

March 8, 2019

Hon. Sarah Carroll, Chair  
New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission  
One Centre Street, 9<sup>th</sup> floor  
New York, NY 10007

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**Re: Request for Consideration of Interior Landmark  
Designation for the White Horse Tavern, 567 Hudson Street,  
Manhattan**

Dear Chair Carroll:



I write to strongly urge the Commission to immediately consider landmark designation of the interior of the White Horse Tavern at 567 Hudson Street in Manhattan. This iconic neighborhood tavern in the West Village has been a mecca and gathering spot for some of the most significant literary figures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Its cultural significance cannot be overstated, and the potential loss of the interior of this tavern from a recent change in ownership would be a devastating loss, not only to New York City, but to the country and the world.

Housed within an early 19<sup>th</sup> century wood frame house in the Greenwich Village Historic District, according to its owners the White Horse Tavern dates back to 1880. The White Horse began nearly 140 years ago as one of many bars in the West Village's Irish immigrant and Irish-American community, largely serving longshoremen and other workers from the docks along the Hudson River.

However, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century it transformed. During the 1930s and 1940s the White Horse became an important meeting place for labor organizations and communist groups, and was at the center of many related political power struggles of the era. Directly following this the White Horse became most closely associated with the literati of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, when Greenwich Village drew poets and writers from across the country and world, and the White Horse Tavern was central to that scene. Taverns such as the White Horse were in the 1950s more than just places for these creative souls to imbibe (although a number did that to excess); they were modern-day versions of 19<sup>th</sup> century literary salons where artists, writers, and intellectuals gathered to talk, argue, pontificate, and share and cross-pollinate ideas

## **Irish Greenwich Village**

Irish immigration to New York began in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. While some Irish immigrants held positions as skilled artisans, most came to work as domestic servants, construction workers, and longshoremen building New York's port. Two significant waves of Irish immigration followed this period: one during the famine years of 1845 through the 1850s, and another after the American Civil War. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the edge of the West Village was dominated by Irish immigrants or their descendants. On St. Luke's Place were located row houses inhabited by the Irish middle-class, descendants of earlier immigrants. To the west of this enclave scores of tenements were built, housing working-class Irish immigrants, most of whom had arrived in the United States after the Civil War. Much like the immigrants who had come before them, these residents worked in unskilled and semi-skilled positions, as seamstresses, washerwomen, factory workers, janitors, truck drivers, and longshoremen. By the end of the 1880s, 95 percent of the longshoremen working between Canal Street and Chelsea were Irish.

New Catholic churches and schools, stables, blacksmith shops, feed stores, and Irish saloons filled out the growing neighborhood. Saloons and bars, which appeared on every block, were particularly important fixtures during this period. Many were opened by the older generation of Irish immigrants, who had accrued some wealth and could open such businesses with relative ease. Often, saloon and bar owners were also leaders of the community and of the county societies specifically, reinforcing these sites as political places. For instance, in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Whitey Munson, the grandfather of the most recent owner of the White Horse Tavern, James Munson, was a boss at the docks, and a dominant figure in the longshoremen community and the Irish community at large. At the saloons, politicians could meet residents, residents could canvass on behalf of politicians, and the community could connect over its Irish heritage.

## **Labor Unions and Communist Organizations**

In the 1930s and 1940s, the leftist International Seamen's Union and the National Maritime Union – both affiliated with the Communist Party USA and the Congress of Industrial Organizations – attempted to challenge the corrupt International Longshoremen's Union and the American Federation of Labor, leading to a series of strikes, street battles, and general unrest along the Lower West Side waterfront. Later, during the Red Scare when employers and unions required loyalty oaths, many leftist longshoremen were put out of work. These and other radical left dockworkers, as well as older men who had been a part of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), were habitués of the White Horse Tavern, which had become a central gathering spot for the Communist faction of the Irish community. Writer and social activist Michael Harrington, who came to Greenwich Village in 1949, wrote in his memoir that he was a regular at the White Horse from 1951 to 1961. He recalled a number of occasions during the McCarthy era when, "Irish working-class kids from the neighborhood made fist swinging, chair-throwing raids on the Horse. They used to scream that we were Communists and faggots."

## Mid-Century Writers and Other Famous Figures

Following World War II, the Village was a center and magnet for poets and writers, both established and struggling. Arguably, the most famous literary figure associated with the White Horse during this time was the poet and writer Dylan Thomas. Welsh-born, he first came to the United States in 1950 for a reading tour of his works, the first of its kind and emulated by others after due to its resounding success.

The 1950 tour would be the first of four tours in the United States by Thomas between 1950 and 1953. When in New York, Thomas was drawn to Greenwich Village, where he was met by throngs of admirers and fans. There his bar of choice was the White Horse. According to several accounts, he was frequently there at all hours of the day and night, and crowds would gather around his table to listen to his tales of touring and writing. Legend has it that he had his last drink at the White Horse in 1953 before collapsing later that night. He died a few days later at St. Vincent's Hospital, reportedly of pneumonia. Today, a large painting of Thomas is hung next to 'his table,' keeping the memory of his association with bar alive and well.

Other writers who were regulars of the White Horse included Delmore Schwartz, James Baldwin, Anais Nin, Hunter S. Thompson, James Laughlin, Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. Norman Mailer and Vance Bourjaily organized Sunday afternoon writers' get-togethers at the White Horse. Only one woman was invited -- playwright, novelist, and artist Rosalyn Drexler. Reportedly the founders of the *Village Voice*, which included Norman Mailer, held their first meeting to start the newspaper at the White Horse Tavern.

The White Horse was also a hangout for many prominent and influential musicians of the era, including Bob Dylan, Mary Travers (of Peter, Paul and Mary), and Jim Morrison of The Doors. The Clancy Brothers also frequented the White Horse and even performed there.

Jane Jacobs' home shared the block the White Horse Tavern, and she was not just a patron but a fan. In her seminal work, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, she said about the White Horse regarding its benefits to the street and neighborhood:

*We are fortunate enough, on the street, to be gifted...a famous bar that draws continuous troops of strangers from adjoining neighborhoods and even from out of town. It is famous because Dylan Thomas used to go there, and it is mentioned in his writing. This bar, indeed, works two distinct shifts. In the morning and early afternoon it is a social gathering place for the old community of Irish longshoremen and other craftsmen in the area, as it always was. But beginning in midafternoon it takes on a different life, more like a college bull session with beer, combined with a literary cocktail party, and this continues until the early hours of the morning. On a cold winter's night, as you pass the White Horse, and the*

*doors open, a solid wave of conversation and animation surges out and hits you; very warming. The comings and goings from this bar do much to keep our street reasonably populated until three in the morning, and it is a street always safe to come home to.*

Today the White Horse Tavern remains an international mecca for literary pilgrims, while also a quintessential Greenwich Village neighborhood bar. Photographs from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, including images of Dylan Thomas and Jane Jacobs (attached), show the interior largely the same as it is today, including the tin ceilings, large oak bar, and dark wood walls.

The White Horse Tavern occupies a singularly important place in the literary, cultural, and social history of New York. Fortunately, it remains remarkably intact to its period of significance, which is one of the reasons why visitors continue to flock to it. While the exterior of the building is protected by virtue of its location within the Greenwich Village Historic District, its equally if not more historic interior enjoys no such protection and lies vulnerable to destruction, especially now as the ownership of the tavern is changing hands. I therefore strongly urge you to designate the interior of this truly remarkable New York City institution a landmark as soon as possible, to ensure that its history is not lost and by future generations of visitors, scholars, and New Yorkers alike can continue to enjoy it.

Sincerely,



Andrew Berman  
Executive Director

567 Hudson Street, 1933, NYPL



567 Hudson Street c. 1940 via Municipal Archives



Dylan Thomas at the White Horse Tavern, date unknown. Photo: Bunny Adler



Dylan Thomas at the White Horse Tavern, date unknown





Delmore Schwartz in the White Horse, 1959. Photo: Fred McDarrah



Jane Jacobs at the White Horse Tavern 1961. Photography by Cervin Robinson/*New York Times*

