

History of Village Preservation's Federal Style Row House Preservation Project

Conversation with Susan De Vries, Jay Shockley, and Vicki Weiner

January 10, 2024

The following is a transcript of a conversation held on January 10, 2024 between Susan De Vries and Jay Shockley, moderated by Vicki Weiner, which was to explore the history of the Federal Style Row House Preservation Project. The work under discussion began as a survey, research, and advocacy effort by two staff members at the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission in the mid-1980s. The Village Preservation (then GVSHP) project was an initiative that began in the mid-1990s to continue the earlier LPC effort, with the goal of protecting many of the disappearing Federal style row houses of Lower Manhattan. In the decades since, Village Preservation has successfully advocated for 136 of these buildings becoming designated as NYC landmarks and/or listed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places. This includes 13 individual NYC Landmarks, nine NYC historic districts or historic district extensions, and the South Village State and National Register Historic District, which contains 96 Federal-era houses among its approximately 750 buildings. Further information about Village Preservation's efforts can be [found here](#).

This transcript was edited for clarity.

Vicki Weiner: Hello and welcome. Thank you for being here. We are members of the Village Preservation Archives Committee who are going to engage in a conversation about the late 20th century documentation process for Federal row houses in Manhattan. I'm Vicki Weiner, a former Executive Director of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, now Village Preservation. I currently work at the Pratt Institute. I'm joined by Jay Shockley, who was a longtime research staff member at the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission from 1979 to 2015, and Susan Devries, an architectural researcher and photographer who was first an intern and then a staff member at the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation in the 1990s. Both of them have been very engaged in researching and documenting the very fragile collection, if you will, of Federal row houses that exist or existed, many of them lost, below Fourteenth Street in Manhattan. While we were prepping to talk about this with a recording going, Jay reminded us that Greenwich Village has the largest assemblage of Federal era row houses left in the city. For Village Preservation this is an issue both of preserving buildings and of documenting the history of preservation. We've really wanted to record and document the process by which some of this research took place, and discuss what it accomplished and what we lost. But also, we want to be thinking about advocacy going forward, thinking about how to continue to support these really wonderful important buildings that are, many of them, in a state of disrepair. So we have a group of questions that we've assembled that we're gonna talk through. We'll start just by, you know, capturing the background of how these research projects began in the 1980s. I'm going to kick it over to you, Jay, to talk about your involvement, when at LPC, and how that all began.

Jay Shockley: Thank you. So again I started at the Landmarks Commission in 1979. I went, in the early years I was there in a number of different capacities. I started out on researching Olmsted landscapes, and then I was on the survey staff, and then Kent Barwick, who was the LPC chair in the late 70s early 80s, rearranged the Landmarks staff into geographic staffs. Then when Gene Norman came in in 1983, he reorganized the Commission staff back into Survey, Research, and Preservation departments. So in my years in the Survey department, and then in the Research department, settling in the mid 1980s, another staff member, Laura Alamo, who couldn't be on this call today, unfortunately, she and I found out that we both had a pet passion for Federal houses in Manhattan. Basically because these are the earliest remnants other than you know the Dykeman House in Upper Manhattan, which is a Dutch farmhouse, Federal row houses in Manhattan are the oldest remnants of the settlement of Manhattan Island by the English. So we realized that there were lots and lots of these buildings that were not protected and we got interested in trying to see if we could get permission together to create a Federal Row House project. We personally went to Gene Norman when he was designated the chair of the Landmarks Commission, and actually got permission from him to spend the two of us working one day a week on this project. By that point I believe I had become the Deputy Director of the Research Department and Laura Alamo became the Deputy Director of the Preservation Department so we really had to plead our case. The thinking then, frankly, inside the Commission staff, was that "Why is this? Why is this important? Why does this matter, aren't the best ones already designated?" You know, given the fact that the 1969 Greenwich Village Historic District, which is quite large. Then there's the Charlton-King-Van Dam Historic District South of there that's three different blockfronts of Federal houses and there were smatterings of individual designations of Federal houses.

So what we ended up having to do in this project was a whole variety of different tasks. Number one was to actually look at the designated Federal houses that the Commission had already done, whether they were in historic districts or individually designated and, for instance, in that exercise when you really look at the Federal houses in Charlton-King-Vandam, there are very few of them that are intact. Almost all of them in the Greek revival period, or in the Italianate period, had upper stories, had new cornices put on, and so on. So that was one factor that we had to look at in the designated properties. Then, number two was to come up with a roster of all of the properties we could find, either in the files, going through the few books like Ada Louise Huxtable, or whatever, people that had been interested in Federal houses. And physically, just as we were going about the city as part of our survey department duties, or just where we lived, or whatever else, we started compiling an extensive list, files, and so on. And as part of that the third part was really coming up with a methodology of "What is a Federal house?" And that actually was the most important thing because, basically, so we and Commission staff people, you know, the administrators of the Commission, and ultimately the Commissioners, would know the basic grammar of a Federal Row House in New York, and there are clearly exceptions.

These were relatively modest. There are some very grand ones in the Greenwich Village Historic District, but by and large, they're two-story row houses, red brick. Sometimes, they were frame construction with just brick facades. They almost always had Federal, or Flemish bond brickwork. And they had simple cornices, sometimes more elaborate cornices. And they almost across the board had dormers on the top.

Then we determined that there was a chronological flow of the lintel type. The very earliest survivors in Manhattan are, have a keystone in the middle and have splayed lentils out of stone.

Vicki Weiner: Did you say what the data range was roughly?

Jay Shockley: Well yes. Those that we identified as the earliest surviving ones in Manhattan are from the 1780s and 1790s. And I think literally, those splayed keystone lintels, and Susan may correct me later, but those basically are only in the 1780s and 1790s. By around 1800 up to 1810 or so, the most common type was incised lintels that had sort of a rectangular incising with little corner blocks. And then there were variations on that. Sometimes you had slightly pedimented lentils that were still Federal. A little bit confusing when you determine Federal houses. Lintels in subsequent decades were frequently vulnerable because they were stone, and a lot of times they were replaced. So it's not always immediately apparent if what you're looking at was actually original to the Federal house period. And sometimes it is amazingly clever. There's a row in Greenwich Village that were done individually - 127, 129, and 131 MacDougal Street, on the west side of MacDougal Street. I happened to do the designation reports for those. When you look at them at first, you swear that those are Federal lintels, but in fact, they're cast iron. That in the cast iron period, probably 1850s, they actually mimic what would have been a convincing Federal lintel.

So, again, going back to, you know, the grammar of what these were. Once we determined that those were the basic materials of what a Federal row house looked like, we went with our list, and as we'll talk about when Susan and I get into a conversation about them. There were a bunch on our original survey list that are recognizable as Federal houses, if you know to look for them. But in the later nineteenth century, they were made into tenements by being raised two to three stories. So those were already altered. As I said, the simpler type of alteration, as per the ones in Charlton-King-Vandam, they were only raised a story or so with a new cornice. Sometimes the Federal houses that are still fully identifiable as a Federal house had later cornices put on. Those are very common types of just, you know, updates in taste, updates in when materials deteriorated, and so on. So that basically was our methodology and that was our entire project, which was, to counter the fact that the most important ones were already protected and designated, to come up with a survey of them, and to develop the vocabulary of what it was that a Federal Row House was.

So I, because it was 40 years ago, I'm not crystal clear how much time Laura and I actually had to work on this project. But it was somewhere, probably between six months to a year at most. And then, when Gene Norman left as chair, then we were pulled off, being allowed to do this. But in all the subsequent years leading up to Susan, I literally in the Research department, I kept a Federal house file. There was one file drawer that was my personal files on Federal houses, and if the Commission was going to get involved in any of those they had to come to me, and, you know, consult the Federal House file drawer.

And so I guess I'll just do a slight prelude into turning it over to Susan. But when Jennifer Rabb was appointed as chair, obviously internally by that point the Research department was advocating for the protection of these things, but I think the thinking by that point was that these definitely were worthy buildings. There were still tons of them sprinkled all over Lower Manhattan, and I didn't say, and I should

have said, that we determined that besides the the earliest survivors from the 1780s and 90s, basically the form of the Federal House died out in 1835, and we found them all the way from the tip of Lower Manhattan all the way up into Chelsea. I don't think we found any at all in the area east of Chelsea. But that meant that there were ones in Soho, NoHo, Chinatown, and the Bowery had a ton of them, as one of Manhattan's earliest thoroughfares that went from Lower Manhattan all the way up. They were in all sorts of states of pristine, slightly altered, altered in the nineteenth century, altered more recently, but we developed quite a list, and when Jennifer Rabb was appointed chair, she actually was just looking for projects for community groups to do.

Jay Shockley: So I think when she was appointed chair, obviously Greenwich Village was starting to advocate for more protections for other areas that were not designated as part of the original 1969 historic district, which, by the way, was Manhattan's first large historic district. Far and away, all of the districts in Manhattan that were designated between 1965, when the Commission was designated, 1969, were all pretty diminutive in size. So it was a big, big, very controversial thing at the time, and the Commission was incredibly courageous to do one large district. In 1969, that said, because of NYU's opposition to anything south of Washington Square, there were a lot of Federal houses that ultimately got protected by, you know, the six or so extensions to the Greenwich Village district from, you know, the Extension one, Extension two, South Village, Sullivan-Thompson, the Meatpacking District, and so on. So many of those were done many years later. But so I'll turn it over to Susan, and I believe she's gonna pick up with how she got involved, and I believe that a portion of our survey was turned over to her, basically south of 14th Street.

Vicki Weiner: Before we turn to Susan, I have two questions if you want to answer, kind of briefly is fine. One: What was in that file drawer? Exactly? If you could describe the contents, you know, just in general terms. And two: remind us how this kind of survey happened in the 1980s? You know, what technologies you did or did not have, to go find these buildings and talk a little bit about how it is you identify, you know, I'm assuming you guys were walking up and down streets, but if you could talk a little bit about that, I think that'd be great.

Jay Shockley: Yeah, I mean, the survey methodology back in those days was all over the place. The Commission, when I first started, and for years afterwards, was actively getting summer interns. They were getting just volunteers in the community who wanted something to do to assist the Commission. I mean, trust me, if everybody knows the Commission now is understaffed and under-financed, back in those days, it was severely so. So the Commission really tried to rely on community people that were just interested because they lived in an area. They were probably interested, ultimately, in getting a historic district protection. But as helpful as they were, particularly in terms of Federal houses, it's so specific, a lot of people that were just community volunteers would look at these things, and "Well, that's a dumpy old house, you know, I'm not interested in that." So that wasn't particularly helpful.

And you know there, for a few years, there was a lot of Federal block grant money that was given to the Commission for survey. A woman named Meredith Sykes headed up what was the first computerized survey, and a great deal of effort was put into that. But unfortunately, during pre-computerization days,

the city only had one central computer for the entire city. So the data that was compiled for the Commission surveys went to other people that entered it, and if they typed in the wrong number, it could change it from a Federal house into a tenement. I mean it was, it was that specific, so the actual data from that survey ended up being virtually useless.

Jay Shockley: But the incredible thing that was compiled in those days was there was an attempt to photograph every single building in Manhattan. And, as part of that, not only is there this photographic file, you know, between people doing that, and so on. Obviously, there became more of an awareness of really, what was surviving, and that said, when Laura and I started the program, and you were asking what was in the file drawer, it was anything that we could find that existed in the research files.

There's an incredible photographer named John Barrington Bailey who, on his own, just went out and photographed the city of New York, and he clearly was an excellent photographer. He had an old fashioned box camera on a tripod. He donated his entire photographic collection to the Commission, and for a number of years, he actually was hired by the Commission. For instance, in the early 70s, when SoHo was designated, he produced all the photographs for the Commission of the SoHo Historic District. So we had a lot of incredible mid-60s photography of Federal houses that we put on our files. Apparently, in the pre-Commission days, there was a predecessor commission before the law went into effect, that most people don't remember about, that lasted between 1963 and 1965. And during that period, Regina Kellerman, who was the first Executive Director of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, she had people doing not technical National Register survey forms, but they were basically sort of early survey forms that were useful. And a bunch of those were on Federal houses, some of them in the Greenwich Village area. There were a whole bunch of identifiable Federal houses on Bleecker Street, just south of the Greenwich Village Historic District, and some of those had survey forms. So again, the famous Federal House file drawer had everything we compiled – photographs, our survey notes. And again, what Laura and I did was, either as part of our jobs or just as we moved about the city, every single time – you know, it's another “Oh, my God! There's another Federal house we didn't know about!” We would take notes on it, create a file on it. And that's basically how it evolved.

Vicki Weiner: That's great. Great. Thank you, Susan, you want to pick up the story from there.

Susan De Vries: Sure, although I think, actually, you would come first, right?

Vicki Weiner: Mhm.

Susan De Vries: I was an intern at then GVSHP. I started in the fall of 1994, and in my memory, it was the spring of 1995 that GVSHP kind of got approached by the Commission.

Vicki Weiner: Right.

Susan De Vries: But I think that you would have had that conversation, probably, and I remember getting faxed a list.

Vicki Weiner: Yeah, yes, I think Jay's memory is accurate about Jennifer's tenure at the Commission, where, you know, she was looking for ways to in a way, relieve the workload of staff and get ahead of requests that were coming in. There was a backlog of different unfinished projects, and on "calendared but never heard, or heard and never acted on" buildings. This was, in a way, part of what the work was under her tenure. I'm not completely remembering, who the Commission's Executive Director was under Jennifer. I think it was Ronda Wist, right?

Jay Shockley: There were a bunch of them.

Vicki Weiner: I remember they were looking to finish some work that was unfinished, and Regina Kellerman was still on our board at the Greenwich Village Society when I became the director in 1993, and was still very active. A number of the board members were very keen on continued designation and addressing the vulnerabilities of some of the buildings and different building typologies. I don't have an exact memory of the call that precipitated them faxing us this list, but I think that's actually quite right, that we were tapped as an organization to look into whether these buildings still existed, and what kind of conditions they were in. That's my recollection.

Jay Shockley: And again, this is totally parallel to that. But besides, in quotes relieving staff of certain things to do, she wanted certain neighborhood groups to do something instead of just bugging the Commission and proselytizing for designations. So it actually was a very clever and ultimately useful, because it did pan out so.

Vicki Weiner: Exactly, yeah.

Susan De Vries: And so there was this faxed list of about 108 or so buildings below 14th Street, river to river pretty much. And, the agreement, as I recall, was that I would spend my summer going and walking by each of the buildings and photographing them. Because, of course, this was pre-Google maps, this was pre-digital anything. So again, much like Jay, you had when you were doing the survey work, the best way was to walk past them and photograph them and just provide a baseline of: how many of these still exist, and what condition are they in, basically. So that was how I spent that summer of 1995, which was my first summer living in New York City. So it was a great way to walk almost, I think I walked every street below 14th Street, and again, you know, having to map them out ahead of time without the benefit of anything, figuring out where they were, and then just basically discovering them because there was no, here's what the building looks like. It was go to this address and see if you can find the building, which is rather fun. And it was a hot summer, as I remember, and I learned what neighborhoods I should carry a clipboard and try to look official in and what neighborhoods I shouldn't carry a clipboard.

And I think we did that first round of photography and then had a meeting and presented the slides to the Commission. I think you were at that meeting, Jay, and Marjorie Pearson, I think. And we just basically went through: here's the status. And there were some, indeed, that were gone, but not as many as I

expected. Actually, I think there were just a few that had been demolished on that list, which was kind of amazing.

And they really were spread out. There were a lot on the Lower East Side, Chinatown, but there were also some like you said, in the Village and in Lower Manhattan, you know, all the way down on Greenwich. And so I think, then, at that meeting, we kind of created a priority list of which ones should I go back and re-photograph, but really zoom-in on the details. So, and I actually still have all my field notes from both that summer of '95 and then the next round, where basically, I was just kind of sketching the buildings, and then, you know, making a note about what was in the storefront. If there was a storefront, what shop was in there. And then, did they have lintels? Did they have dormers? What could I tell? Because I was still learning. I, you know, didn't have, Jay, your knowledge at that point. So I was kind of learning what to look for and how to photograph them. And, you know, using my eye to walk around the building and see what I spotted. So in my memory, we did another slideshow with the Commission showing close ups of lintels, of dormers, you know anything I could get with my new zoom lens to show them, and then kind of make some further decisions.

Vicki, does that ring a bell? Yeah?

Vicki Weiner: Yeah.

Susan De Vries: Yeah.

Jay Shockley: My question to you, Susan. Sorry if I'm jumping ahead. And you can say this.

Susan De Vries: Yes. No.

Jay Shockley: You, to all the viewers out there, she sent us the materials to prep for this ahead of time. What you didn't send was the ultimate ring binder booklet that was GVSHP's proselytizing tool, for these are the most important ones, let's have these designated. Do you remember how many were on that final list?

Susan De Vries: That is a good question because that was actually post-me.

Jay Shockley: Okay.

Susan De Vries: I remember contributing to that, and sharing my thesis and stuff like that. But I think the production of that booklet came after me. And actually, the New York Landmarks Conservancy also produced something. If you remember, their endangered building project.

Jay Shockley: Right.

Susan De Vries: And they also produced a list of endangered buildings, and there were a lot of Federals. So I remember contributing to both.

Jay Shockley: Okay, that's really interesting. Because I thought that ring binder, which seemed to be the main tool, ultimately, you know, our survey getting honed down by you with all these meetings, whatever, but I always thought for sure that that was your product. But.

Susan De Vries: No, I mean, I think it had a lot of my stuff in there.

Jay Shockley: Yeah.

Susan De Vries: But, I think I was an intern, then became a staff member, and I think, left in 1999, I wanna say.

Vicki Weiner: After I left, which was in 1998.

Susan De Vries: So that might have come out in the early 2000s or something like that, or maybe.

Vicki Weiner: So it was after you and I had both left.

Susan De Vries: Yeah.

Vicki Weiner: Yeah. Can you talk a little bit about how you went from this intern project to exploring this more deeply as a Master's thesis?

Susan De Vries: Sure, I was actually contemplating that last night when I was looking at your notes. It kind of ended up because my early thesis consideration was theaters in Greenwich Village because there had been a research project about that, and I had done a ton of research, and there were particularly some theaters still standing in Union Square at the time that got demolished in 1995. So when we had this photography opportunity, and I was spending so much time with the buildings and walking around and getting to know all these neighborhoods, it just seemed a very logical thesis project.

And so I ended up doing not so much research on the history of each individual building, which Jay, as you know, when you're dealing with these buildings like that, especially pre-digital research, was a monumental task. So I did, kind of post-thesis, spend a ton of time doing that research. But for the thesis, it was really about: What is this topology? Why is it important? What various studies like Jay's work, there was a Lee Roberts study, there's Ada Louise Huxtable, who produced a volume about these buildings like, you know, and why are they surviving, and why are some not designated? So that ended up being my thesis. And then I actually ended up, and I still kind of, go back and visit the buildings and have been photographing them kind of ever since. Yeah.

Vicki Weiner: And what is your recollection of the National Register effort?

Susan De Vries: Then I think we had conversations about doing a non-contiguous district.

Vicki Weiner: Yeah.

Susan De Vries: You know that we could do a Federal row house. What is it? It's multiple property.

Vicki Weiner: Multiple property listing.

Susan De Vries: I think we had that conversation. I remember going up to Peebles Island and chatting with people.¹

Vicki Weiner: In the SHPO's office. Yes.

Susan De Vries: I think we just didn't have the resources to do the full, you know, nomination.

Vicki Weiner: Yeah.

Susan De Vries: Which is a regret that we kind of didn't do that.

Vicki Weiner: Yeah.

Susan De Vries: And then the focus, I think, became more on local designation.

Vicki Weiner: Yeah, I do recall we went to Troy after our visit with SHPO at Peebles Island and got a great tour of Troy with...

Susan De Vries: Yeah. Peter Shaver.

Vicki Weiner: Peter Shaver. Exactly!

Susan De Vries: Yeah.

Jay Shockley: I just wanna, have to, swing back to something that she just mentioned that I should have, is, you know, of all the research tasks that one can do, researching Federal houses is quite difficult, particularly in all those years. I mean, the Internet may be useful for some of that stuff, but you have to go

¹ In a later conversation, Weiner and De Vries recalled an important grant received by GVSHP from the Preservation League of New York State to support the research and advocacy for the Federal Row Houses. This was a regrant from the New York State Council on the Arts awarded to GVSHP in 1997. It was used to continue research and fund the work toward National Register listing, and ultimately the creation of the "ultimate ring binder booklet" to which Shockley refers in this conversation.

to early land records, you have to go to early tax records, and you have to compare all these, and early directories.

Susan De Vries: Yeah.

Jay Shockley: It's basically the triangulation between when somebody shows up in a directory, when a property was sold, and a tax evaluation, if you can find that, to pinpoint when these things were actually constructed.

Susan De Vries: Yeah.

Jay Shockley: So it's a lot of different research.

Susan De Vries: It is. And it was a lot, because addresses and street names sometimes changed as well.

Jay Shockley: Oh, all the time.

Susan De Vries: I spent a lot of time at the Municipal Archives using the tax and assessment records on microfilm, which is still required if you want to do that early research, and basically starting in the 1890s and going backwards to like, have a baseline: this is the building, and then just keep going backwards and hoping you can figure out when that lot has a house on the lot, or when the assessment value changed. I mean, now, it's easier to do the mapping research digitally, but you're right. It doesn't change the effect, having to go through those tax assessment records.

Jay Shockley: And from what I've understood since I retired in 2015, they've moved the conveyance books out of Manhattan.

Susan De Vries: Yeah. So I did a certain amount of that for my thesis. And then afterwards, I did a lot on those buildings that eventually ended up in that binder. I did a lot of the tax assessment research. I probably would come to different conclusions now, than I did then, right, just with more research experience under my belt. Yeah.

Vicki Weiner: That's interesting. What ways do you think your conclusions might have been different? Be different now?

Susan De Vries: I think you just with time, you become better at thinking analytically and you know a little bit more about the neighborhoods that you can know what was going on, when, what makes sense, and just more access to resources now, perhaps, and hopefully more in my brain, that I've saved. I don't know. I don't know about that, but one of the things that I did as part of my thesis was, see those magical files of Jay's. So I have very clear memories of going to the Commission, Jay allowing me to go through those files. I got copies of some of those photographs that you mentioned, so I still have those.

Jay Shockley: Mhm.

Susan De Vries: And then I, also with my memory, what was so fascinating in those files that you had compiled was for certain buildings, like the wonderful stretch on Canal Street, there were, you know, letters on file from like Robert Moses saying, ugh “Please don't bother with these buildings,” because they were in the way of a project, or there were the wonderful houses on Lower Greenwich, 94, 94 and a half, 96, which had been heard but not designated. And there were wonderful things in the files, including letters of objection from the owner's lawyers in the 60s, and so that for me, for my thesis, was really great cause it showed: look, these were considered important, but it just didn't make it, and now only one of those is individually designated.

Jay Shockley: No they're both designated.

Susan De Vries: Two, okay. But not all of them, there were three in that stretch, yeah. So yeah, like that, those research files were really important because it brought all of that information together, and then, you know, you allowed me to photocopy some things and photograph some things which was great. Yeah.

Vicki Weiner: So when we think of all of the different materials that you both produced, you know, between the research, the photography, maps, compilations of information, of archival material... What material exists today, and do we know where this material is? What would you say, in the inventory of resources that we have about the Federal houses, that still we know where it is?

Jay Shockley: Well, in terms of the Commission, I actually don't have a clue, as I said, from '85 until 2015, when I retired, I kept that Federal House file intact, and the Commission has moved so many times, and the staff has changed so many times, I doubt if it stayed intact as a Federal House file, which is too bad, because it's such a specific topic, it was inordinately helpful to have that as a totality. None of the material would have disappeared, but if it's been sprinkled around by address filing, or whatever else, then it's only as helpful as it is. But.

Vicki Weiner: Although we haven't asked, I don't think anyone's asked them if this file is still intact, it'd be an interesting question. We should probably ask the research staff today if they know of this documentation.

Susan De Vries: I still have the photocopies of things that I made from your files. So I have some photographs and photocopies of some of the letters and things, so I still have building files with that in there. No, I wasn't able to obviously copy everything, so I don't have the full extent, but at least some of it.

Vicki Weiner: Mhm, and Jay, did you keep any of it, since some of it was your personal research? Was there any of it that you continued to research after you left the Commission, or - ?

Jay Shockley: Well the one thing that was which I actually don't think we've quite touched on yet, with what happened with all of these two parallel projects.

Vicki Weiner: Yeah.

Jay Shockley: And ultimately Susan, very helpfully, prior to this meeting, sent out the original list that she had and she looked at the entire list, and I looked for several hours this morning, went on Google Street maps just to see what each of the properties looked like. And the good news is that many, many, many, probably the vast majority of all of the buildings on that list, were ultimately designated as individual landmarks or in historic district extensions. You know, Greenwich Village has had so many extensions, there are two NoHo districts, there was a SoHo extension district, and so of that original list that Susan had, there have been a number of alterations, a number of demolitions. There, as I mentioned earlier, a number of the buildings had already been altered in the nineteenth century as tenements. I would guesstimate that there are a handful, maybe four to six, that I still think are worthy of designation, that are not protected. And they're just, you know, stray areas outside of protected areas.

The tragic thing is, as we were discussing prior to recording, it's a tragedy, both Susan and me, because we had a fondness for the Bowery in particular. Back between when she picked it up, and when I had started the survey, the Bowery, probably as one single street, had the most amount of surviving Federal houses, as one of the earliest thoroughfares that went all the way from the tip of Manhattan, you know, basically up to Cooper Union, and very few of those are protected, and so many of them have been severely altered or demolished, so that was tragic, that sort of as a streetscape, that those ended up both under the flaws of the Landmarks Law ability to do something like that, with discontinuous properties that are sort of thematic rather than contiguous properties. So, but by and large, I'm really pleased at relooking at that, the totality of the list, because, at least on paper, and we'll pick up on this topic coming up, on paper, most of these are protected. But.

Susan De Vries: Yeah and.

Jay Shockley: Do you have a different feeling about that, Susan?

Susan De Vries: No, I think I just would say, Vicki, your original question about like where documentation lies, I would just wanna say about the list is that it was an amazing starting point of like a hundred and so buildings. But it isn't every single Federal building in Manhattan. So that's something to think about. And that, you know, the photography that I did, some of that has been digitized, and, you know, I've retained all of my original stuff, both things that I did after working for Greenwich Village Society. And a lot of that, as Jay noted, was the affection for the Bowery, the Lower East Side, Grand Street, which is amazing. So I did a lot of kind of walking around there and discovering "Oh a lintel here, a little bit of Flemish bond there" that still survives.

Susan De Vries: So there's both the collection from the 90s, the slides that I took for then-Greenwich Village Society. Those have been digitized mostly and now-Village Preservation has those online. I have my kind of additional collection of things, and then I have all my, you know, folders on each building. That I have my original survey notes that I keep hanging onto instead of throwing out kind of thing.

Vicki Weiner: Well I think that's a good thing.

Susan De Vries: Yeah. And the buildings that still exist are also those that are undesignated are, or unprotected, are still constantly changing and at risk. So, you know, I might walk down Grand Street in another year, and those will all be gone.

Vicki Weiner: Yeah.

Susan De Vries: You just don't know. There was a great project, most of those buildings are within a National Register District, Lower East Side.

Vicki Weiner: Mhm.

Susan De Vries: So, I don't know if you remember, Jay, there was this great stretch all the way at the end of Grand by East Broadway, like those were just like an amazing little stretch. Those were included in the National Register. They kind of stretched the National Registered District to go all the way down.

Jay Shockley: And then going through them on Google Maps today, one or two of those were individually designated.

Susan De Vries: Yes, yeah. I think I-.

Jay Shockley: It was a tragedy, they didn't do the row because.

Susan De Vries: Yeah.

Jay Shockley: They're so diminutive and so unusual.

Susan De Vries: It's just a wonderful little stretch. I think it's just like 511 and 513 Grand Street [Manhattan], if I remember, that were designated.

Jay Shockley: Right.

Susan De Vries: But it's a wonderful little stretch there. Yeah.

Jay Shockley: Yep.

Vicki Weiner: In preparing for this conversation - actually, I should have shared this, but I'm sure you, Susan, know about this, and maybe Jay, you do as well - that in 2016 before their name change Village Preservation created a document called "[Making the Case](#)," which is a report on their website of Federal row houses landmarked or listed on the State of National Registers of Historic Places, 1999 to 2016. It's a compilation of images and discussion as we've been having, of which buildings ended up in which historic districts, that was last updated, I think, in 2016. It's hard to tell if it has been updated since then. Jay, your exercise this morning is pretty much the exercise that they went through, whenever this report was produced. To kind of identify which buildings are protected and which ones are outliers and not protected. So I guess two questions are: What have we lost? What are the remaining threats and how many do we think are threatened? And this question of ones that have not yet been quote-unquote, discovered. Those that are probably still extant, but behind layers of signage or siding, or, you know, very deep beneath a lot of alterations.

Vicki Weiner: Susan, I do remember some of your images in those days from Chinatown, and there was one picture in particular where you said "Look at this, it's there, the building is there!" But there was a giant billboard sign.

Susan De Vries: Modern Decor!

Vicki Weiner: I think you found an angle to take the picture where you could see the dormer behind the sign.

Susan De Vries: Yeah, they've lost their dormers, and at least one in that row is gone. But it was like my favorite row, cause you could look past the giant billboards.

Vicki Weiner: Yep.

Susan De Vries: See a little bit of Flemish bond, and they still had their dormers, and they were such a wonderful part of the history of that streetscape.

Vicki Weiner: Yeah.

Jay Shockley: And Susan, I think, if you still have your files on that, I think there was an early John Barrington Bayley Photograph from the mid 60s of that row.

Vicki Weiner: Oh, wow.

Susan De Vries: Yes.

Jay Shockley: And you could really tell.

Vicki Weiner: Yeah.

Susan De Vries: Yes, yeah, I think I used that in my thesis, maybe, I think so.

Vicki Weiner: Mhm.

Susan De Vries: Yeah, so you could see what they were. But I loved those so much because they weren't perhaps what the Commission was then looking for, as far as the purity of form.

Vicki Weiner: Right.

Susan De Vries: But to me, they show the Federal row house as kind of a workhorse -

Jay Shockley: Yeah.

Susan De Vries: [continued from her previous sentence] - of the streetscape. That it was adapted by, you know, different immigrant communities coming into the neighborhood, and, you know, a floor was added, or, you know, the storefront was changed, but it was still such an important part of that streetscape.

Jay Shockley: And it's funny exactly what you're describing, it's sort of the working class, alternative to what ended up happening with the Harrison Street houses.

Susan De Vries: Yeah.

Jay Shockley: Which were all, early Federal houses that were part of the Washington Market that was demolished, and they were designated and then moved into this, it's quite wonderful, but it's a little mini-Williamsburg, over-restored houses next to these high-rise apartment buildings.

Susan De Vries: Yeah.

Jay Shockley: I mean, they're important houses, and they've been wonderfully restored, but they're really overly restored. And.

Vicki Weiner: Right.

Jay Shockley: Sort of fake -

Susan De Vries: Out of their context.

Vicki Weiner: And they're out of the context that they were originally constructed in. Absolutely. Yeah.

Jay Shockley: Yeah. Yep.

Susan De Vries: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Vicki Weiner: Preserved, but some of the meaning is altered by how they present today, right, you cannot get a sense of the original.

Jay Shockley: And and I don't know if either of you have ever seen those photographs there, the Commission owns a slew of photographs of those when they were still in situ as market buildings.

Vicki Weiner: Mhm.

Susan De Vries: Yes, yeah.

Jay Shockley: And then up on flatbed trucks being rolled over to Harrison Street.

Vicki Weiner: Wow.

Jay Shockley: It's a really amazing process of saving those and moving. But.

Vicki Weiner: Yeah. Yep. Do you think that there is, you know, sufficient evidence and reason to go back to this question of a multiple property designation? Or is there another way we can think of them as a group that we should be thinking about, either a policy application or, you know, a book? Maybe the two of you want to write a book? I don't know. Just saying, how do we capture and continue to support the, you know, preservation of some of these buildings and appreciation for them, even those that have been heavily altered?

Jay Shockley: Well, if I could jump in, and we haven't exactly jumped into this aspect of it. I, and I think Susan would back me up on this, and certainly Vicki would back me up on this, just because they're designated, I think these are still among the most vulnerable properties in New York. Again, going to the very beginning of this conversation, these are the oldest remnants of settlement on Manhattan Island. And just because they're designated, we just lost the building on Gay Street, in the Greenwich Village Historic District, and there was a cluster, I think it's five houses, were all built together, going through Gay Street over to Christopher Street. Those are in terrible shape, they have scaffolding up right now, they are really really vulnerable.

The Commission allowed, I will say they would counter the use of that word, but I personally did the entire historic district for Gansevoort Market Historic District. There was a whole row between 14th Street and 15th Street. They weren't technically Federal houses, but they were row houses built at exactly the end of the Federal Row House period. And the Commission allowed a new building to go up in the back, with no protections of these vulnerable buildings, and the Buildings Department required that the entire row be taken down.

Jay Shockley: And I just saw them a week or two ago. The new construction is atrocious. They look fake, the windows are awful, the cornice is awful, the brickwork is awful. There is nothing that the Commission did in having them reconstructed that is believable that these are old buildings. And then even some of the individually designated buildings, one of the oldest buildings in Lower Manhattan, 67 Greenwich Street: incredibly old, incredibly rare. It's one of the only Federal houses that had a bowed rear on it. They allowed the entire building to be demolished except for the front wall and the rear wall. There's nothing inside of it, there's nothing left to the building other than these two walls.

Susan De Vries: Yeah, that one is heartbreaking for me, because there once were many of those bow backed houses on Greenwich, that were demolished for the construction of the tunnel. So it was really the one that was left.

Jay Shockley: And the family that owned it was an incredibly important family, early Lower Manhattan family. So you know, and as we're finding out more and more and more, the Commission, in the last, at least 10 or 15 years, is only protecting facades. They're not protecting buildings. It's a problem all over the city. And it's not as widely talked about in preservation circles, but it's an absolute fact. So again, even if they're individually designated, or even if they're in historic districts, because of the fragile nature of, you know, they're usually frame, they're frame construction.

Vicki Weiner: Right.

Jay Shockley: A lot of times, it's only a brick front facade. Sometimes, it's the rear facade and the front facade, but it's frame construction between. And again, the Commission, allegedly with the Buildings Department, has provided some sort of a document about how fragile buildings are supposed to be protected. But I personally haven't had a chance to look at that yet, but I'm a little bit leery that this is enough that's needed. So I think Village Preservation and other preservation groups, I would urge them to look at what is designated and protected. What's happened to them? How vulnerable they still are. And for things like the Gay Street and Christopher Street buildings, and other ones, really lower the boom, something has to happen, these are too precious to lose.

Vicki Weiner: Mhm.

Susan De Vries: And just like you mentioned Jay, the vulnerability, because of, you know, even adjacent construction. I mean the Merchants House Museum is another important example of one that obviously was not on my list.

Jay Shockley: Oh.

Vicki Weiner: Mhm.

Susan De Vries: It was already designated, but one that I studied and photographed as an example of what I needed to look at, which is now vulnerable to construction next door, and that, you know, something, if that's lost, that's lost.

Vicki Weiner: Right? We're not getting that back.

Susan De Vries: Yeah.

Vicki Weiner: That sounds like a call to action of a sort, is there, are there groups that you know of? You know we have, of course, wonderful, local organizations like Village Preservation, first and foremost, but that and the NoHo, and SoHo preservation groups. Are there other affinity groups that might be interested in this issue of this particular time period of house? That might join -

Jay Shockley: The interesting thing I didn't even think of until now when you're asking the question but, HDC, does annual lists of the most vulnerable properties.

Vicki Weiner: Mhm.

Jay Shockley: It might be worth joining Village Preservation, and then joining together to have a look at this. And is that worth that would at least put a spotlight on this question.

Vicki Weiner: That's a really good point. Yeah, they have the Six to Celebrate program, right? Other groups are there, you know, is this something that's of interest to the Society of Architectural Historians or AIA New York?

Susan De Vries: Yeah. Well, local kind of just history buffs. Also, I just wanted to mention Two Bridges Neighborhood Council, which really did a lot of that work on the National Register District. So they are invested in that kind of history in their communities and that whole area-

Jay Shockley: I mean the Bowery Alliance definitely was, and Richard Moses, and the Lower East Side Preservation Initiative are.

Vicki Weiner: Mhm.

Jay Shockley: That said, looking at the list again this morning, I don't know either on the Bowery or on the Lower East Side at this point, if there are any that are still, still extant that would be individually designated.

Susan De Vries: Oh, individually, I mean, I think that is the tough thing about those that as much as I personally love them, I think individual designation would be difficult. But there's certainly some that you know, I have, now an additional list of ones that I've seen pop up. Some favorites in that kind of Two Bridges area, what is now called Two Bridges wasn't at the time.

Susan De Vries: You know, so there could be an addendum to the list of additional ones. But I think you're right. That, individual designation, might be a little tricky.

Vicki Weiner: Yeah, I mean it does really point to also something that we talk about a lot in New York City, about the Landmarks Law, which we love and need and want to keep strong, but that it really is somewhat prohibitive of, you know, being used for purposes where a building lacks the complete integrity, the complete intact. You know, individual landmark status is a very big deal. And the Commission, you know, has its policies which are that the integrity of that building has to be pretty intact. And so, these do not have that. But they have other values, there are other ways in which we value these buildings.

Susan De Vries: Absolutely. And the cultural significance of - I know that different individuals have submitted requests for evaluation to the Commission on some of these, with some extensive research, especially along the Bowery, where it's not about the integrity architecturally, even though they still have clearly Federal elements. But for the historic significance and the cultural significance of those buildings in the community, and it just hasn't done it. Yeah.

Jay Shockley: Well, that's really one of the dirtiest secrets of the Commission, because the 35 and a half years that I was there, trust me, it was raised in the earliest days when I was on staff. And even though the Commission talks a slightly different way about it, when push comes to shove, the buildings by and large, that are designated for historic cultural reasons are still mostly intact, and are mostly more high style architecture. Federal houses, when you really consider it, other than the really grand ones, are vernacular architecture.

Susan De Vries: Yeah.

Vicki Weiner: Absolutely.

Jay Shockley: And its absolute elemental meaning.

Vicki Weiner: Yeah.

Jay Shockley: But that's partly, as you were talking about before, about some of, Susan, some of your favorite examples on the Bowery. They should be protected for so many reasons.

Vicki Weiner: Yes. For so many reasons.

Susan De Vries: Exactly. They are charming, and they are vernacular, and they speak to the history of New York, and of Manhattan from, you know, its earliest architecture, and that they have still survived -

Vicki Weiner: And, yeah. Right.

Susan De Vries: - into the twenty-first century.

Vicki Weiner: It's a miracle.

Susan De Vries: And how in the world would one expect them to survive with every single detail intact? That's not the nature of New York, right?

Vicki Weiner: Right. Absolutely. So we've had just a few minutes remaining. It's been a great conversation. I'm so glad we did this. I guess if there were, was any message you wanted, or you know, maybe advice about what to do now. For Village Preservation and its allies. I know the interest there is very high for these buildings, both the ones that are in districts and the ones that are not. What would you advise them to do, if anything?

Jay Shockley: Well, I basically touched on it before. I think it's worth reaching out to other groups that are allies. I think it's worth Village Preservation specifically to do what we've done through this exercise, which is taking a fresh look in the original district and all of the adjunct surrounding districts. And what is there? What is vulnerable? What should they insist the Commission take action and not be reactive to the vulnerable nature of some of these, and insist that the city put in place between the Buildings Department and the Landmarks Commission. Not lip service to protection, but serious, serious, serious protection. And again I'm I -

Vicki Weiner: So kind of bumping up the watchdog efforts. Yeah.

Jay Shockley: Oh, absolutely. And just not take for granted that just because these are designated individually.

Vicki Weiner: Yeah.

Jay Shockley: Or in historic districts, they're automatically protected, because that's turning out, not to be the case.

Vicki Weiner: Right.

Susan De Vries: And I think also, there are more community organizations now than there were in the 90s.

Vicki Weiner: Mhm.

Susan De Vries: It's an opportunity whether it be Village Preservation, whoever, to reach out to the different communities where these buildings are likely to be, and just say: "Hey, do you have five on your watch list? What are those, what should we know is a priority in your neighborhood?"

Vicki Weiner: Right. Mhm.

Susan De Vries: "And then how can we all pool our resources to make sure at least those that you have identified as significant in your neighborhood get some more attention as part of this whole group."

Vicki Weiner: Yeah. These are terrific suggestions. Right, call it some coalition building, some checking with local communities about what's important to them and being vigilant. Even if we think the building is protected, it may still not survive.

Susan De Vries: Yeah.

Jay Shockley: And it's actually, Susan, not to give you a task, but since you just admitted that you have an adjunct list to properties that we're not on that list, I mean, we had talked before the camera went on that since you got the Commission's list only south of 14th Street, I know for fact that we had in our files, buildings in Chelsea.

Susan De Vries: Yeah.

Jay Shockley: Two Federal houses on 8th Avenue were designated by the Commission. I used to live on West 16th Street, and there actually were some back then that were on 16th Street.

Vicki Weiner: Mhm.

Jay Shockley: So there are a number in Chelsea that are not designated. Although, most of them have been severely altered in subsequent years, but it would be worth making that public, if you have.

Vicki Weiner: Mhm.

Jay Shockley: In fact, I think as an aftermath of this conversation, our fresh look at it, I'm gonna compile a list of the ones that I think are individually designatable.

Susan De Vries: Great.

Jay Shockley: And I again, just doing it again this morning, I think it's probably less than six of that original list.

Vicki Weiner: Right.

Jay Shockley: But if you could look at your resources.

Susan De Vries: Sure.

Jay Shockley: And see if you think that there are any that are individually designatable again, it's entirely possible in the future. If the Commission ever gets around to doing some tenement historic districts on the Lower East Side.

Vicki Weiner: Mhm.

Jay Shockley: As the Bowery Alliance and LESPI is trying to do.

Vicki Weiner: Right.

Jay Shockley: Some of them will get, you know, scooped up in those measures. But that's not a given.

Vicki Weiner: No.

Jay Shockley: But again, my reading of going through all of the properties this morning on that original list that you took up, there's less than a handful that are potential, that are still out there that are intact, that I think could be designated.

Susan De Vries: Yeah, I'll look through my files. I remember certainly when we were working on the project, and kind of word got out that I received communication from people in Chelsea, saying, "Hey, do you know about these buildings?" And then someone from Brooklyn: "Hey, we've got Federals in Brooklyn, do you know about these?"

Vicki Weiner: Yeah.

Susan De Vries: I'll have to go through my files and my notes and also my photographs, because I spend a lot of time roaming the Lower East Side and seeing what I've got.

Vicki Weiner: Mhm, and I do think to your point earlier about community engagement and organizing - you're right. There are probably folks in communities all over the city who would be thinking, "Oh, well, that's interesting. I'd love to join an effort like that." Maybe we should be looking at this in a broader geography.

Susan De Vries: Mhm.

Vicki Weiner: And finding partners outside of Lower Manhattan who are also thinking about the importance of these, and even to celebrate them, even if you know, if protection through policy measures is not possible, to really uplift the idea of them and draw attention to them through writing or exhibits or programs, or just to really kind of build the constituency of people who care about them and potentially could be stewards or advocates.

Jay Shockley: It's actually -

Susan De Vries: Yeah and I don't want - Oh, go ahead Jay.

Jay Shockley: You know, thinking this through is all of us are just formulating our own thoughts. It's rather ironic in a way that we have a Victorian Society, Art Deco Society, Friends of Cast Iron, Friends of Terracotta, but there's never been a Federalist Society.

Vicki Weiner: Yes. Well, there is, but not for these buildings.

Jay Shockley: In terms of architecture.

Vicki Weiner: It is true, this is a type of, you know, a typology and a time period that doesn't have friends yet.

Susan De Vries: Well and in that vein too like, we don't want to make this too broad, but certainly I've also looked at obviously all of the boroughs, and if we don't make it just, strictly the Federal style, if we're talking about this kind of early nineteenth century vernacular building.

Vicki Weiner: Yeah.

Susan De Vries: And obviously that Federal form continued in some of the other boroughs into the 1850s. Or that very basic -

Vicki Weiner: Yeah.

Susan De Vries: (continuing her previous sentence) - you know, style, or that Greek Revival style continued, as well like, if you're looking at that. You really have representation in every borough.

Vicki Weiner: Yeah, absolutely.

Susan De Vries: You know, of some kind of early nineteenth century architecture that is important to the kind of residential topology of the borough.

Vicki Weiner: Yeah.

Susan De Vries: Not as significant a number of Federal buildings, but still something that kind of works in there. But that's getting pretty broad.

Vicki Weiner: Maybe we need to start a little bit smaller with a friend's group for Federal row houses and see how that goes.

Susan De Vries: Exactly, yeah.

Vicki Weiner: Who comes out of obscurity, to join an effort to celebrate these vulnerable resources? Okay, feels like a good time to wrap it up. Any last comment, last thoughts you want to throw in.

Jay Shockley: I'm so glad we had this conversation. As you said before, it's been instructive for the three of us. I hope, ultimately, whoever views this, feels that way.

Susan De Vries: Yes. It's great.

Vicki Weiner: Yes. You too. Anyone? Absolutely. No, this has been really fun. And yeah, hopefully we can do this again.

Susan De Vries: Great.

Vicki Weiner: Okay. I am going to turn the recording off if I can remember how to do that. It's funny, stop recording. There we go.