

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Women's Liberation Center Multiple Property Nomination: no

other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number 243 W. 20th Street not for publication

city or town New York vicinity

state New York code NY county New York code 061 zip code 10011

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. See continuation sheet for additional comments.

R. Daniel Murray 3/11/2021
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

DSYPO
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet for additional comments.

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:	Signature of the Keeper	Date of Action
<input type="checkbox"/> entered in the National Register. <input type="checkbox"/> See continuation sheet.	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> determined eligible for the National Register. <input type="checkbox"/> See continuation sheet.	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> determined not eligible for the National Register.	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> removed from the National Register.	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> other, (explain:) _____ _____ _____	_____	_____

Women's Liberation Center
Name of Property

New York, New York County
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-Local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property

(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
1	0	Total

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

GOVERNMENT/fire station

SOCIAL/meeting hall

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

COMMERCE/TRADE/organizational

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

LATE VICTORIAN/Italianate

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation stone

walls brick

roof

other Cast iron, stone, metal

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8 Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria considerations

(mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object or structure.
- F** a commemorative property.
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

Social History: LGBT

Social History: Women's Rights

Period of Significance

1972-1987

Significant Dates

1972

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

na

Cultural Affiliation

na

Architect/Builder

unknown

Primary location of additional data

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

Women's Liberation Center

Name of Property

New York County, New York

County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of property .05 acres

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1	18	584535	4510728
	<i>Zone</i>	<i>Easting</i>	<i>Northing</i>
2			

3			
	<i>Zone</i>	<i>Easting</i>	<i>Northing</i>
4			

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Emily Kahn Contact: Kathleen LaFrank, NYSHPO, kathleen.lafrank@parks.ny.gov

organization New York City LGBT Historic Sites Project date December 2020

street & number 71 W. 23rd Street, #903 telephone _____

city or town New York state New York zip code 10010

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name _____

street & number _____ telephone _____

city or town _____ state _____ zip code _____

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.470 *et seq.*)

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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New York County, New York

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Summary

The Women's Liberation Center, 243 West 20th Street, is located on the north side of West 20th Street between Seventh Avenue and Eighth Avenue in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan, New York City, New York County. It is situated mid-block and is one of the only non-residential buildings on a street characterized by four- to six-story apartment buildings. Immediately to the west of 243 West 20th Street is a three-story former row house now used as a hostel. The remainder of the block to the west consists of row houses and apartment buildings with commercial storefronts. Immediately to the east is a four-story apartment building. Further east are additional apartment buildings, some of which have commercial storefronts. Apartment buildings also dominate the south side of the block, with a fourteen-story apartment complex on the corner of West 20th Street and Seventh Avenue.

The nominated building was most likely built as a volunteer firehouse ca. 1854 and either substantially altered or rebuilt as a firehouse for a paid company around 1865. The firehouse was converted into the Women's Liberation Center in 1972. It sits on a rectangular lot measuring approximately 25 x 75 feet in size. It occupies the entirety of the width and the majority of the depth of the lot. The facade of the three-story, Italianate-style building faces West 20th Street. The building's main entrance is located at sidewalk level. The top of the west elevation is visible above the former row house to the immediate west, but neither the east elevation nor the rear elevation is visible from the street. The building retains its exterior architectural integrity to the period of significance to a high degree.

Narrative Description

The Women's Liberation Center is a three-story, three-bay building in the Italianate style. The building is built of red brick laid in common bond and has cast-iron, sheet-metal, and stone details. It is divided into two main sections: the ground floor, which features the historic cast-iron vehicular and pedestrian entrance enframement

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(with non-historic infill) added around 1878, and the two upper stories crowned by a cornice. It has a flat roof topped with mechanical equipment that is not visible from the street.

The facade faces West 20th Street. On the ground floor, there is a single, painted cast-iron enframent divided by three pilasters into two sections of unequal size. The west section is wider than the east section and once contained the historic vehicular entrance. The east section contains the pedestrian entrance. The stylized pilasters have paneled bases, fluted shafts, blank friezes, and fluted capitals. The pilasters support a horizontal lintel ornamented with eight, equally spaced, rosettes and, at either end, acanthus leaves. The enframent interrupts a horizontal stone band at the building's base. While the enframent is substantially intact, the two original vehicle doors were replaced after the period of significance with wood panels and windows that approximate the appearance of a single garage door. Tax photos from the 1940s show that the vehicle entrance consisted of two wood doors with six fixed windows above. Today, the space is defined by three rows of wood panels surmounted by one row of fixed windows. The pedestrian entrance was a wood panel and glass door; it is now a multi-panel glass door. The space within the enframent above the garage and pedestrian doors is filled with a large segmental-arched glass transom. Above the enframent are two metal attachments that supported the firehouse signage prior to its removal around 1967.

The second and third stories of the facade have three, evenly spaced, segmental-arched wood windows on each story. Each window has an intact historic wood surround, a stone sill, and a painted, arched cast-iron lintel with acanthus leaves. The windows on the third story are slightly shorter than the windows on the second story in order to give the building an increased sense of height. The building is capped with a projecting, painted sheet metal cornice with modillions and an elongated bracket ornamented with an acanthus leaf on each end.

The top of the west elevation is visible above the building to the west of 243 West 20th Street. It has no fenestration. The east elevation is fully obscured by the west wall of the taller adjacent apartment building. The

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rear elevation of the building is not visible from any street or avenue. On this elevation, the ground floor projects out farther than the upper two stories. There are three unevenly spaced windows on the second story and three evenly spaced windows on the third story. The windows have stone sills and lintels.

Interior

On the interior, the building's plan and finishes have been altered several times throughout the building's history as it was adapted to changing functions. It retains its original division into three floors plus a basement; however, the original first-floor functional divisions indicating its use as a firehouse have been removed. The stairwells remain in their original locations, and the stairs are steep and made of concrete, suggesting that those are original or early features. Additionally, the interior retains its high ceilings, which have remained consistent throughout the building's period of significance, and one third-floor classroom has exposed brick on two interior walls. It also retains its large third floor studio, which was similarly used during the period of significance. When the building was acquired from the fire department, the women themselves did the alterations necessary to make it functional as a meeting place by various groups. As the building was in poor condition, major repairs were necessary to achieve code compliance; however, most of the work was function oriented.

The building's most recent renovations date to 1994 and 1996, when it was renovated to the create classroom, fitness, and workshop spaces for the current occupant. These renovations were more professional and sophisticated, yet they were also function oriented. The basement is an open plan design that serves as the workshop, filled with student workstations and tools. The ground floor is accessed via the pedestrian entrance in the cast-iron enframement on the building's facade. There are hardwood floors and brick and plaster walls original to the building throughout. Immediately upon entering, there is a reception vestibule with a wood door leading to a hallway to the other rooms on the ground floor. Moving north on the west side of the hallway is a three-stall restroom followed by a classroom with a rectangular plan and a mechanical room. The classroom

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provides flexible space that can also be transformed into a fitness room. To the east of the hallway are two wood doors leading to stairwells to the basements. Both stairwells lead to the basement and ground floor. The second floor, third floor, and roof are accessed via a large staircase from the ground floor. The second floor to the south contains a printing station, a staff kitchenette, and a small, enclosed office space off a hallway. To the north is an open plan design with rows of desks used as staff offices. The third floor contains a mix of classroom and office space. There is a single-stall bathroom immediately off the stairwell followed by additional open plan office spaces to the south and another large classroom (formerly studio) to the north. The roof serves as an extension of the interior, with picnic tables used for meetings and socialization.

Integrity

The building at 243 West 20th Street is currently occupied by the employment agency Nontraditional Employment for Women. With the exception of the infill of the first-story cast-iron enframement, the building's exterior remains intact to the building's period of significance. After the women replaced the fire fighters, they transformed the interior themselves to meet their functional needs without benefit of professional help. While we know in general how the space was used, no photos have been found that would tell us exactly what these spaces looked like during the period of significance. There was one large room in the front of the main floor, a large meeting room and office on the second floor, and a large studio-like space and office on the third floor. Several women from the period recalled that it was cozy, furnished with old furniture, and probably heated by stoves, though often cold.¹ These spaces were used over and over for different purposes, so they were changed many times. However, other than its division into spaces where a variety of groups could meet, the plan, size of rooms, and decorative qualities of the interior played no determining role in its use and are not related to its historic significance as a meeting place for women.

¹ Various interviews with Emily Kahn, 2021.

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In 1994 and 1996, the current occupant, Nontraditional Employment for Women, renovated the interior of the building to create classroom, fitness, and workshop space. Currently, the basement contains the tool shop; the ground floor holds the fitness room and a classroom, and the upper floors contain classrooms and offices. A large open room on the third floor is believed to occupy some or all of the original studio space. Although the building's specific uses may have changed from more passive meetings and gatherings to more active classes and training sessions, its general use as a flexible space exclusively dedicated to the empowerment of women remains the same. In a way, training women for jobs not traditionally open to them and giving them the tools for self-sufficiency and financial independence can be seen as a logical step in a women's liberation movement that began long ago with the quest for suffrage and continued through the period of significance, as women sought personal and spiritual freedom to fulfill their own destinies. Thus, Nontraditional Employment for Women could be seen as a continuation of the founders' mission. Therefore, although some of the spaces may be configured differently than they were during the period of significance, they are configured to meet the same general purposes in a contemporary context. One important aspect of both uses was the flexibility of the spaces, which were often reconfigured to serve new groups or functions. Another was the overall lack of decorative qualities, which were overlooked in the quest for practical and functional space. A third quality was economy, as finances did not allow for unnecessary embellishment. The building at 243 W. 20th Street clearly retains integrity of location, setting, materials, exterior design, and association. Those features that define its general character more specifically, including size, materials, fenestration, distinctive façade design, main entrance, division into floors, concrete stairs, some plaster walls, flexible division into spaces for smaller gatherings, and continuity of purpose, all combine to preserve its integrity of feeling as a space where late-twentieth-century women could find freedom and power and share goals for self-empowerment. Thus, the building retains sufficient integrity to illustrate the significant themes represented.

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Summary

The Women's Liberation Center (WLC) is nationally significant under criterion A in the area of social history: LGBT and Women's Rights as the first permanent advocacy space for women's and lesbians' organizations in New York City and as one of the earliest examples of a feminist gathering space nationwide. Founded in 1970 and relocated to 243 West 20th Street in 1972, the WLC served as a meetinghouse and a clearinghouse for grassroots, radical organizations associated with the women's and lesbian liberation movements. Due to the ability of women of all backgrounds to gather and share ideas in this space, the WLC helped foster an increased acceptance of lesbians within the women's liberation movement and illustrated the nationwide trend for lesbian organizations to operate out of women's centers. The inclusion of multiple perspectives from diverse organizations helped to create a more radical version of feminism and affirmed the need for women's spaces within male-dominated society. Two prominent lesbian organizations — Lesbian Feminist Liberation and Lesbian Switchboard — developed at the WLC in the early 1970s to advocate for increased rights for and improved visibility of lesbians. In addition to serving as a pioneering women's space, the WLC also helped to cultivate lesbian activism both within and separate from the general gay liberation movement, which often overlooked lesbian issues. By serving as an alternative to the general movement, the WLC provided women with increased autonomy to advocate for their own rights both inside of and separate from the gay liberation movement. The WLC set a precedent for other LGBT centers and activism spaces, showing how these centers could focus not only on the political but also on the social and cultural needs of LGBT individuals. Finally, the WLC fostered ongoing and increasing partnerships between feminists and lesbians, a departure from earlier tensions in the second-wave women's liberation movement. Although the WLC closed in 1987, activists and organizations associated with the WLC have been influential in instituting women's and gay rights into the political agenda of the state and the nation since. The building is exceptionally significant under criterion exception G for its pivotal and sustaining involvement in numerous aspects of the second wave of the women's liberation movement, for its early support of lesbian activism and gatherings at a time when the latter were shunned by other women's and gay rights organizations, as the first permanent advocacy space for women's

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and lesbians' organizations in New York, and for its precedent setting advocacy of feminist gathering spaces nationwide. The building continues to serve as a space for women's activities today. The period of significance captures the most significant and influential years of the group's existence, beginning with its move into this building in 1972 and concluding when the group disbanded in 1987.

National Significance

The Women's Liberation Center is nationally significant as one of the first and most influential women's advocacy centers, a resource type specific to the 1970s and early 1980s that was of pivotal importance in championing female empowerment and social equity in the United States. The rise of these centers aligned with the activism of the second-wave women's liberation movement. Second-wave feminists, who focused on seeking the independence and empowerment of women, saw owning or operating their own spaces as a way of gaining self-autonomy, asserting their authority, and ensuring that their voices were not muffled in male-dominated spaces. Women, of course, had been gathering without men for centuries – in church societies, quilting clubs, mothers' clubs, and fraternal auxiliaries, just to name just a few – but more politically and/or socially oriented women-only spaces began to open in the form of restaurants, coffeehouses, and bookstores in the late-1960s and 1970s. However, women's advocacy centers had an additional layer of significance, as Daphne Spain, a foremost scholar on gender and urban space, defined in her 2016 book *Constructive Feminism: Women's Spaces and Women's Rights in the American City*:

Of all feminist places, women's centers were the most important for both the women and the movement. A completely new use of space, they nurtured the formation of yet more places. Women went to find out what a feminist was and figure out whether they qualified. They carried on serious conversations about sexism, racism, and homophobia with other women, or joined a C-R [Consciousness-Raising] group to explore the relationship between their personal lives and the political economy in which they were enmeshed.¹

¹ Daphne Spain, *Constructive Feminism: Women's Spaces and Women's Rights in the American City* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2016), 51.

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Spain further commented that it is “nearly impossible” to determine which women’s center in the United States was founded first due to a lack of centralized record-keeping and limited scholarship. However, research to date suggests that New York’s WLC was one of the first four women’s centers to open in the country and that these four helped launch a nationwide movement to create new women’s spaces.

Three women’s centers with comparable participants, values, and programming to the WLC opened in 1970: The Crenshaw Women’s Center (Los Angeles, California), the San Francisco Women’s Centers (San Francisco, California), and the Women’s Education Center (Cambridge, Massachusetts). Self-described feminist anarchist Joan Robins is reported to have heard about talks of a women’s center in New York City in 1969 (these would most likely have been plans for the WLC) and thought that the idea would work in Los Angeles.² She envisioned the LA center as a space for existing feminist groups to meet and communicate. The Crenshaw Women’s Center in Los Angeles opened in January 1970 in a brick duplex at 1027 South Crenshaw Avenue, serving as a clearinghouse, offering free abortion referrals, providing vocational counseling, housing a lesbian suicide hotline, building a feminist library, and renting flexible meeting space. Unfortunately, the Crenshaw Women’s Center closed after just two years due to schisms with NOW members and disagreements over leadership.³

The San Francisco Women’s Centers was founded in 1970 by a coalition of feminist organizations. The center was designed as a meeting site and communication hub and originally operated out of a three-room office at 63 Brady Street. After outgrowing the space, the group purchased the Women’s Building at 3543 18th Street in 1978. Echoing the history of the WLC, women involved with feminist organizations completed all of the repairs

² Spain, 54.

³ Spain, 56-61; NOW opened the Center for Women’s Studies in December 1970 at 8664 West Pico Boulevard in Los Angeles after splitting from the Crenshaw Women’s Center. The Center for Women’s Studies, however, does not represent the development of women’s centers. NOW welcomed men to all their activities at the center and limited their opening to NOW members, distancing themselves from the core ideas that these centers should be women-only spaces that facilitate diverse and widespread participation from feminists across the movement.

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and renovations of the building themselves. The Women's Building, like the WLC, actively welcomed women regardless of race, sexuality, physical ability, age, or socioeconomic status. Groups including the San Francisco Network for Battered Lesbian and Bisexual Women, Lesbian Bisexual Artists, Older Lesbian Organizing Committee, Women's Cancer Resource Center, and San Francisco Women's Switchboard met at the Women's Building. The Women's Building continues to operate as a non-profit, women's center today.⁴ The building was listed on the National Register at the national level of significance in 2018.

Like the WLC, the Cambridge Women's Education Center was founded in 1970 but obtained its long-term building two years later. Members of the Bread and Roses collective and other feminist groups seized a building at Harvard University to demand a permanent women's center, similar to the 1971 occupation of a city-owned building to form the Fifth Street Women's Building in New York City (the latter building is no longer extant). Upon moving into a house at 46 Pleasant Street in 1972, feminists once again completed their own building repairs before opening the center to a women's school, lesbian mothers' support group, reproductive counseling, and a rape crisis center, among other services. Keeping with trends in women's centers, the Cambridge Women's Education Center was inclusive of women's diverse identities and experiences. This center also remains operational.⁵

The nominated building shares features with most of these other early women's advocacy centers. The organization's founding dates to 1970; however, the women met in temporary quarters until finding a permanent home several years later, in 1972. Once the building was acquired through a long-term lease, the women did the work to convert it to meet their needs themselves, and they offered a multitude of provocative and much needed programs to empower women. All four of these early organizations were located in major metropolitan areas; however, by 1975, more than 100 independent women's centers had opened in thirty-nine

⁴ Donna Graves, *The Women's Building National Register Nomination* [San Francisco, CA], 2018.

⁵ Spain, 67-75; Graves, *The Women's Building National Register Nomination*.

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states. Massachusetts, California, and New York City, where the four original women's centers were founded, had the highest densities of women's centers in the country.⁶

Contextualizing the significance of the WLC within the broader history of women's centers demonstrates how this resource was influential and exceptionally significant within the women's liberation movement. As evidenced by Robins's comments on the conceptualization of Crenshaw Women's Center, the development of the WLC was a catalyst for mobilizing the creation of women's centers nationwide. The WLC and other founding women's centers' model of welcoming diverse women, operating as a meetinghouse and clearinghouse, and supporting lesbian initiatives was replicated in subsequent women's centers. Furthermore, due to New York State's less restrictive abortion policies, it appears that other women's centers and organizations referred women to the WLC to learn about resources for receiving a safe and legal abortion in New York.⁷ As with these other early centers, the WLC illustrates how obtaining a physical building for a women's center became a tangible symbol of the second-wave liberation movement, and the WLC was among the earliest (1972) to rent its own building for long-term use. According to Sylvia Hartman, a founder of the Crenshaw Women's Center, women's centers "would be visible evidence that 'something is being done' about women's problems and needs."⁸ Although the WLC's association with the building lasted only fifteen years, those years were pivotal ones in the history of women's advocacy.

Despite this tangible evidence of the success of the second-wave women's liberation movement, there has little recognition of this theme on the National Register of Historic Places. As discussed in the National Register nomination for the San Francisco Women's Building, the buildings that housed these centers

⁶ Spain, 52-53.

⁷ Cecilia Nowell, "A Firehouse Where Pioneering Feminists Have Carried the Torch," *Bedford + Bowery*, December 26, 2019. <https://bedfordandbowery.com/2019/12/a-firehouse-where-pioneering-feminists-have-carried-the-torch/>

⁸ Sylvia Hartman, quoted in *Constructive Feminism: Women's Spaces and Women's Rights in the American City*, Daphne Spain, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2016), 55.

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are just reaching the fifty-year threshold.⁹ Buildings associated with the second-wave women's liberation movement, most notably women's centers such as the WLC, are exceptionally significant in the broad pattern of history for their role in campaigning for equity on the basis of sex, gender, and sexual orientation.

Building

The building at 243 West 20th Street was either constructed or converted from an earlier building to serve as a firehouse. A building was constructed on this site about 1854 as a firehouse for Volunteer Engine Company No. 50. In about 1860, either the early building was updated or a replacement was built on its site to serve as a firehouse for Hook and Ladder Company No. 12 of the Metropolitan Fire Department (MFD), which became the New York City Fire Department (FDNY) around 1865. Hook and Ladder Company No. 12 was the last of a dozen fire companies to be established in the first year of New York City's paid fire service. The possible redesign of an older building was characteristic of the MFD's reuse of volunteer firehouses. When Hook and Ladder Company No. 12 opened, the MFD constructed a rear addition, and the cast-iron entrance enframent was added in 1878. The spatial layout of the firehouse, with designated space for engine storage, offices, a kitchen, and dormitories, demonstrated the professionalization of the fire service, and the Italianate ornament was typical of stylistic development of firehouses and Chelsea in the 1850s and 1860s. The Italianate exterior decoration and general outline of the fire truck entrance survive, and the cast-iron entrance, though recently redesigned, recalls its original use. Unfortunately, all the interior evidence of this function has been lost. The interior was altered to provide spaces for meetings, classes, and offices when it became the Women's Liberation Center, and it has been subsequently altered to serve similar functions for its current occupant, Nontraditional Employment for Women, a job opportunity and training center. While not exactly the same as during occupation by the WLC, the current pattern of workshops and offices is consistent with that during the period of significance.

⁹ Graves, *The Women's Building National Register Nomination*.

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Brief History of Chelsea

Present-day Chelsea, a west side neighborhood in Manhattan stretching from 14th Street to 34th Street, was inhabited by the Lenape from the 1400s to the 1700s. The Lenape established a village called *Sapokanikan* (Land Where the Tobacco Grows), which became a trading settlement and docking point for other indigenous groups. The arrival of the Dutch in the 1620s led to the death of many Lenape people, and the British forced the Lenape off the land in 1758.¹⁰

Under British control of New York, Chelsea developed in the mid-eighteenth century as Captain Thomas Clarke's rural estate. He built this estate for his family upon returning from the French and Indian War. He named the estate "Chelsea" after an institution in London for retired soldiers and its surrounding neighborhood.¹¹ The boundaries of Clarke's estate were approximately present-day Eighth Avenue, Tenth Avenue, West 20th Street, and West 28th Street. He later purchased a strip of land to the south of the original estate boundary that spanned from present-day West 19th to 24th Streets. When Clarke's wife died in 1802, he bequeathed the southern part of the estate to his daughter Charity and her husband, Benjamin Moore, and they deeded it to their son, Clement Clarke Moore, in 1813. Clarke used "Chelsea" as his summer home until making it his permanent residence in 1835.¹²

Clement Clarke Moore is best-known for writing the classic Christmas book *A Visit from St. Nicholas*. However, he also served as the president of Columbia College and the Episcopal bishop of New York and was instrumental in transforming Chelsea from an estate to a residential neighborhood. The rural character of Chelsea began to change in 1811 when the street grid system was initiated. Although Moore publicly

¹⁰ "A Brief History of Chelsea with a Long-Time Resident," *High Line*, November 12, 2019.

<https://www.thehighline.org/blog/2019/11/12/a-brief-history-of-chelsea-with-a-long-time-resident/>

¹¹ Kenneth Holcomb Dunshee, *As You Pass By* (New York: Hastings House, 1952): 238.

¹² New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (hereafter LPC), "Chelsea Historic District Designation Report," 1970.

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denounced the procedures used to create the grid, including the leveling and filling of the landscape, he embraced the situation and helped plan for Chelsea's development.¹³

No early plans of Chelsea survive other than a map from 1835 showing lots for sale and noting that purchasers would be required "to build fireproof houses of good quality."¹⁴ The first houses were mansions in parklike settings, since Moore required buyers to allocate for public space in front of their homes.¹⁵ As Chelsea adopted a residential square concept, Greek Revival row houses developed in the 1840s, followed by Italianate row houses in the 1850s, all built for the upper-middle-class.¹⁶ The Eighth Avenue Street Railway opened in 1852, fostering a new wave of construction of residential and civic architecture.¹⁷

Volunteer Engine Company No. 50 and Hook and Ladder Company No. 12 (1854-1967)

Numerous volunteer firehouses were erected in Chelsea between the formal establishment of New York's volunteer fire department in 1837 and the mid-1850s.¹⁸ Volunteer Engine Company No. 12 opened in 1854 and occupied a brick firehouse at 243 West 20th Street by 1859.¹⁹ It is possible that the firehouse was enlarged from the existing brick building on the lot in 1854, as New York's board of councilmen had presented a resolution for "repairing [the] house of Engine Company No. 50" in January 1855 and voted in favor "of Engine Company No. 50, for the enlargement of the house" in July 1855.²⁰ However, there is no documentation showing whether the board followed through with the enlargement or decided to erect a new building on the site.

¹³ LPC, "Chelsea Historic District Designation Report."

¹⁴ LPC, "Chelsea Historic District Designation Report."

¹⁵ LPC, "Chelsea Historic District Designation Report."

¹⁶ Charles Lockwood, "The Italianate, Anglo-Italianate, and Second Empire Styles," in *Bricks and Brownstones*, 2nd Edition (New York: Rizzoli, 2003): 156.

¹⁷ LPC, "Chelsea Historic District Designation Report."

¹⁸ Dunshee, *As You Pass By*, 240.

¹⁹ "New-York City: The Cholera. Seduction and Attempted Suicide. River Thieves..." *New York Daily Times*, August 10, 1854; William Perris, *Maps of the City of New York*, 1854, Volume 5, Plate 72; William Perris, *Maps of the City of New York*, 1859, Volume 4, Plate 64.

²⁰ "New-York City: The Usury Law. Mayor's Black Book. The Tars Backing..." *New York Daily Times*, January 19, 1855; "New-York City: The Juvenile Asylum. Evil Omens. Society of Liberals," *New York Daily News*, July 10, 1855.

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Volunteer Engine Company No. 50 disbanded along with the rest of New York City's volunteer fire companies in 1865 upon the creation of the Metropolitan Fire Department of New York and Brooklyn (MFD). The New York State Legislature established the MFD following a crusade by insurance companies, which held that New York City's ordinary fire loss was too high. Frequent riots between volunteer fire companies over which one would respond to a fire and the state Republican Party's belief that volunteer fire companies were a political weapon for state Democrats also contributed to the formation of the more organized MFD. When the Tweed Charter abolished state control over New York City in 1870, the MFD transitioned to the municipally controlled New York City Fire Department (FDNY).²¹

By the end of 1865, the MFD had formed twelve paid fire companies, including Hook and Ladder Company No. 12, later called the Chelsea Firehouse, at the site of Volunteer Engine Company No. 50 at 243 West 20th Street.²² Although it is possible that the volunteer firehouse was demolished and a new building was erected with the same footprint, Hook and Ladder Company No. 12 may also have adapted Volunteer Engine Company No. 50's firehouse. By 1869, the MFD likely added a rear addition.²³ The building housed a fire engine constructed by esteemed engine builder Charles E. Hartshorn.²⁴ Around 1878, the ground story was altered to include the current cast-iron enframingent, which included vehicular and pedestrian entrances.²⁵

The exterior of No. 243 West 20th Street is a relatively intact and representative example of both mid-nineteenth century architecture in Chelsea and early firehouse architecture in New York City. The building is representative of the Italianate style with elongated brackets, a heavy cornice, and slightly elongated third-story

²¹ John A. Calderone & Jack Lerch, *Wheels of the Bravest: A History of FDNY Fire Apparatus, 1865-1982* (Staten Island: Fire Apparatus Journal Publications, 1984).

²² Calderone & Lerch, *Wheels of the Bravest*; LPC, "Women's Liberation Center Designation Report," prepared by Margaret Herman, 2019.

²³ Perris & Browne, *Insurance Maps of the City of New York*, 1869, Volume 3, Plate 65.

²⁴ Metropolitan Fire Department, *Fifth Annual Report of the Metropolitan Fire Department of the City of New York (N.Y.)* (New York: Bradstreet Press, 1870): 41.

²⁵ *Real Estate Record*, Alteration 345, April 13, 1878, p. 329.

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windows that create an increased sense of height.²⁶ It was recognized by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission as “an important reminder of the block’s historic character and scale.”²⁷

Hook and Ladder Company No. 12 closed in 1967 after over a century of service to Chelsea. The City of New York put the firehouse up for public auction so that it could be converted into a residence. Bernard Gersten, an associate producer for the New York Shakespeare Festival, purchased the building for \$77,000 — more than double the minimum bid — but the deal fell through. The city listed 243 West 20th Street as “surplus property” in the summer of 1967, and the building remained abandoned for five years.²⁸

Early Years of the Women's Liberation Center (1970-1972)

The Women's Liberation Center (WLC) opened as a volunteer-run meeting and communications space for women's activist organizations in April 1970 on the second floor of a “dingy but expensive...commercial loft” at 36 West 22nd Street, in the Flatiron District.²⁹ It was one of, if not the first, formal women's centers in the country, predating San Francisco's Women's Centers by about a year and launching a wave of women's centers nationwide.³⁰ The WLC and later women's centers primarily developed out of the increased need for women's and lesbians' spaces during the growth of the second-wave women's liberation movement. Second-wave feminists believed that women's ability to run and occupy their own spaces outside of the presence or

²⁶ LPC, “Chelsea Historic District Designation Report”; Lockwood, “The Italianate, Anglo-Italianate, and Second Empire Styles,” 155; LPC, “Women's Liberation Center.”

²⁷ LPC, “Women's Liberation Center.”

²⁸ “News of Realty: New Hotel for L.I.,” *New York Times*, March 22, 1968.

²⁹ Interim Steering Committee of the Women's Liberation Center, “History of the Women's Liberation Center of New York as of December 11, 1970,” 1970, Folder: ORGFIL1606- Women's Liberation Center of New York/The Women's Firehouse (New York City Women's Center; Women Center), Lesbian Herstory Archives, New York, NY, digitized in Archives of Sexuality and Gender; Women's Liberation Center newsletter, April 1972, Collection: Women's Liberation Center of New York, Kalamazoo College Digital Archive, Kalamazoo, Michigan.

³⁰ The spelling “centers” is correct. “History and Mission,” *The Women's Building*. <https://womensbuilding.org/about/mission-history/> San Francisco's Women's Centers moved into the “Women's Building” in the late-1970s. This building was listed on the National Register in 2018 for its importance in the areas of Women's history and LGBTQ History.

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leadership of men was key to liberation.³¹ Despite the presence of small feminist restaurants and bookstores prior to the WLC, there were no permanent spaces for women to gather *en masse* for activities related to liberation and empowerment in New York City or in other parts of the country. According to the WLC's April 1972 newsletter, "There is no public place for women to meet each other, 'hang out,' drop in on their world informally — nothing, in short, that compares with the neighborhood bar for men or the school yard for children. Our 'women's center' is a step toward filling this need in the community of women."³²

Women founded the WLC under the philosophy that "Sisterhood is Powerful."³³ Early programming and groups at the WLC embodied this idea by empowering and supporting women regardless of age, socioeconomic status, race, or sexuality. At the initial WLC location, women attended classes on self-defense, feminist theory, women's health and anthropology, carpentry, and practical technology, among other subjects. Women could visit Safonia, a food collective, to purchase nutritious food at prices students and people on welfare could afford.³⁴ They could attend meetings of Older Women's Liberation (OWL), a group founded in 1970 to discuss the struggles of older women; the Anti-Rape Group, the first group in New York City to support rape victims; and the Women's Health and Abortion Project, the first women-controlled abortion referral service.³⁵

According to an anonymous volunteer staff member in 1970, the WLC was "more of a woman's space than a political place."³⁶ The WLC did not have a singular political agenda but was conceptualized as a space to "plan the activities of the new feminist movement."³⁷ Thus individual groups and activists advocated for women's rights and reforms that ultimately would create a more radical version of feminism. With the presence of the

³¹ First-Wave Feminism generally refers to the nineteenth-century fight for suffrage. The second wave, in the 1960s and 70s, involved women's self-empowerment.

³² Women's Liberation Center newsletter, April 1972.

³³ June Arnold, "Sisterhood is Powerful," *Manhattan Tribune*, May 2, 1970.

³⁴ Women's Liberation Center newsletter, April 1972.

³⁵ Women's Liberation Center newsletter, April 1972; Nowell, "A Firehouse Where Pioneering Feminists Have Carried the Torch."

³⁶ Marilyn Bender, "Women's Lib Headquarters," *New York Times*, July 1, 1970.

³⁷ Arnold, "Sisterhood is Powerful."

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Women's Health and Abortion Project, abortion rights were a focus of early advocacy work at the WLC, and other women's centers nationwide also opened with a focus on abortion rights.³⁸ Prior to *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, women would travel to New York to obtain abortions due to the state's less restrictive abortion laws.³⁹ Thus, in its early years, the WLC helped countless women receive safe, quality abortions at reasonable prices through referrals and advocacy work.⁴⁰ Activists at the WLC also supported social justice issues, such as raising bail and defense funds for Joan Bird, one of a group of twenty-one Black Panthers arrested and accused of plotting attacks on New York city police stations (later acquitted), and other incarcerated Black Panthers.⁴¹

As the women's liberation movement expanded and additional groups requested meeting space, the WLC quickly outgrew the loft, which could hold about fifty people. The WLC had started hosting events and meetings at other locations due to the shortage of space. Additionally, the WLC needed a space with cheaper rent.⁴² Feminists paid for the first ten months of rent with the proceeds from a forthcoming article on women's liberation in the *Ladies' Home Journal* after women stormed the journal's headquarters on March 17, 1970, to protest the misrepresentation and exploitation of women in the media.⁴³ However, with no other funding source, the WLC relied on small donations from women, proceeds from rummage sales, and dues from groups.⁴⁴

In 1972, volunteers from the WLC began searching for a new space. They hoped for "a large, cheap (or free) loft space, heated evenings and weekends[, with] both office and meeting areas" in a "safe neighborhood in Manhattan." Their search occurred a year after the widespread feminist takeover of an abandoned, city-owned building at 331 East 5th Street (demolished) in the East Village, known by participants as the Fifth Street

³⁸ Nowell, "A Firehouse Where Pioneering Feminists Have Carried the Torch"; SurveyLA, *Los Angeles Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Context Statement*, September 2014, p. 14.

³⁹ Nowell, "A Firehouse Where Pioneering Feminists Have Carried the Torch."

⁴⁰ Women's Liberation Center newsletter, April 1972.

⁴¹ Bender, "Women's Lib Headquarters."

⁴² Women's Liberation Center newsletter, April 1972.

⁴³ Women's Liberation Center newsletter, April 1972; Letter from Second Interim Steering Committee to Sisters, 1970, Folder: ORGFIL1606- Women's Liberation Center of New York/The Women's Firehouse (New York City Women's Center; Women Center), Lesbian Herstory Archives, New York, NY, digitized in Archives of Sexuality and Gender; Jean E. Hunter, "A Daring New Concept: *The Ladies' Home Journal* and Modern Feminism," *NWSA Journal* 2, no. 4 (Autumn, 1990): 583.

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Women's Building.⁴⁵ For two weeks in January 1971, feminists from groups across New York City used this space as a food cooperative, book and clothes exchange, feminist school, and large meeting space. These actions likely contributed to the WLC's decision to look for a city-owned building. By May 1972, the WLC had acquired "an old firehouse from the city...a beautiful but decrepit old building located at 243 W. 20th St" for one dollar a month in rent.⁴⁶

The Women's Liberation Center at 243 West 20th Street (1972-1987)

The Women's Liberation Center opened at the firehouse at 243 West 20th Street in June 1972, earning the building the name "The Women's Firehouse."⁴⁷ The transition to a larger space, rented from the city, was a monumental moment in the WLC's history, as publicized in the WLC's newsletter shortly before the move: "This Building represents a very big commitment for the women's groups who have taken it on. The New Building can become a fantastic center for the Women's Movement — encompassing much more than the present Women's Center ever could."⁴⁸ For the first few months, the WLC only allowed groups who already utilized the loft on 22nd Street to rent the space in order to expedite the transition. These groups included OWL, the Anti-Rape Squad, and the Women's Health and Abortion Project.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Bender, "Women's Lib Headquarters."

⁴⁵ Liza Cowan, "A Feminist Urban Action Jan 1-13th 1971," 1992, written as part of Diane Davis's Urban Social Movements Course at the New School for Social Research. <https://www.dykequarterly.com/2012/07/the-fifth-street-womens-building-a-feminist-urban-action-jan-1-13th-1971-our-hands-our-feet-our-minds-our-bodies.html#:~:text=On%20January%201st%2C%201971,exchange%20and%20a%20feminist%20school>

⁴⁶ Women's Liberation Center newsletter, May 1972, Collection: Women's Liberation Center of New York, Kalamazoo College Digital Archive, Kalamazoo, Michigan; Nowell, "A Firehouse Where Pioneering Feminists Have Carried the Torch."

⁴⁷ Women's Liberation Center newsletter, May 1972; The name "Women's Firehouse" may also have distinguished this space from the Gay Activists Alliance Firehouse (GAA), referred to as "The Firehouse," on Wooster Street from 1971 to 1974. While both men and women utilized the GAA Firehouse, the space and the organization were male dominated.

⁴⁸ Women's Liberation Center newsletter, May 1972.

⁴⁹ Women's Liberation Center newsletter, May 1972.

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The move was not easy. After five years as a vacant building, the firehouse had deteriorated. Although the WLC paid to turn the lights on upon moving in, the building had no heat or electricity.⁵⁰ A notice about the move publicized that the firehouse had numerous building code violations.⁵¹ Nevertheless, the city did not pay for or complete any work on the building, leaving all the work to the women at the WLC.⁵² Thus, groups that had rented space at the WLC were required to help pay for and repair the new building.⁵³ Women worked together to paint, plaster, fix the leaking roof, eliminate basement flooding, refurbish the first and second floors, and install an automatically fed furnace.⁵⁴ They also covered the walls with posters that said "Women Are Not Chicks" and filled the space with "a collection of beat-up and makeshift furniture."⁵⁵

After completing many of the major repairs by the mid-1970s, the WLC released a memo praising "the women who use the center" for "convert[ing] the building from an unusable shell to a functioning multi-service center."⁵⁶ Yet, even with these renovations, women reused components of the firehouse's original interior architecture, turning the former lockers of firefighters into office files and archives for the Anti-Rape Group, OWL, Radical Feminists, and the Lesbian Lifespace Project.⁵⁷ The WLC's 1973 newsletter even joked about utilizing the firehouse to store feminist files:

If, thousands of years from now, archaeologists were to excavate the ruins of the firehouse at 243 West 20th Street in Manhattan, they would be in for a real twitch of the whisk. A sober 1881

⁵⁰ Women's Liberation Center Memorandum, post-1972, Folder: ORGFIL1606- Women's Liberation Center of New York/The Women's Firehouse (New York City Women's Center; Women Center), Lesbian Herstory Archives, New York, NY, digitized in Archives of Sexuality and Gender.

⁵¹ Women's Liberation Center Notice re. Move, 1972, Folder: ORGFIL1606- Women's Liberation Center of New York/The Women's Firehouse (New York City Women's Center; Women Center), Lesbian Herstory Archives, New York, NY, digitized in Archives of Sexuality and Gender.

⁵² Women's Liberation Center Memorandum, post-1972.

⁵³ Report on the Women's Liberation Center, Spring 1975, Folder: ORGFIL1606- Women's Liberation Center of New York/The Women's Firehouse (New York City Women's Center; Women Center), Lesbian Herstory Archives, New York, NY, digitized in Archives of Sexuality and Gender.

⁵⁴ Report on the Women's Liberation Center, Spring 1975; Women's Liberation Center Memorandum, post-1972.

⁵⁵ Laurie Johnston, "2 Groups Seeking A Firehouse Here," *New York Times*, October 28, 1973.

⁵⁶ Women's Liberation Center Memorandum, post-1972.

⁵⁷ Johnston, "2 Groups Seeking A Firehouse Here."

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manual of N.Y.C. fire codes and a flamboyant feminist 1973 MAJORITY REPORT, the latter showing evidence of having been read.⁵⁸

Although no known photographs of the interior of the WLC survive, evidence suggests that the renovations created a habitable and functional space for women to meet while preserving the façade and the basic structure of the building from further deterioration. The result showed the self-determination of women in creating their own spaces.

Notably, the WLC originally obtained a temporary rental agreement for the firehouse from the city. Even after the women repaired the building, the WLC nearly lost its lease in late 1973. Another group, the Chelsea Committee for Child and Family Development, wanted to use the building for drug abuse prevention, family counseling, and youth recreation for Chelsea's poor, Spanish-speaking populations. Lois Chafee of the WLC Building Committee explained that, while the WLC supported the cause, they could not afford to lose the cheap rent: "Who could be against anything that's for poor Puerto Rican mothers and children? But there isn't much feminist money around either."⁵⁹ Ultimately, the city awarded the WLC a long-term lease of the firehouse despite calls for the WLC and the Chelsea Committee to share the space.⁶⁰

After the move, the WLC continued to serve its primary functions as a meetinghouse and a clearinghouse. The WLC advertised itself as a "low-cost women's movement space."⁶¹ Rents for each organization were "individually agreed upon" and varied per group depending on their needs and financial means.⁶² Groups that rented space at the WLC gained access to flexible space that included classrooms, offices, storage space, and a

⁵⁸ Women's Liberation Center Newsletter, Summer 1973, cited in Nowell, "A Firehouse Where Pioneering Feminists Have Carried the Torch."

⁵⁹ Johnston, "2 Groups Seeking A Firehouse Here."

⁶⁰ Johnston, "2 Groups Seeking A Firehouse Here."

⁶¹ Report on the Women's Liberation Center, Spring 1975.

⁶² Report on the Women's Liberation Center, Spring 1975.

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large studio floor. The flexibility of the space coupled with the low cost of rent allowed a diverse group of organizations to hold fundraisers, social events, and meetings at the WLC.⁶³

More important than the physical meeting space was the intersectional atmosphere of the WLC. Although the women's liberation movement was predominantly white and middle-class, it appears that the WLC attracted a more diverse group of women due to its programming and association with other known intersectional feminist and lesbian sites, such as the Women's Coffeehouse at 254 Seventh Avenue South, in Greenwich Village (open 1974-1978).⁶⁴ Yet, for the first time, New York City feminists had a large, permanent space where they could interact with and meet people from all sectors of the women's liberation movement. Any woman, regardless of her ability to pay dues, was welcome to participate in activities or volunteer to help staff the center.⁶⁵ In this space, women had the rare opportunities to try new activities and share their ideas freely in a supportive community away from the gaze of men, thus helping to create a more radical feminism and to advance the women's liberation movement.

This intersectionality contributed to a broad range of one-time and recurring events at the WLC. Women rented space for martial arts, theater, and dance lessons, and groups held art shows in the third floor studio.⁶⁶ The former firehouse dormitories became, at times, a music studio and practice space for the Victoria Woodhull Marching Band, named after the first woman to run for president of the United States.⁶⁷ Classes were held on topics including "Women in Solar Building," job hunting skills, hair cutting, architecture, and more.⁶⁸ The Creative Women's Collective held free art therapy for low-income women and storytelling-hosted programming about women's history and culture. The Feminist Credit Union and the First Women's Economic Development

⁶³ Report on the Women's Liberation Center, Spring 1975.

⁶⁴ "Congress to Unite Women?" *RAT* (May 8-21, 1970), p. 12. Folder: ORGFIL 1596- Women's Coffeehouse, 1974-1978, Lesbian Herstory Archives, New York, NY, digitized in Archives of Sexuality and Gender.

⁶⁵ Report on the Women's Liberation Center, Spring 1975.

⁶⁶ Report on the Women's Liberation Center, Spring 1975; "N.Y.C. Women's Center," *Majority Report*, April 1974, p. 14.

⁶⁷ Johnston, "2 Groups Seeking A Firehouse Here."

⁶⁸ Women's Liberation Center Memorandum, post-1972; "N.Y.C. Women's Center."

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and Employment Corporation led financial workshops.⁶⁹ Alcoholics Anonymous and Overeaters Anonymous hosted regular meetings at the WLC.⁷⁰ Many of the groups that met at the WLC had no other place to meet, demonstrating that, without this center, women's programming would have been drastically reduced in New York City.

As a clearinghouse, the WLC served as the main resource for women in New York City and the rest of the tri-state area to receive information on women's facilities, groups, spaces, or contacts.⁷¹ In 1972, the WLC was the only listing in New York's telephone directory for women's liberation, allowing WLC volunteers to serve as "informal ombudswomen for women who need almost anything."⁷² The WLC had volunteer staffers available seven days a week that women could call or visit in confidence for information on the women's movement, abortion referrals, crisis counseling, the names of medical professionals sympathetic to women, female lawyers for divorce and legal problems, contacts of other women looking for roommates, or advice on emergency housing.⁷³ Additionally, Women on Our Own, a free job counseling service with an emphasis on helping minority, disabled, or older women, allowed women to seek information, counseling, and training on career planning and job hunting.⁷⁴ By the mid-1970s, the WLC compiled all this information into a pocket directory on women's services, updated twice a year.⁷⁵ Thus, the WLC became the public contact for the women's liberation movement in a broad regional area and a support network for women, especially those in crisis without anywhere else to turn.⁷⁶

⁶⁹ Women's Liberation Center Memorandum, post-1972; Brochure for Women's Liberation Center I.D.C., 1985, Folder: ORGFIL1606- Women's Liberation Center of New York/The Women's Firehouse (New York City Women's Center; Women Center), Lesbian Herstory Archives, New York, NY, digitized in Archives of Sexuality and Gender.

⁷⁰ Women's Liberation Center Memorandum, post-1972.

⁷¹ "N.Y.C. Women's Center."

⁷² Women's Liberation Center newsletter, April 1972.

⁷³ "N.Y.C. Women's Center"; Women's Liberation Center newsletter, April 1972.

⁷⁴ Women's Liberation Center Memorandum, post-1972.

⁷⁵ Report on the Women's Liberation Center, Spring 1975.

⁷⁶ Women's Liberation Center newsletter, April 1972.

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Other services also took place at the WLC in order to support the center's joint purpose as a meeting place and a clearinghouse for the women who frequented the space. There was a food collective on the first floor and a feminist lending library with books for, by, and about women.⁷⁷ All of the services at the WLC combined to create a holistic experience for women, who could find political, physical, spiritual, and educational enrichment.

Nevertheless, some women criticized the WLC for not serving as enough of a social gathering space. Around 1975, after several women crashed overnight at the WLC and physically defaced the firehouse, WLC leaders discouraged "hanging out" at the center and banned playing billiards.⁷⁸ Women held an open mic night at the nearby Women's Coffeehouse to air their concerns, proclaiming that "the feminist community has a right to know what is happening at our women's center."⁷⁹ WLC leaders responded, saying, "We can't be everything for everyone, but common sense (as well as our emotional preferences) tell us that we can serve more people more productively, as a referral center and meeting place, than if we try to cater to the whims of the crashers and the trashers."⁸⁰ Ultimately, the WLC prioritized the collective good over individual interests, promoting as inclusive of an environment as possible in a time when women remained excluded from many aspects of quotidian life.⁸¹

Lesbian Activism at the WLC

The inclusive nature of the WLC allowed marginalized groups to experience increased visibility and support within the women's liberation movement and society at large as well as to expand movements of their own.

⁷⁷ Johnston, "2 Groups Seeking A Firehouse Here"; "News from the Library Collective at the Women's Center," n.d., Folder: ORGFIL1606- Women's Liberation Center of New York/The Women's Firehouse (New York City Women's Center; Women Center), Lesbian Herstory Archives, New York, NY, digitized in Archives of Sexuality and Gender.

⁷⁸ Invite to "Open Mike at Women's Coffeehouse," c. 1975, Folder: ORGFIL1606- Women's Liberation Center of New York/The Women's Firehouse (New York City Women's Center; Women Center), Lesbian Herstory Archives, New York, NY, digitized in Archives of Sexuality and Gender.

⁷⁹ Invite to "Open Mike at Women's Coffeehouse," c. 1975.

⁸⁰ "Our Answers to Those Terrible Questions," c. 1975, Folder: ORGFIL1606- Women's Liberation Center of New York/The Women's Firehouse (New York City Women's Center; Women Center), Lesbian Herstory Archives, New York, NY, digitized in Archives of Sexuality and Gender.

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Whereas abortion rights were the main focus of the WLC prior to the move to the firehouse, lesbian visibility and rights became its main focus from 1972 on.⁸² Lesbians were involved in the early iteration of the WLC, but the firehouse later became predominantly a gathering space for fledgling lesbian organizations. These organizations included the Lesbian Food Conspiracy, Gay Older Women's Liberation, Dykes Opposed to Nuclear Energy, Black Lesbian Caucus, and Radicalesbians Health Collective.⁸³ The WLC was also the site of numerous other meetings on topics such as "Lesbians to Fight Racism."⁸⁴

The rise of lesbian groups at the WLC reflected larger shifts in the women's and lesbian liberation movements. Historically, the women's liberation movement and the National Organization of Women (NOW, founded 1966) had rejected the contributions and overlooked the experiences of lesbians. Leaders of NOW, including Betty Friedan and Susan Brownmiller, feared that lesbians would tarnish the movement's reputation if NOW members were accused of being "man-haters" or "a bunch of dykes."⁸⁵ In May 1970, members of the Radicalesbians, along with women from the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and several feminist organizations, conducted the "Lavender Menace" action by storming NOW's Second Congress to Unite Women at 333 West 17th Street, in Chelsea, in protest of the rejection of lesbians in the second-wave women's liberation movement.⁸⁶ This action largely contributed to NOW's ratification of a resolution that acknowledged the double oppression of lesbians as women and as homosexuals and recognized the "oppression of lesbians as a

⁸¹ "Our Answers to Those Terrible Questions," c. 1975.

⁸² Women's Liberation Center newsletter, April 1972; Nowell, "A Firehouse Where Pioneering Feminists Have Carried the Torch."

⁸³ Flyer from Dyke Opposed to Nuclear Technology, n.d., Folder: ORGFIL1606- Women's Liberation Center of New York/The Women's Firehouse (New York City Women's Center; Women Center), Lesbian Herstory Archives, New York, NY, digitized in Archives of Sexuality and Gender; LPC, "Women's Liberation Center Designation Report"; Women's Liberation Center newsletter, May 1972.

⁸⁴ Poster for "Lesbians to Fight Racism," n.d., Folder: ORGFIL 1596- Women's Coffeeshouse, 1974-1978, Lesbian Herstory Archives, New York, NY, digitized in Archives of Sexuality and Gender.

⁸⁵ Karla Jay, *Tales of the Lavender Menace: A Memoir of Liberation* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1999); Nina Renata Aron, "Lesbians Battled for their Place in 1960s Feminism," *Timeline*, January 19, 2017. <https://timeline.com/lesbians-battled-for-their-place-in-1960s-feminism-25082853be90>

⁸⁶ "Women's Liberation is a Lesbian Plot," *RAT* (May 8-21, 1970).

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legitimate concern of feminism” in 1971.⁸⁷ Thus, the collaboration between lesbians and feminists at the WLC was emblematic of the increased acceptance of lesbians in the women’s liberation movement and of the ability of women to unite for political mobilization.

The gay liberation movement had also overlooked lesbians. Despite the participation of cisgender and transgender women in the 1969 uprising at the Stonewall Inn and surrounding streets (Stonewall, NR 1999; NHL 2000), which was considered a key turning point in the fight for LGBT equality, the gay liberation movement, a more radical version of the earlier homophile movement, remained male dominated.⁸⁸ The New York chapter of the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), the main homophile organization for women, continued to operate into the early 1970s, even though the national organization shut down in 1969. DOB briefly ran a lesbian center at 141 Prince Street, in SoHo, for most of 1971 and then at 49 East 1st Street, in the East Village.⁸⁹ However, even if this center had lasted into the mid-to-late 1970s, DOB’s comparatively more conservative approach and focus on a range of political issues, rather than just on lesbian or LGBT rights, did not have appeal to the younger, more radical, and more diverse lesbian activists drawn to the WLC.⁹⁰

A radical gay rights organization, the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA), formed in 1969. Coincidentally also headquartered in a historic firehouse (99 Wooster Street) in SoHo (1971 to 1974), the GAA focused entirely on LGBT civil rights. Yet its membership was about 90 percent male in 1970. Men invaded women-only meetings and often controlled the microphones at GAA press conferences, leaving lesbians frustrated.⁹¹ In an attempt to fully participate in the gay liberation movement, lesbians in GLF and GAA held women-only dances at

⁸⁷ “NOW Passes Resolution Supporting Lesbians,” *Focus* 2, no. 11 (1971).

⁸⁸ Lillian Faderman, *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015); LPC, “Women’s Liberation Center Designation Report.”

⁸⁹ Matthew Morowitz, “LGBT History: Not Just West Village Bars,” *Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation*, January 9, 2017. <https://gvshp.org/blog/2017/01/09/lgbt-history-not-just-west-village-bars/>;

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⁹⁰ LPC, “Women’s Liberation Center Designation Report.”

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Alternate U., 530 Sixth Avenue (demolished), in Chelsea; at the GAA Firehouse; at the Gay Community Center at 130 West 3rd Street, in Greenwich Village; and at the Church of the Holy Apostles (NR 1972; additional information 2020), also in Chelsea, in the late 1960s and early 1970s.⁹² Nevertheless, lesbians were in need of their own permanent spaces and groups where they could advocate for their own needs.⁹³

The WLC was one of numerous lesbian activism spaces to emerge in the 1970s in New York City, as well as in other parts of the country with heightened LGBT activism, such as in San Francisco. In New York City, these spaces included the original location of the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Joan Nestle's Upper West Side apartment at 215 West 92nd Street, founded in 1974; multiple bookstores owned and operated by lesbians; and bars, such as Bonnie & Clyde at 82 West 3rd Street, in Greenwich Village.⁹⁴ However, the WLC was the only large, permanent, and visible space for lesbian activism and gatherings at this time, allowing it to attract lesbians from across the city.

The WLC was a pioneering launching pad for new lesbian organizations that allowed participants to fight for their visibility and rights within the women's and gay liberation movements and in liberal hubs of society at large. Encompassing lesbian organizations within a women's center followed broader trends nationwide.

⁹¹ Faderman, *The Gay Revolution*; LPC, "Women's Liberation Center Designation Report"; Jean O'Leary interview with Lillian Faderman, February 18, 2004, in *The Gay Revolution*.

⁹² "Gay Liberation Front at Alternate U.," *NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project*. <https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/gay-liberation-front-at-alternate-u/>; "Tony Pastor's Downtown/Gay Community Center," *NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project*. <https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/tony-pastors-downtown-gay-community-center/>; "Church of the Holy Apostles," *NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project*. <https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/church-of-the-holy-apostles/>; "Gay Activists Alliance Firehouse," *NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project*. <https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/gay-activists-alliance-firehouse/>. The NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project amended the National Register listing for the Church of the Holy Apostles in 2020 to include its significance as one of the most important meeting places in New York City for organizations of the early post-Stonewall gay rights movement.

⁹³ Jean O'Leary interview with Lillian Faderman.

⁹⁴ "Joan Nestle Residence," *NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project*. <https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/joan-nestle-residence/>; "Tenth of Always/Bonnie & Clyde," *NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project*. <https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/tenth-of-always-bonnie-clydes/>. The Lesbian Herstory Archives moved from Joan Nestle's apartment to a rowhouse at 484 14th Street in Park Slope, Brooklyn, opening to the public in 1993. It is still located there today. Notably, Bonnie & Clyde and many other lesbian bars were Mafia-run, and the WLC affirmed the need for lesbian spaces outside of the Mafia's control.

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Although many gay community centers founded in the 1970s would later change their names to gay and lesbian community centers, as seen in Los Angeles, women's centers in the 1970s and early-to-mid 1980s were places that prioritized the needs of lesbians.⁹⁵ In San Francisco, lesbian groups operated as part of the San Francisco Women's Centers, which moved into a permanent space called the Women's Building (NRHP 2018) in the late 1970s.⁹⁶ Independent gay women's centers did exist in small numbers nationwide, as seen by the Los Angeles Gay Women's Services Center, formed in 1971 as the first organization in the United States to focus solely on lesbian social services, and the Furies Collective in Washington, D.C. (NR 2016), which operated briefly from 1971 to 1973 as the location of a lesbian feminist collective.⁹⁷ Yet lesbian-specific community centers were smaller and far less common than women's centers, which meant that the lesbian liberation movement flourished within centers for women of various sexualities.

The two most important lesbian groups to develop at the WLC were Lesbian Feminist Liberation (LFL) and the Lesbian Switchboard, representing the center's function as a meetinghouse and a clearinghouse, respectively. Co-founded as GAA's Lesbian Liberation Committee in 1972 by activists Jean O'Leary and Eleanor Cooper at the Church of the Holy Apostles, LFL decided in 1973 to become a lesbian rights organization entirely independent from GAA and moved to the second floor of the WLC.⁹⁸ O'Leary, Cooper, and other LFL members were frustrated that GAA and the gay liberation movement treated women as second-class citizens. At the WLC, LFL held cultural, social, and political events and campaigned for increased public awareness about the discrimination and legal injustices lesbians encountered in everyday life.⁹⁹ It protested bigoted media

⁹⁵ SurveyLA, *Los Angeles Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Context Statement*, 14.

⁹⁶ "History and Mission," *The Women's Building*.

⁹⁷ SurveyLA, *Los Angeles Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Context Statement*, 29; Mark W. Meinke, *The Furies Collective National Register Nomination*, 2016.

⁹⁸ "Jean O'Leary, 57, Former Nun Who Became a Lesbian Activist," *New York Times*, June 7, 2005; LPC, "Women's Liberation Center Designation Report"; "Women's Liberation Center," *NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project*.

<https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/womens-liberation-center/>; "Church of the Holy Apostles."

⁹⁹ "Lesbian Feminist Liberation offers cultural, social and political events," n.d., Folder: ORGFIL1606- Women's Liberation Center of New York/The Women's Firehouse (New York City Women's Center; Women Center), Lesbian Herstory Archives, New York,

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representation, brought attention to the difficulties divorced lesbian mothers faced when trying to maintain custody of their children, and fought to increase the visibility of lesbians at political rallies and pride marches.¹⁰⁰ The group held its own political events, including a 200-person rally and dance at the American Museum of Natural History, on Central Park West, in protest of the portrayal of female animals as subservient.¹⁰¹ Through its proximity to other women's groups at the WLC, the LFL increased its network of supporters, spread awareness for its cause, and exposed others to a radicalized feminism that included issues of lesbian rights.

Founded in 1972 at the WLC, the Lesbian Switchboard also fostered connections and kinship among lesbians and women. This organization was a volunteer-staffed telephone service based at the WLC that gave peer counseling, referrals, and information about local events and groups to lesbians. Many lesbians were accustomed to living in the shadows for fear of discrimination and losing their jobs or housing due to their sexuality.¹⁰² Thus, the Lesbian Switchboard served as a mental health support system, spread awareness about lesbian culture in New York City and fostered a sense of camaraderie for lesbians, both those who expressed their sexuality publicly and those searching for affirmation and acceptance.¹⁰³

The WLC set a precedent for other LGBT centers and activism spaces, showing how these centers could focus not only on the political but also on the social and cultural needs of LGBT individuals. As a cultivator of female activism, it also helped establish the lesbian liberation movement. By serving as an alternative to the GAA, it provided women with increased autonomy to advocate for their own rights both inside of and separate from the

NY, digitized in Archives of Sexuality and Gender; LPC, "Women's Liberation Center Designation Report"; "Women's Liberation Center," *NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project*.

¹⁰⁰ "Women's Liberation Center," *NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project*.

¹⁰¹ "Women's Liberation Center," *NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project*.

¹⁰² LPC, "Women's Liberation Center Designation Report."

¹⁰³ Lesbian Switchboard of New York City, Inc. Records, LGBT Community Center Archives, New York, NY.

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gay liberation movement. Finally, the WLC fostered ongoing and increasing partnerships between feminists and lesbians, representing a departure from earlier tensions in the second-wave women's liberation movement.

Decline and Impact of the Women's Liberation Center

The Women's Liberation Center closed in 1987 after nearly two decades of service to women in New York City. The decline began around the mid-1980s following the 1983 opening of the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center (now the LGBT Community Center) at 208 West 13th Street, in Greenwich Village, which reduced the need for the WLC. Although WLC president Cheryl Adams advertised that "we can offer you space at rates lower than going rents in the city," many groups, such as the Lesbian Switchboard, relocated to the center on 13th Street around 1987.¹⁰⁴ Financial strains, exacerbated by the loss of dues from organizations moving to the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center, also played a large role in the WLC's decline. It appears that, on top of the cost of renovations, the city was raising the rent for the firehouse beyond what the WLC could afford, leading Friends of the Women's Center to campaign for the purchase of the firehouse from the city.¹⁰⁵ Women pleaded with Mayor Edward Koch, saying that "the firehouse has been a building dedicated to community service for over 130 years and the community still needs it."¹⁰⁶ Despite "serious negotiations," the sale fell through and the WLC disbanded.¹⁰⁷

In the final years of the WLC, representatives reflected on its significance beyond its primary functions as a meetinghouse and clearinghouse. A brochure from 1985 encapsulates the diverse roles filled by the WLC, calling it:

¹⁰⁴ Memorandum from Cheryl Adams, April 14, 1986, Folder: ORGFIL1606- Women's Liberation Center of New York/The Women's Firehouse (New York City Women's Center; Women Center), Lesbian Herstory Archives, New York, NY, digitized in Archives of Sexuality and Gender; Women's Liberation Center," *NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project*.

¹⁰⁵ Letter from Women's Liberation Center (Attn: Cheryl Adams) to Friends of the Women's Center, September 1984, Folder: ORGFIL1606- Women's Liberation Center of New York/The Women's Firehouse (New York City Women's Center; Women Center), Lesbian Herstory Archives, New York, NY, digitized in Archives of Sexuality and Gender; Nowell, "A Firehouse Where Pioneering Feminists Have Carried the Torch."

¹⁰⁶ Letter from Women's Liberation Center (Attn: Cheryl Adams) to Friends of the Women's Center, September 1984.

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A COALITION of women's groups that has grown and responded to changing times since 1970.

A BUILDING- three wonderful floors in the heart of Chelsea- that is a base for women's services, organizations and meetings.

AN INCUBATOR for innovative services to meet new needs in the women's community.

A SUPPORT NETWORK for women's groups of all sizes, whether experimental or established, funded or volunteer.

A HAVEN from economic pressures for grassroots women's organizations- self-help, political, educational and/or social.

AN ALL-WOMAN SPACE that reflects the special interests and cultural realities of women- A SPACE UNIQUELY OUR OWN.

A THRIVING CENTER where as women we can work together and develop ourselves by sharing spiritual, physical, political, and self-help activities.¹⁰⁸

Thus, long after the Women's Liberation Center closed, activists who had frequented it kept its spirit and the women's and lesbian liberation movements alive.¹⁰⁹ The WLC affirmed the need for spaces for and run by women and showed that these spaces could be a source of female independence and liberation. Many groups that met at the WLC thrived long after the center closed, illuminating how the WLC cultivated fledgling, grassroots women's and lesbians' groups that grew into successful independent organizations. Through nurturing groups like the Lesbian Switchboard and Lesbian Feminist Liberation, the WLC also fostered a more radical and vocal version of lesbian activism that strove for lesbian rights over lesbian acceptance.¹¹⁰

Discussions that took place at the WLC became the basis for political and legislative changes in New York City and state. Beyond the WLC's early advocacy for protecting abortion rights in New York State prior to *Roe v.*

¹⁰⁷ Letter from Women's Liberation Center (Attn: Cheryl Adams) to Friends of the Women's Center, September 1984.

¹⁰⁸ Brochure for Women's Liberation Center I.D.C., 1985.

¹⁰⁹ Nowell, "A Firehouse Where Pioneering Feminists Have Carried the Torch,"

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Wade, the groups who occupied the WLC were among those who helped secure critical legislative victories.¹¹¹ These victories included New York City's legalization of sexual activities between consenting adults of the same sex in the 1980s and a ban on discrimination based on sexual orientation in 1986. Ongoing activism of former WLC leaders also contributed to the ratification of New York State's Hate Crimes Act in 2000.¹¹² WLC leaders grew into prominent figures in the women's and LGBT movements state and nationwide. For example, Jean O'Leary (whose group Lesbian Feminist Liberation branched off from the Gay Activist Alliance in 1973 to meet at the WLC) became the co-executive director of the National Gay Task Force (now the National LGBTQ Task Force), the first national LGBT organization in the United States. She also was the first openly gay person to serve on a presidential commission and co-founded National Coming Out Day in 1977.¹¹³ Eleanor Cooper, also a founder of Lesbian Feminist Liberation, helped found the Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights (CLGR), which brought together over fifty lesbian and gay groups to lobby in New York City and Albany.¹¹⁴ Thus, through the WLC and the activism it inspired, issues of LGBT equality became more visible in the political arena.

243 West 20th Street after the Period of Significance

Since 1987, Nontraditional Employment for Women (NEW), a nonprofit organization that trains cisgender women, transgender women, and non-binary individuals for unionized jobs in building trades, has occupied 243 West 20th Street. In this space, women train to become construction workers, electricians, and painters, among other professions.¹¹⁵ NEW is one of the first and only trade pre-apprenticeship organizations that serves only

¹¹⁰ LPC, "Women's Liberation Center Designation Report."

¹¹¹ Nowell, "A Firehouse Where Pioneering Feminists Have Carried the Torch."

¹¹² LPC, "Women's Liberation Center Designation Report."; Raymond Hernandez, "Pataki Signs Bill Raising Penalties in Hate Crimes," *New York Times*, July 11, 2000.

¹¹³ "Jean O'Leary, 57, Former Nun Who Became a Lesbian Activist."

¹¹⁴ Barbara J. Love, ed., *Feminists Who Changed America, 1963-1975* (University of Illinois Press, 2006): 94.

¹¹⁵ "For Construction Students, On-the Job Training," *New York Times*, January 21, 1996.

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individuals of gender minorities and, to this day, it remains the only one in New York City. This group's occupation of the building carries on 243 West 20th Street's legacy as an empowering space for women.¹¹⁶

In 1994 and 1996, pioneering female modern architect Barbara Neski led renovations of the building. In the spirit of WLC members who renovated the firehouse on their own, NEW students completed much of this work. On the interior, Neski designed classrooms, a tool shop, and a fitness room. Yet, according to Neski, the building's "spirit was retained" by leaving the exterior fairly intact.¹¹⁷ The infill within the cast-iron enframing on the ground floor was modified to eliminate the doors and the wooden door was replaced, but the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) commented that "the building's facade was sensitively restored...retaining most of the historic features present during the time it was associated with the Women's Liberation Center."¹¹⁸

In 2019, as part of the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of Stonewall, the LPC designated the Women's Liberation Center as a New York City Landmark due to its significance as "an epicenter for women's engagement in the LGBT civil rights movement."¹¹⁹ It was one of six historic buildings with LGBT significance that were designated that year, per the recommendations of the NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, which described the center as a pioneering space for LGBT activism and visibility in the early post-Stonewall era.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Nowell, "A Firehouse Where Pioneering Feminists Have Carried the Torch."

¹¹⁷ "For Construction Students, On-the Job Training."

¹¹⁸ "For Construction Students, On-the Job Training"; LPC, "Women's Liberation Center Designation Report."

¹¹⁹ LPC, "Women's Liberation Center Designation Report."

¹²⁰ Sarah Friedmann, "There Are 6 New LGBTQ Landmarks & They All Have Deep Significance," *Bustle*, June 19, 2019. <https://www.bustle.com/p/6-lgbtq-landmarks-join-the-stonewall-inn-as-historic-sites-in-nyc-18019426>;

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Verbal Boundary Description:

The boundary is indicated by a heavy line on the attached map with scale.

Boundary Justification:

The boundary was drawn to include the current tax parcel associate with 243 W. 20th Street, which is the same as the historic parcel.

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New York City tax photo ca.1940s

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Women's Liberation Center Brochure, ca.1970s

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*Basement tool shop, ca. 2014, courtesy Nontraditional Employment for Women

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New York County, New York

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number images Page 4



*Third floor classroom, ca. 2019, courtesy Nontraditional Employment for Women

See continuation sheet

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

Women's Liberation Center
New York County, New York

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number images Page 5



*Third floor classroom, ca. 2014, courtesy Nontraditional Employment for Women

*It was not possible to obtain current photos in the required size in 2021 due to the Covid pandemic. When the building reopens, the NYSHPO will request appropriate replacement photos.

See continuation sheet

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

Women's Liberation Center
New York County, New York

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number photos Page 1

Photographs:

Name of Property: Women's Liberation Center
City or Vicinity: New York
County: New York
State: NY

Photographer, date: Emily Kahn, November 19, 2020

Tiff Files: CD-R of .tiff files on file at
National Park Service
Washington, D.C.
and
New York State Historic Preservation Office
Waterford, NY 12188\

Views

0001. facade, looking east

0002. facade, looking west

0003. facade, detail of first story and entrance, looking north

See continuation sheet

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

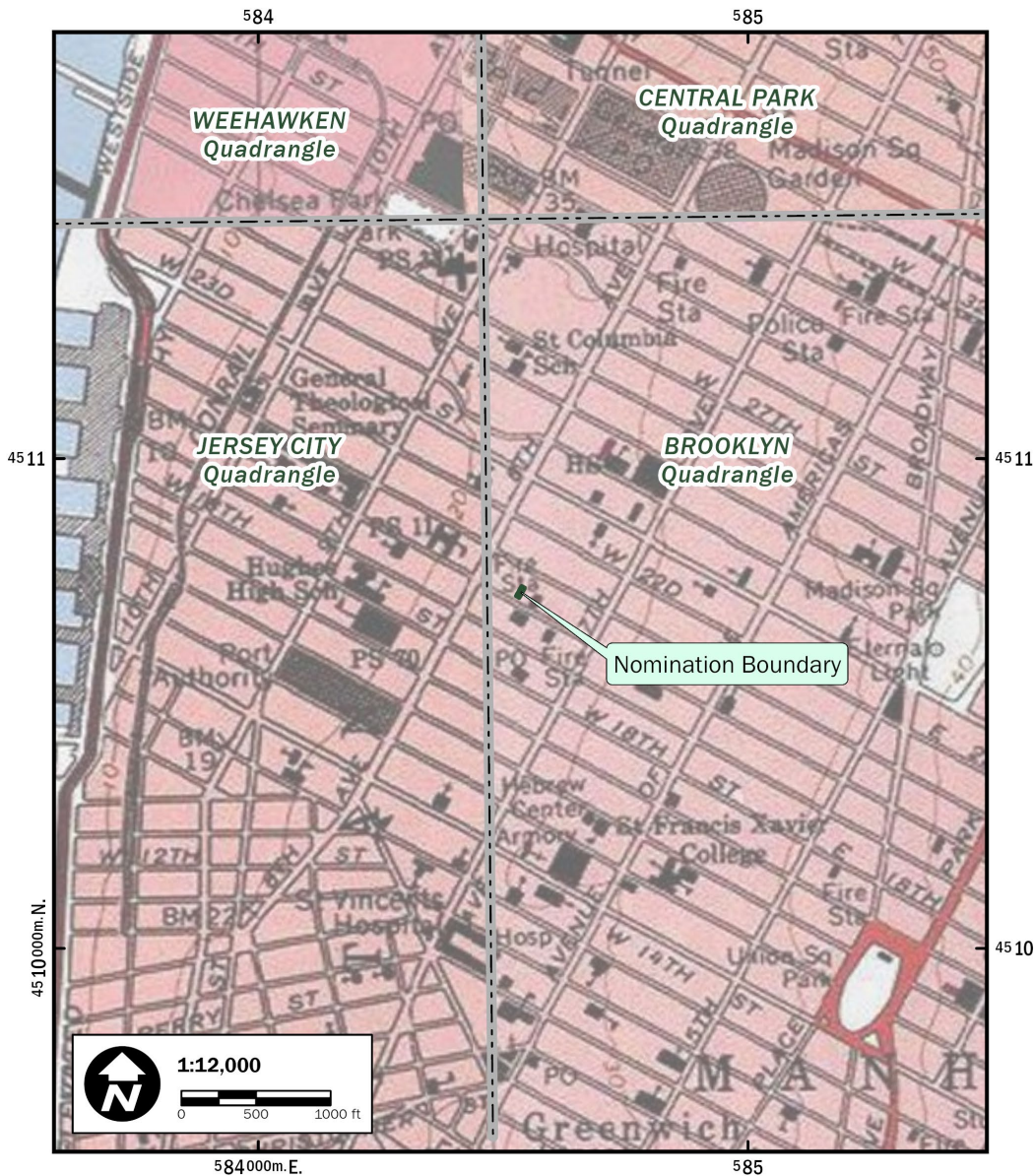
Women's Liberation Center
New York County, New York

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number maps Page 1

Women's Liberation Center
Borough of Manhattan, New York County, New York

243 West 20th Street
New York, NY 10011



Coordinate System: NAD 1983 UTM Zone 18N
Projection: Transverse Mercator
Datum: North American 1983
Units: Meter

Nomination Boundary



Parks, Recreation
and Historic Preservation

See continuation sheet

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

Women's Liberation Center
New York County, New York

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number maps Page 2

Women's Liberation Center
Borough of Manhattan, New York County, New York

243 West 20th Street
New York, NY 10011




Coordinate System: NAD 1983 UTM Zone 18N
Projection: Transverse Mercator
Datum: North American 1983
Units: Meter

 Nomination Boundary



Parks, Recreation
and Historic Preservation

 See continuation sheet

NYC Landmarks Preservation
Commission

Sarah Carroll
Chair

March 9, 2021

R. Daniel Mackay
Deputy Commissioner for Historic Preservation
Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer
New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation
P.O. Box 189
Waterford, NY 12188-0189

Re: Women's Liberation Center, 243 West 20th Street, Manhattan (Block 770, Lot 17)

Dear Deputy Commissioner Mackay:

I am writing on behalf of Chair Sarah Carroll in response to your request for comment on the eligibility of the Women's Liberation Center at 243 West 20th Street in Manhattan for the State and National Registers of Historic Places.

The agency has reviewed the materials you submitted and has determined that this building meets the criteria for inclusion on the State and National Registers of Historic Places. We note that the Women's Liberation Center was designated as a New York City individual landmark on June 18, 2019 for its cultural and historic significance. Therefore, the Commission strongly supports the nomination of this building.

Sincerely,



Kate Lemos McHale
Director of Research



Lisette Camilo
Commissioner

Laura B. Ringelheim
Deputy Commissioner
Real Estate Services

July 16, 2020

Ms. Kathleen LaFrank,
National Register Coordinator
New York State Office of Parks, Recreation
and Historic Preservation
Division for Historic Preservation,
Field Services Bureau
Peebles Island State Park
P. O. Box 189
Waterford, NY 12188-0189
Kathleen.LaFrank@parks.ny.gov

Re: National Register Nomination
Former Women's Liberation Center
243 West 20th Street
Block 770, Lot 17
Borough of Manhattan

Dear Ms. LaFrank:

On January 13, 2020, Ken Lustbader, on behalf of the NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, notified the Department of Citywide Administrative Services (DCAS) of its interest in nominating the Women's Liberation Center located at 243 West 20th Street in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan to the National Register of Historic Places. The building is located on the north side of West 20th Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues. On June 18, 2019, the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) designated the Women's Liberation Center, as a New York City landmark.

This property is owned by the City of New York and is under the jurisdiction and management of DCAS. At this time, the property is under long-term lease to the Non-Traditional Employment for Women (NEW) organization. On behalf of the City of New York, DCAS has no objection to the nomination.

Thank you for the opportunity to write on behalf of this nomination. Please keep this agency informed as the process moves forward. If you have any questions or require additional information, please do not hesitate to contact Matthew Berk, Executive Director of Planning and Dispositions at (212) 386-0245 or mberk@dcas.nyc.gov.

Sincerely,



Laura Ringelheim
Deputy Commissioner

The David N. Dinkins Municipal Building
1 Centre Street, New York, NY 10007
212-386-6310
nyc.gov/dcas





243

THE OFFICE & GARAGE

REMOVING BY THE AREA

241





Architectural details of the entrance including the grey metal frame, decorative elements, and the door with the number 243.

NO SMOKING
IN THIS AREA

243

THE SOUTH PALADECK
NON-TRADITIONAL EMPLOYMENT
FOR WOMEN

SMOKE FREE ZONE