

Harriet and Thomas Truesdell House

277 Duffield Street, Brooklyn
Tax Map Block 146 Lot 15

Built: c. 1847-1850

Architect: Undetermined

Style: Greek Revival

Proposed Action: Calendared June 30, 2020;
Public Hearing July 14, 2020



2019 Photograph, LPC

This Greek-Revival former row house is a rare surviving 19th-century abolitionists' home in Downtown Brooklyn. It was built c. 1847-50 and for more than a decade, from 1851-63, was the home of Harriet and Thomas Truesdell. The Truesdells were active in abolitionist work in Rhode Island before moving to 14 Hicks Street in Brooklyn Heights in 1838, and then to Duffield Street in 1851, where they continued to support the movement. They were associates of William Lloyd Garrison, a prominent abolitionist from Boston, who visited them at their Hicks Street address in 1840 (since demolished for the construction of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway).

In the early 19th century, Brooklyn's economy relied heavily on the storage and export of agricultural products shipped from the Southern slave-holding states. At the same time, its waterfront location and large population of free African Americans made it a hub for abolitionist activity. Brooklyn's busy working waterfront was an important entry point for freedom seekers who stowed away on ships to escape slavery in the south, and many of them were sheltered by local abolitionists before either staying in Brooklyn or traveling north to Upstate New York, New England, and on to Canada.

The period after 1850, when the Truesdells lived at 227 Duffield Street, was marked by more clandestine abolitionist activity due to the harsh penalties on those who broke the Fugitive Slave Law. Passed in 1850, the Act required that all escaped slaves be returned to their owners, and making any person accused of aiding an escaped slave subject to imprisonment and fines. Thus, housing fugitive enslaved persons during this time was a dangerous and secretive activity, making Underground Railroad activity difficult to document or verify. Recent verbal accounts of the Truesdell House being a stop on the Underground Railroad have not been confirmed after extensive research and physical analysis. However, the building has significance as the surviving home of the Truesdells, abolitionists who resided there for more than a decade.

The house remained in the Truesdell family until 1921, a period of 70 years. The house was subsequently altered, reflecting early 20th-century changes in the neighborhood. These alterations included the removal of original front and rear porches, and the construction between 1932 and 1933 of a two-story commercial extension. Above this extension, the original 1850s facade, fenestration pattern, window surrounds and cornice remain, and the building's form and historic fabric still convey its 19th century residential character and association with the Truesdells and Brooklyn's significant abolitionist history.