

Statement of Friends of Miller House/ Washington's Headquarters, Inc.
at Westchester County Board of Legislators
Committee Meeting on Labor, Parks, Planning and Housing
Tuesday, August 25, 2015

Madam Chairman and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for inviting me to participate in today's discussion on the Miller House. My name is Kerri Kazak and I am speaking as President of The Friends of Miller House / Washington's Headquarters. The Friends find it encouraging that preserving Miller House is recently receiving the attention it deserves. We have read the recent memo from the Westchester County Historical Society to Kevin Plunkett and enthusiastically agree with their statement that "If we are to be good stewards of our historic resources, it is important that the Miller House remains part of the County's fabric and landscape." To be good stewards we must understand that the Miller House is not only part of the County's fabric and landscape, but the house and the property that it sits on is an integral part of our nation's fabric and landscape as it played an important role in its formation. This role has been carefully documented and recognized by the nation's highest authority.

In 1976, the NYS Deputy Commissioner for Historic Preservation of the NYS Office of Parks and Recreation submitted a nomination form to the United States Department of the Interior to have Miller House placed on the National Register of Historic Places. In that submission, the Deputy Commissioner stated that the Miller House "has long been recognized and revered as one of Washington's headquarters during the Battle of White Plains in October of 1776." He noted that Ann Miller offered the use of her home to General Washington in late October 1776 during the Battle of White Plains, and the farm house and nearby Miller Hill were the sites of the retrenchment Washington ordered. He then stated that "the difficult terrain, some fortuitous weather, and indecision on the part of British General Howe permitted the Americans to hold their position on the Miller land and the British forces decided to decamp without forcing a confrontation." The Deputy Commissioner goes on to note in the nomination form that:

"the events of those few days were well remembered by the local citizens and by 1818 the role of Ann Miller and her farmhouse in the Battle of White Plains had been immortalized by a published interview with Ann Miller in the Methodist Magazine. By 1850 the house was well-known and frequently visited as a shrine to General Washington. The Miller family kept a guest book, which still survives, with the names of the visitors, many of whom had relatives who had fought in the Battle of White Plains."

In 1976, the US Department of the Interior reviewed and accepted the nomination of the Miller House and it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. On their website, the National Parks Services states that:

"The National Register of Historic Places is the official list of the Nation's historic places worthy of preservation....Listing in the National Register of Historic Places provides formal recognition of a property's historical, architectural, or archeological significance based on national standards used by every state."

In his book "Washington's Headquarters at the Battle of White Plains," Professor Thomas R. Parker notes that "To be accepted into the Register is equivalent to an individual being accepted into Who's Who in America, or for an accreditation of a college or university. It means that someone in authority has examined an applicant's credentials and said 'You pass.'" In 1976, when the U.S. Department of the Interior placed Miller House on the National Register they definitively decided that it was "one of Washington's headquarters during the Battle of White Plains in October of 1776." They examined the Miller Houses's historical credentials and said "You Pass" thereby officially recognizing its historic significance on the highest level possible. This recognition cannot be challenged, cannot be diminished, and should never be forgotten.

The Miller House has stood in its present location since it was built over 300 years ago. The land it stands on is as integral to its historical significance as the house itself. They are one and cannot be separated. Not only did George Washington plan the Battle of White Plains from the table in the house, but the house served as a field hospital during the Battle with soldiers camped all around it on the lands of the Miller Farm. Wounded and dying soldiers of the American army were nursed by Ann Miller and her daughters. After the war, Ann Miller continued to live in Miller House until her death in 1819. She was an active important member of her community and her home continued to play an important role as the First Methodist Church of White Plains was founded there and services were held in the home.

For these reasons, the land on which Miller House sits is hallowed ground. In addition, there are specific parts of the property that are historically significant. First, the old sycamore tree in the front yard is believed to date back to the time the house was built. Second, there is the root cellar near the southeast corner of the house that can be clearly seen in the photos submitted with the Miller House nomination to the National Register. Not only does this root cellar show an important part of home life during revolutionary times, but there is anecdotal evidence that it was used as part of the Underground Railroad during the Civil War.

The Miller House has transitioned through the centuries and stood the test of time with assistance. In 1917, when the County bought the building, it was in need of repair and the Daughters of the American Revolution restored and furnished the house. After this, the house flourished as a popular destination. As noted by Charles E. Pound, former Commissioner of the Parks, Recreation and Conservation Department of Westchester County, and current Vice President of the Friends of Miller House, from 1955 until 1975 the Miller House was a very active site and was a prime destination for field trips by schools and camps. Over time Virginia Road became more industrialized. In 1976 the cement plant was built opposite the Miller House, but the Miller House continued to flourish. Up until June 2010 when the last docent tour was given, whenever the Miller House was open, people came to see it.

When the County closed the Miller House it began to deteriorate from neglect not from its location. The leaking roof is not a result of its location, it is a result of neglect. The sagging porch is not a result of its location, it is a result of neglect. The rotting beams are not a result of its location, they are a result of neglect. When animals find their way in through broken windows, it is not a result of its location, it is a result of neglect. The desperate state that Miller House is in today, is not due to its location, it is due to the continued neglect by its owner, the County of Westchester. We are now at the point where if immediate action is not taken to repair the Miller House where it stands, it will literally fall down. Only a carefully coordinated concerted effort will prevent this.

Westchester County is incredibly fortunate to have several National Register Sites, all of which must be preserved. The Westchester County Historical Society sells a book on their website entitled "Picturing Our Past: National Register Sites in Westchester County." The book was written by Gray Williams and edited by Elizabeth G. Fuller and Katherine M. Hite and describes both Miller house and the Jacob Purdy House as veterans of the Battle of White Plains and hosts to General Washington during the battle. Page 41 of this wonderful book says "In the end it hardly matters where Washington hung his hat. The county has very few houses of the Revolutionary era and it is lucky to possess both of these survivors."

The mission of Friends of Miller House / Washington's Headquarters is to aid in the historic preservation and ongoing operation of Miller House /Washington's Headquarters and to contribute to the support, including financial support of Miller House; to encourage and maintain public appreciation of Miller House / Washington's Headquarters; and to give assistance, including financial assistance, to cultural and other programs and projects at Miller House/ Washington's Headquarters. We stand ready to do all of these things. We look forward to working with the County, Town and all interested groups in finding the best solution for preserving Miller House. We look forward to being good stewards of our historic resources.