



August 26, 2022

Sarah Carroll, Chair
Landmarks Preservation Commission
1 Centre Street
New York, NY 1007

RE: Oliver Street—Alfred E. Smith Historic District

Dear Chair Carroll:

The Lower East Side Preservation Initiative (LESPI) and Friends of the Lower East Side (FOTLES) are dedicated to recognizing and protecting the storied neighborhood of the Lower East Side, an area of great architectural and historic importance for the city and the nation. It is unfortunate that, to date, there are no Historic District designations in the core area of the Lower East Side below Houston Street, while so many other significant Manhattan neighborhoods are now designated. We fear the fate of the Lower East Side—fear that its unique immigrant past, embodied in its historic architecture, will be lost as demolitions occur and contemporary buildings rise at an astounding rate. This is an urgent matter.

While our organizations have long advocated for a Historic District around the Tenement Museum, and continue to pursue that goal, we also request the evaluation of a small two-block area just southeast of Chatham Square. The boundaries are Oliver Street, Madison Street, and St. James Place, bisected by James Street. This was the symbolic core of the old 4th Ward, an immigrant neighborhood and Tammany Hall stronghold that shaped the life and career of Alfred E. Smith (1873-1944), four-time Governor of New York, and Democratic candidate for President in 1928. Smith, one of New York's most distinguished citizens, was a champion of Progressive causes whose initiatives FDR credited as inspiring the New Deal. His longtime residence remains on Oliver Street, and close by are the church and school he attended alongside so many from this community.

Today, the proposed Historic District is much as it was when Smith walked through the neighborhood. Its low-scale buildings and narrow streets and sidewalks—punctuated by landmark churches and a landmark cemetery—give it a unique sense of place. In New York City, an area of a few blocks can sometimes resemble a small town, and that is how this district functioned for Smith. It is imperative that this area be recognized and protected with landmark designation so that it can remain a touchstone of our historic immigrant past and serve as a tribute to a remarkable New York citizen.

Please feel free to call Deborah Wye at (917) 846-2953 with any questions or to discuss this RFE further.

Sincerely,



Richard D. Moses
LESPI



Deborah Wye
LESPI



Linda C. Jones
FOTLES



Mitchell Grubler
FOTLES



Joyce Mendelsohn
FOTLES

P.S. Images of the proposed district are included within the Statement of Significance. Two separate images are also attached here as they include buildings not discussed in the Statement of Significance.

—31 + 35 St. James Place: Two late, 2-story, back-building annexes for the funeral home complex at 29-33 Madison Street.

—29-37 Madison St. + 31-33 James St.: A row of early-mid 19th century buildings with altered first floors at 29-35 Madison St., an early-mid 19th century building on the corner of Madison and James Sts., and a 5-story, mid-19th century building at 31-33 James Street

P.P.S. Also provided here is a link to a LESPI Webinar on the historic Oliver Street neighborhood.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1dvUkNEJkoM&t=118s>

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