

THE LEGAL AID SOCIETY

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Legal Aid Secures Tax Exemption for Bed-Stuy Headquarters of the United Order of Tents - the Oldest Black Women's Benevolent Society in the US - Saving Historic Building Previously at Risk of Demolition

(NEW YORK, NY) – The Legal Aid Society announced today that it has [secured](#) a property tax exemption for the Brooklyn headquarters of the [United Order of Tents](#), the oldest Black women's benevolent society in the United States. The tax exemption will save the mansion from demolition and allow the organization to proceed with the renovations and continue their operations providing critical services to local residents.

In October 2022, [Legal Aid filed litigation](#) against the New York City Department of Finance (DOF) for denying the United Order of Tents an exemption from real property tax, despite the organization's status as a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit. The DOF erroneously believed that the headquarters was vacant, even after Legal Aid attorneys established otherwise.

[The United Order of Tents](#) was formed in 1848 to provide aid to those escaping slavery via the Underground Railroad. The organization was officially chartered in 1883 by Anetta M. Lane and Harriet R. Taylor, two formerly enslaved women, in Norfolk, Virginia.

Since 1945, the organization's Brooklyn chapter has owned and operated its Bedford-Stuyvesant headquarters, which has served as a central hub from which they have provided support to local communities by tending to the sick, feeding the poor, caring for the elderly, and burying the deceased.

Beginning in 2019 and accelerating during the pandemic, the building fell into some disrepair as a result of mandatory stay-at-home and social distancing orders which forced members of the organization to meet virtually to avoid the spread of COVID-19, hampering their ability to care for the mansion's needs.

On June 16, 2023, after several years of advocacy from Legal Aid's Community Development Project on behalf of the United Order of Tents, DOF announced that the Tents' application for Real Estate Tax Exemption for Nonprofit Organizations was approved, affording the organization the opportunity to seek grants for historic preservation that would enable rehabilitation of the premises.

“We are elated that the City finally agreed to grant the United Order of Tents this exemption to remain in their historic Bed-Stuy headquarters, serving the community for New Yorkers in need,” said **Jacques David, senior staff attorney in the Community Development Project at The Legal Aid Society**. “The historical importance of this organization and their cultural heritage cannot be understated, and we thank the many elected officials, including Council Member Justin Brannan, who offered their support to help preserve this vital landmark.”

Essie Gregory, President of the United Order of Tents, Brooklyn, said: “Our Bedford-Stuyvesant headquarters has served the community for over 75 years, and with this tax exemption, we will be able to continue our legacy for many more years to come. As our organization evolves and recruitment grows, we are excited for the next chapter of the United Order of Tents and the new mark on history we will create. We are grateful for all the stakeholders who have come together to save our historic headquarters, including elected officials, preservation societies, architects, and Legal Aid, and we look forward to the incredible journey that lies ahead to revitalize our mission.”

“When I heard the United Order of Tents was at risk of losing their storied Brooklyn headquarters, I was morally obligated to get involved. I could not stand by and allow the City of New York to essentially evict an organization with such deep historical and cultural significance going back to the Underground Railroad. We couldn’t turn our backs on an organization led by Black women dedicated to empowering other Black women – especially over an issue that boiled down to little more than bureaucratic morass. As Chair of the Finance Committee, I was proud to take up this cause behind the scenes with the NYC Department of Finance, and I am grateful for their partnership in this matter. For the good of our city – the Tents have obtained tax exempt status and their building will be saved,” said **City Council Finance Chair Justin Brannan**.

The United Order of Tents is an organization with significant African American heritage. The premises constitute a prominent site of African American history and culture, similar to the African Burial Ground, Weeksville Cultural Heritage Center, the Langston Hughes House, Louis Armstrong House, and the Audre Lord Residence.

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The Legal Aid Society exists for one simple yet powerful reason: to ensure that New Yorkers are not denied their right to equal justice because of poverty. For over 145 years, we have protected, defended, and advocated for those who have struggled in silence for far too long. Every day, in every borough, The Legal Aid Society changes the lives of our clients and helps improve our communities. www.legalaidnyc.org