

My name is Maisa Tisdale. I'm the President of the Mary & Eliza Freeman Center for History and Community in Bridgeport. We own, and are restoring, the Mary & Eliza Freeman Houses at 354 & 360 Main Street in the South End. We are creating a national historic site consisting of a museum, education, and digital humanities center (with a unit of housing). Our preservation and restoration plans are designed to be catalysts to neighborhood revitalization.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation wrote:

...The historic Mary and Eliza Freeman Houses in Bridgeport, Connecticut... are rare and irreplaceable evidence of African American life prior to Emancipation, and should be considered a site of national significance worthy of careful stewardship and protection. Listed on the State and National Register of Historic Places, the circa 1848 Freeman Houses should be considered some of Bridgeport's most significant architectural resources... they are the last extant examples remaining from a community, Little Liberia, circa 1822, and are the oldest houses built by African Americans in the State of Connecticut. These buildings must be considered irreplaceable.

In 2013, Action for Bridgeport Community Development (ABCD) and the Freeman Center received a \$20,000 grant from the CT Trust to complete the historical architecture plans and construction specs required of historic properties by the Secretary of the Interior. In other words, for the first time, we know what the houses looked like in 1848 and how to restore them to the required standards. Without this grant, our project could not move forward.

The Freeman Houses are unique cultural assets that can bring prominence to Bridgeport. Yet our grassroots, volunteer, effort to raise funds was daunting. Cities prefer to fund "bricks and mortar" over plans and studies, even though contractors can't work without them. And because it can take so long for government project monies to be paid; local small businesses, minority enterprises, mom & pop vendors (who employ and train neighborhood people) are often discouraged from bidding on contracts they really could win. The CT Trust streamlines this process. Prompt payments are made and procurement is more inclusive.

Many South End buildings are so old they're historic. Italianate, Georgian, Victorian, Queen Anne and Gothic Revival houses are owned by ordinary Bridgeporters. It's not true that the Trust just funds barns where blue-haired ladies serve tea. This funding allows working people and minorities to restore residential and commercial property – block by block. It gives individual voters a say in city planning by providing funds to maintain and repair properties important to them.

The CT Trust saves properties that bear witness to the contributions and dignity of all people. Work on the Freeman Houses brings the block to life. Families come out to watch and talk history. In 2012, one thousand people came to our site - construction workers, artists, preservationists, archaeologists, students, scholars, business people. They patronized the Spanish restaurant and corner store. Vandalism and illegal dumping were down.

Research suggests that Little Liberia's African and Native Americans were establishing a free city - on American soil - during slavery in CT and the US. Men brought earnings home from sea. Women owned and operated businesses. They advocated human rights; and like-minded free people of color from around the country and the world, joined this community and invested there.

Because the CT Trust invested in the Freeman Center, we now have the plans required for restoration funding.