



**Testimony of Manhattan Borough President Brad Hoylman-Sigal to the  
New York City Council Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and  
International Relations regarding Intro 0496-2026: A Local Law in  
Relation to a Study and Report on the Installation of Potential Structures  
to Acknowledge the Draft Riots of 1863**

April 27, 2026

Good afternoon, Chair and Deputy Speaker Dr. Nantasha Williams and members of the committee. I'm Brad Hoylman-Sigal, and I have the honor of serving as Manhattan Borough President—eight score and three years since the New York City draft riots nearly tore this borough from its foundations and brought the deadly horrors of racial discrimination to our front doors.

I'm really grateful for the opportunity to testify here today – not only because I share the commitment to finding appropriate public ways to remember this historically important, and horrifically violent outbreak, but because doing so has been a priority of mine since my days as a State Senator representing Chelsea and part of the West Side—where some of the mayhem of July 1863 broke out with deadly consequences.

Several terrific New York historians have written about the Draft Riots, I might note, including independent scholar Barnet Schechter and our own Harold Holzer, whom I named a few months ago as the new Manhattan Borough Historian—with explicit instructions to find a way, or ways, to memorialize the 1863 draft riots.

Harold wrote about the outbreak in his 2014, Lincoln Prize-winning book, *Lincoln and the Power of the Press*—because the 1863 riots were not only directed against the military draft, and against random free people of color, and against opponents of slavery, supporters of the Union, uniformed fire-fighters, and police; but also against newspapers that supported Abraham Lincoln, emancipation, and the end of the Confederate rebellion.

South of City Hall Park, not far from where we are sitting today, rioters attacked the offices of the anti-slavery *New York Tribune*, even setting fire to the first floor before police drove the vandals outside. A few doors away, the owner of the *New York Times*, Henry J. Raymond, stood on the roof with his publishing partner, Leonard Jerome, manning gatling guns to ward off an attack on their new headquarters. (Jerome, by the way, was

the grandfather of someone who would make his name in another war: Winston Churchill!) Both newspapers survived the violence of 1863, but for a while it was touch and go.

The riots started in the brutally hot week after the Union's big victory at the Battle of Gettysburg, when the nation's first-ever conscription law went into effect. On Second Avenue and 46<sup>th</sup> Street, army officers were preparing to pull the initial draftees' names out of a large wooden wheel when an angry mob outside began throwing bricks through the window.

Soon, all hell broke loose. The drafting process stopped in its tracks, mob marched north along the East Side, gaining in strength and fury as they headed uptown, then crossed over at the southern border of Central Park, and began heading down the West Side. Along the way, the rioters pried loose cobblestones from the streets to use as weapons, picked up clubs and pokers, and began wreaking havoc at every dwelling and retail establishment suspected of supporting the Union and, worse—in their minds—sympathizing with people of color.

There is no way to rationalize mob violence, but it's worth noting that the rioters did have one actual justification for their opposition to the draft. The way that first law was written, anyone called up for conscription could pay \$300 to "buy a substitute" and thereby evade the draft altogether. Theodore Roosevelt's father availed himself of the opt-out. Even Lincoln did it!

But most of the poverty-stricken Irish in Manhattan didn't earn \$300 in an entire year! They convinced themselves, with the encouragement of racist newspapers and politicians, that the fight against secession and slavery was a "rich man's war but a poor man's fight"—and that disparity, that dramatic economic inequality, incited them to unspeakable violence.

Over the next couple of days, the outbreak grew into unspeakable proportions. Commercial establishment as small as corner drug stores and as large as Brooks Brothers were vandalized and looted. People's apartments were broken into, furnishings destroyed. Police were attacked on the street.

But worst of all, as I have noted, was the violence directed at Black people. Men were dragged from their homes in Lower Manhattan, beaten, sexually mutilated, lynched, set on fire, or driven off the docks into the river to their deaths. The grotesque killing spree claimed some 119 victims—we don't really know the total; it could have been larger.

And it uprooted families, especially mixed-race families, and drove Black women from the safety of their homes and onto the streets.

There is ample reason that Harold Holzer and other historians refer to the Draft Riots as the worst civil disturbance in American history save for the Civil War itself.

But the worst was yet to come. On July 14, a mob of white people attacked a new, modern orphanage for Black children that stood on the northwest corner of Fifth Avenue and 43<sup>rd</sup> Street—the site of a super-tall skyscraper now rising next to the city’s famous Century Club.

The 1863 building, known as the “Colored Orphans Asylum,” stood just a block from the source of Manhattan’s water supply—the reservoir standing where the New York Public Library now stands—and its occupants included the children of Black soldiers who had recently volunteered to fight for their own freedom in the Union Army.

The rioters did not care. They ransacked the building and set fire to the mattresses in the upstairs dormitory, sending the entire structure up in flames. Only when the headmaster of the orphanage held a bible over his head and begged the petrified children to follow the good book outside—as they had followed it all their lives—did the children escape with their lives. Once safely on the street, a young Irish boy led them down to the nearest police station, from which they were transported across the East River to what is now Roosevelt Island, for their own safety. We don’t even know this hero’s name.

But for that one miracle, the death toll of the Draft Riots might have risen by 250—all children burned alive.

There is no question but that there were heroes in New York that week: the exhausted troops sent north from Gettysburg to finally put the riots down; the white New York progressives who hid Black neighbors and fellow Republicans in their homes; the newspapers that continued to condemn the violence and defend both Black freedom and press freedom ... and, on the other side, the villains who so savagely injured, maimed, and killed the innocent and wreaked havoc on the streets—deluded into believing that free Black people would undermine their job security and take away their own freedom.

They had succumbed to the same divisive rhetoric that plagues us today—from those who believe immigrants will hurt, rather than enhance our economy; that widening the pool of opportunity for some will narrow it for others. As usual, Lincoln said it best a few months later at Gettysburg: government must be of, by, and for the people... all the people. And “a new birth of freedom” for those long denied freedom can only make us more faithful to the “all men are created equal” promise of the document whose 250<sup>th</sup> birthday is now just two months away: the Declaration of Independence.

Fortunately, we do have a few ways we can already remember the New York City Draft Riots. The New York Historical collection, for example, includes the very bible the 43<sup>rd</sup>

Street orphans followed through smoke and flames to escape their burning building in 1863.

But the site of the orphanage itself – shrouded in construction scaffolding these days (like too much of Manhattan) bears no marker to convey its history. It never has. In fact, when the excavation pit was first dug a decade ago, veteran *New York Times* reporter, now its official historian, David Dunlap, pleaded for the chance to do just a little archaeological exploration on the site. He hoped to unearth just a few artifacts that could testify to the lives of the forgotten children who once found peace on the site – and then ended their time there in terror. David was denied access.

Well, it's not too late to make amends for the invisibility of the draft riot victims. I would certainly support a study as envisioned by your legislation and I we hope we can have our experts assist you.

I will share with you some thoughts for locations of the markers that you envision:

- Fifth Avenue and 43<sup>rd</sup> Street, of course – where the atrocity against the Orphan Asylum took place. And maybe at the headquarters the orphanage later built in Harlem, up at 143<sup>rd</sup> Street between Broadway and Amsterdam;
- The site of the first outbreak of anti-draft violence: Third Avenue, between 46<sup>th</sup> and 47<sup>th</sup> Streets;
- The site of the federal armory on Second Avenue and 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, burned down by the rioters – and the nearby Union Steam factory, where workers were clubbed to death or pushed to their deaths from the upper windows;
- The site of the old New York Tribune building south of City Hall, where freedom of the press almost came to an end here;
- And perhaps even the basilica of the Old St. Patrick's Cathedral around Prince and Mulberry Streets, where Archbishop John Hughes made a hugely important speech imploring Irish Americans to put down their weapons and end the violence that was staining the streets – and reputation – of New York City.

We should not be afraid to mark these spots. We proudly celebrate our great accomplishments here, but we seem to have far more difficulty admitting our failures.

History happened in Manhattan – history as glorious as the tearing down of the Statue of King George to start the American Revolution here in July 1776; and as inglorious as the rioting that almost tore down the fabric of the city in July 1863.

We should identify all such sites – either in celebration or in solemn acknowledgment.

History is complicated – but unless we fully confront and understand the past, we can't and won't find what Lincoln once called "a vast future." The idea is to learn from our mistakes, not ignore them.

By making sure we don't erase what happened in Manhattan – as well as other cities, by the way – in July 1863, we will make sure nothing as ugly and devastating ever happens again. It's a part of our history we have closed our eyes to for far too long. But it's not too late to open them and shine a light on the truth.

Thank you.