

# (Former) Colored School No. 4

**128 West 17th Street Manhattan**  
**Tax Map Block 792, Lot 53**

**Built:** 1849-50

**Designed by:** New York City Public School Society

**Proposed Action:** Propose for Calendaring, February 14, 2023



Tax Photograph, c. 1940



LPC, 2022

The former Colored School No. 4 is a three-story mid-block brick school building constructed in 1849-50 on West 17th Street in the Chelsea neighborhood. It is the only known surviving school building that exclusively served African Americans in Manhattan and is associated with many significant individuals. Spanning the period between the Civil War through the Post-Reconstruction era, the former Colored School No. 4 is an important reminder of racially segregated education in New York City and illustrates how education afforded crucial opportunities and skills to Black students as they struggled against the discrimination and inequities that were part of their daily life.

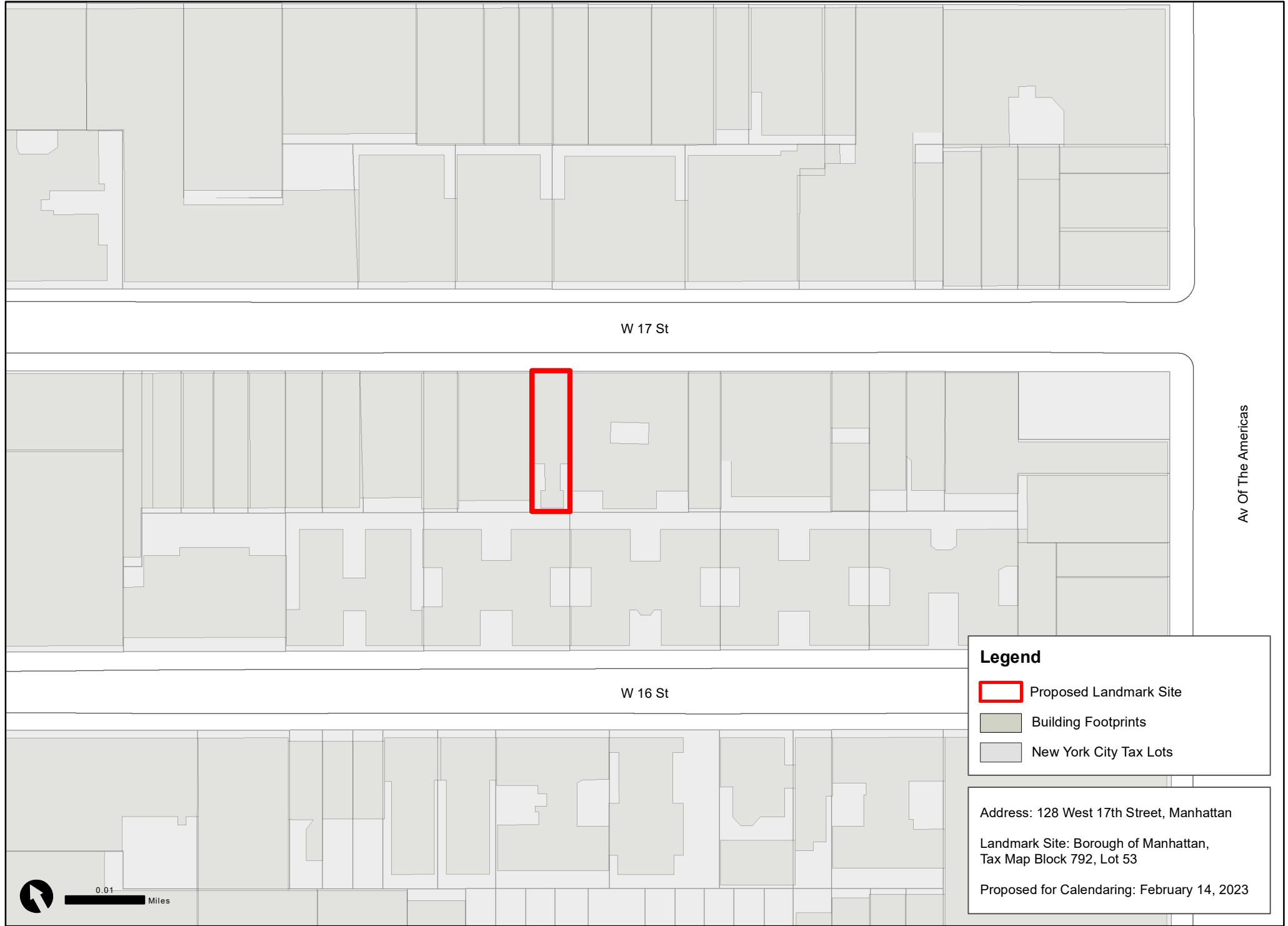
The building was constructed by the New York City Public School Society, and the design follows the Model Primary School House plan (adopted by the Society in 1844). Its 25-foot wide four-bay façade featured large multi-pane windows and two separate entries at the ground floor—one for boys and the other for girls—that led to separate spaces for boys and girls inside.

In 1853 the building was transferred to the City of New York when the Board of Education was established. The school became Colored School No. 7 in 1860 and later Colored School No. 4 in 1866. At that time there were eight primary public schools in Manhattan serving 2,377 African American students. In 1884 the school became Grammar School No. 81 when the Board of Education dropped the term “Colored” from the official names of public schools. Despite the name change, Grammar School 81 continued to serve African American children exclusively until 1894 when the public school system closed the segregated schools.

The former Colored School No. 4 was associated with important African American teachers and students. The school’s principal, Sarah J. S. (Tompkins) Garnet, was one of the first African American female principals in the New York City public school system and also an ardent suffragist and champion of social justice. J. Imogen Howard, a teacher at the school, became a manager at Chicago’s 1893 Columbian Exposition. In addition, several of the school’s graduates became prominent leaders in the fields of education, music, transportation, and public service, including Susan Elizabeth Frazier, who became New York City’s first African American teacher assigned to an integrated public school, and the acclaimed composer and classical violinist Walter F. Craig.

The history of New York City’s free education includes the story of the institutional segregation of African American students in the 19th century. Within that history, the former Colored School No. 4 illustrates not only what a small NYC public school looked like before the Civil War, but also the story of prominent teachers and graduates within the African American community who excelled within their areas of expertise and valued education as they struggled for civil liberties and opportunities.

Although no longer used as a school, the building has remained a property of the City and used for other purposes. Despite some alterations, the almost 175-year-old building exhibits its pre-Civil War urban schoolhouse design and illustrates the history of New York City’s 19th-century public education of African American children.






W 17 St

Av Of The Americas

W 16 St

**Legend**

-  Proposed Landmark Site
-  Building Footprints
-  New York City Tax Lots

Address: 128 West 17th Street, Manhattan

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan,  
Tax Map Block 792, Lot 53

Proposed for Calendaring: February 14, 2023

