankment and the
Harsimus Cove and Hamilton Park Historic Districts
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As President of the Harsimus Cove Neighborhood Association in the mid-1980s, I was closely involved in the listing of Harsimus Cove on the State and National Registers. Indeed, this was one of the Association's primary goals.

In the late 1970s, the area had been surveyed by a group of graduate students from Columbia University's Historic Preservation Program. They generated a draft State Register/National Register (SR/NR) nomination, recommending that the entire study area from Railroad Avenue on the south to the Hamilton Park Historic District on the north be incorporated in a Harsimus Cove district. This would have included both the largely commercial Newark Avenue and the contiguous segments of the Harsimus Stem Embankment. While we had been assured by Jersey City officials that they intended to advance the Harsimus Cove nomination at the state and federal level, in 1985 the Association decided to act on its own. We hired Sullebarger Associates to update the nomination, largely through detailed photographic documentation and analysis. Given the opposition that had apparently developed to listing by certain Newark Avenue merchants, and our uncertainty about the attitude of Conrail (as well as the problem of how to treat the segments of the embankment that extended west of the proposed borders of the district), we decided to scale back the scope of the nomination to a residential core. Here, our reasoning was entirely pragmatic. Time was of the essence. We wanted the protections inherent in historic designation in what was a rapidly developing Downtown Jersey City. We were aware that the embankment was part of a "federally regulated railroad" (the usual reply to our numerous efforts to have the filthy railroad underpasses cleaned up), and, from the legal notices in the local press, we were aware that there was a federal permit process required for any "rail abandonment." So, the embankment, and Newark Ave, were left for another day. In the

Harsimus Cove nomination, we retained the Columbia students' language about the import and connection of railroads to the neighborhood. (This is discussed in my Embankment nomination.)

I also wish to raise a few more general points that address the suggestion that the embankment can somehow be severed from its physical context, or, indeed, that its demolition would somehow not affect the adjacent historic districts.

It has been suggested that historic integrity is somehow the victim of a sort of inevitable entropic process. Certainly, fires, floods, and demolitions, legal and illegal, happen. But there is also a countervailing force, this very apparent in Downtown Jersey City: with the clear economic success of historic preservation here, many owners, even outside the official districts, have removed the inappropriate cladding of historic fabric and detail that once made assessment of resources almost impossible. This seems to be especially the case in the western reaches of the Downtown, about which we could only be agnostic in our analysis a few decades ago.

Much more important, our ideas of what is historically significant have evolved, and will continue to evolve.

Historic Preservation has its own history, some of it rather cringe-worthy. For some local elites, it was a way of celebrating temporal priority and cultural hegemony. This has often been coupled with an obsession with the high-style at the expense of the vernacular, of the residential at the expense of the industrial, and of the articulate and self-promotional at the expense of the anonymous and inarticulate.

If the "lifestyles of the rich and famous" school of historic preservation is on the wane, this is probably because practices have been informed by the kind of social history historians have been practicing for the last fifty years: Braudel and the entire *Annales* school, E.P Thompson and the notion of writing history "from the bottom up," "urban history," "industrial archaeology," post-J.B. Jackson "vernacular landscape...." Why we

today have a Women's Rights National Historic Park (Seneca Falls), an African Burial Ground National Monument (Manhattan), and a Stonewall National Historic Monument (Manhattan). All are National Register listings.

And, to the work of historians (usually comfortable only with texts) we might add voices from within the practice of architecture, planning and preservation. If any thread unites the practice of such a diverse group as Venturi & Scott-Brown, Jane Jacobs, and Kevin Lynch, it is the willingness to embrace urban complexity and juxtaposition, and to eschew the sort of "Euclidian" (in the zoning sense) categories that once seemed to constitute "rational" planning.

When I hear people suggest that the embankment might be removed without effect on Harsimus Cove or Hamilton Park, I'm reminded of M. Christine Boyer's *Dreaming the Rational City; the Myth of American City Planning* (M.I.T. Press; 1983).

We really can't return to the 1870s and re-write a fictive history of Downtown Jersey City, imagining that it might have evolved into a sort of Brooklyn Heights West. Jersey City became a continental rail-head. The adjacent neighborhoods of Hamilton Park and Harsimus Cove developed with and were structured by the rail infrastructure. This is their real history. In the Hamilton Park nomination (Sheehan, 1977), the embankment is described as both the southern "edge" and "boundary" of the district. In the Harsimus nomination (Sullebarger, 1987) it is described as the northern "boundary."

Boundaries and edges are not voids. Often, they help define districts. If so, to obliterate an edge is to degrade the integrity of the district. Here, I would simply refer the reader to Kevin Lynch's discussion in his planning classic, *The Image of the City*. (M.I.T. Press, innumerable editions.) Interestingly, much of the field work for this study was done in Jersey City in the late 1950s. This work's *Figure 10; The visual form of Jersey City as seen in the field* depicts well how the railroads structured Downtown Jersey City. He also quotes, at considerable length, a local informant's account of her trip across what we would today call Harsimus Cove and Hamilton Park. She cites many street and store

names, but, according to him, she cites only two "visual images," and they are both of rail infrastructure, until she finds Hamilton Park.

Within the practice of historic preservation, it was the architectural historians, building on a long tradition of scholarship, who initiated many of the early listings on the National Register. In the popular mind, the NR still constitutes a sort of architectural "hit parade."

In fact, the National Historic Preservation Act and the National Park Service's elaboration of the National Register criteria is vastly more inclusive, incorporating "districts, sites, buildings, structures and objects significant in our prehistory and history." (NPS Bulletin #15, *How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation*.) The intent is to preserve cultural resources that "represent the major patterns of our shared local, State and national experience." (Preface, Bulletin. #15) Among those resources, the NPS cites, as examples: a stable, a carousel, a trolley car, a railroad grade, a milepost, ruins of a building or shelter, a trail, a petroglyph. (*Bulletin 15, section IV*)

We all approach historic preservation with certain assumptions, prejudices and what the French call a "déformation professionnelle." While it might be possible to write a purely architectural account of Harsimus Cove or Hamilton Park, the rich, overlapping contexts of significances of the districts and the embankment more fully tell our local, State and national experience.

The National Park Service's Brochure *The National Register of Historic Places* begins: "The National Register of Historic Places is the official list of the Nation's historic places worthy of preservation." This might seem banal and almost tautological, save in the current discussion. Nowhere is the destruction of one type of historic resource for the "betterment" of another type contemplated.