

Women's Liberation Center

243 West 20th Street, Manhattan
Tax Map Block 770 Lot 17

Built: c. 1866

Architect: Charles E. Hartshorn

Style: Anglo-Italianate

Action: Proposed for Commission's Calendar May 14, 2019



The Women's Liberation Center is located at 243 West 20th Street in Chelsea, in a former firehouse building designed in 1866 by Charles E. Hartshorn. From 1972 to 1987, this building housed numerous lesbian and feminist organizations, and became an epicenter for women's engagement in the LGBT civil rights movement. In the Women's Liberation Center, activists in both the lesbian and feminist movements found common cause, joining together to provide community services and to push for radical political action that could serve all women.

The Women's Liberation Center was formed just as the "women's lib" movement was catching fire in New York City. The center was volunteer-run and organized as a collective, made up of a range of feminist social service groups, general women's political committees, and lesbian organizations. After briefly operating in a building on West 22nd Street, the Women's Liberation Center moved into larger quarters at 243 West 20th Street, where it began to draw greater numbers of lesbian activists, who were then breaking off from male-dominated LGBT political organizations.

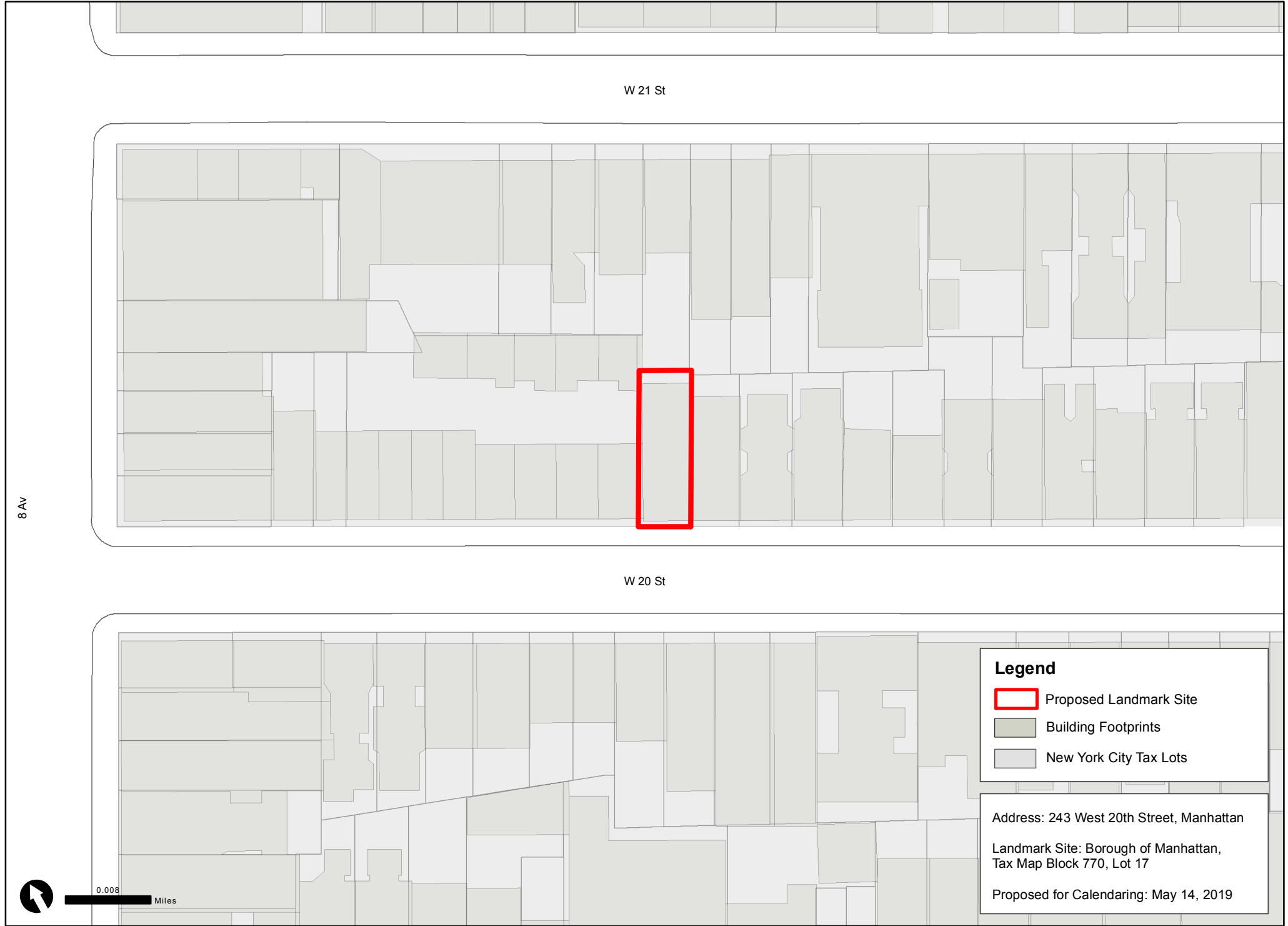
Lesbian Feminist Liberation, a lesbian rights group founded in 1972 by Jean O'Leary as part of the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA), branched off from that group and began holding meetings at the Women's Liberation Center in 1973. From the West 20th Street building, Lesbian Feminist Liberation worked to bring public attention to the discrimination and legal injustices faced by lesbians. The group protested bigoted media representations of lesbians, fought to raise visibility for women at LGBT political rallies and pride marches, and advocated in particular for lesbian mothers.

The Women's Liberation Center also housed the Lesbian Switchboard, a volunteer-staffed telephone service that provided peer counseling, referrals, and information about local events. During a time when the LGBT community was frequently stigmatized and forced to remain in the shadows, this service provided much needed mental health support and a sense of kinship among New York City's lesbians. Other groups that used the building included the Lesbian Lifespace Project, the Radicalesbians Health Collective, the Radical Feminists, and Older Women's Liberation. The ground floor of the Women's Liberation Center housed a wholesale food-buying cooperative known for a time as the Lesbian Food Conspiracy.




The Women's Liberation Center disbanded in 1987 and many of its organizations moved to the LGBT Community Center in Greenwich Village. After a sensitive facade restoration and a renovation to the interior, since the late 1980s 243 West 20th Street has served New York City women as the home of Non-Traditional Employment for Women, a skilled-trades workforce development program.



c. 1940 Tax Photo



Legend

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

Address: 243 West 20th Street, Manhattan
Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan,
Tax Map Block 770, Lot 17
Proposed for Calendarling: May 14, 2019



0.008 Miles