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NEIGHBORHOOD REPORT: HARLEM

NEIGHBORHOOD REPORT: HARLEM; The Battle to Keep Alexander Hamilton's Home Where It Is

By EMILY M. BERNSTEIN

When the National Park Service announced a plan to move Hamilton Grange, the last home of Alexander Hamilton, from 287 Convent Avenue to St. Nicholas Park, it was met with outrage -- even though the park is only a block away, and a full restoration of the house was part of the deal.

But to many of its neighbors, the stately yellow-and-white building jammed against St. Luke's Episcopal Church belongs just where it is, lending a sense of grace and history to the collection of brownstones that line Convent Avenue and make up Hamilton Heights. Last Thursday some of them protested the Park Service plan in a demonstration in front of the Grange.

"There are people who very much want to see the house restored as it was back when it was built," said the Rev. Johan Johnson of St. Luke's, who is actively fighting the move. "But I don't think they are looking as much at the preservation of the neighborhood. To move the house would be to tear the fabric of this community."

The Grange, which was designed by John McComb Jr., the architect who helped design City Hall, was originally 250 feet to the north. When the city decided to extend its street grid uptown, the building was in the path of 143d Street. The owners donated it to St. Luke's in 1889 and moved it to its current location.

The house was turned sideways with its front door on the side and its porch and back stoop lopped off. Three years later, St. Luke's built a new stone church, which crowds the Grange's southern side. On its northern side is a low brick apartment building. For the past year, the Grange has been closed to visitors because it is structurally unsound.

There have been drives to move the building by preservationists who say it cannot be fully restored where it is. On Nov. 18 Community Board 9, which represents the area, will take an advisory vote on the plan by the Park Service, which acquired the building in 1962, to move the Grange and construct on its current site a new building with exhibit space and an apartment for a park ranger.

"If you ask me how I am going to vote, I don't know yet, and I am a trained historian," said Theodore P. Kovaleff, chairman of the community board. "I feel torn in two ways. It is our responsibility to represent the community, but one of my problems is defining that word in this case."

But many of the homeowners and apartment dwellers in the small Hamilton Heights historic district

believe they know what community means. They are trying to keep the neighborhood safe and clean, and they are worried that the Park Service will not be able to get enough money, an estimated \$11 million, both to restore the house and to construct a new building, and that the spot will become a vacant lot.

And they see the house, and the statue of Mr. Hamilton in front, as a cherished part of their community, one they do not want lose, even to a park across the street. A group of them has obtained more than 1,300 signatures on a petition. E.M.B.

Photo: Hamilton Grange is jammed against St. Luke's on Convent Avenue. (Don Hogan Charles/The New York Times) Map of Harlem