

Ear Inn building celebrated at tour event



Downtown Express photo by Akiko Miyazaki

The converted "EAR" Inn sign.

BY ALBERT AMATEAU

Keeping a 186-year-old wooden beach house standing and functioning as living quarters, office and pub is no easy task. Especially one condemned as unfit for use back in 1906.

But Rip Hayman, owner of the James Brown House at 326 Spring St. gets along with a little help from friends.

The house, built before 1817, is a designated landmark and the Ear Inn, a pub on the ground floor, is a favorite neighborhood destination. Recently, the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, joined with Hayman and Andy Coe, author of "Ear Inn Virons," a book (as its punning title indicates) about the history of the property and neighborhood, in a guided tour of the building two weeks ago.

The three-story house, originally the home of an African-American Revolutionary War veteran who ran a tobacco shop on the ground floor, has uneven floors, stairs that slant at an odd angle and a unique ambiance.

"This is sand from the foundation of the building," said Hayman, holding a beer stein full of grayish sand. The house, now 1 1/2 blocks from the Hudson River, was right on the riverbank in the early decades of the 19th century. "There was a sand spit in the river at Canal St. at that time," said Hayman. "We have to pump out the tide from the basement twice a day," he added.

Hayman first rented a room in the house in 1973 when he was a Columbia University student. He paid \$100 a month rent to Harry Jacobs who ran the unnamed pub known to neighbors as "The Green Door." In 1977, Hayman and friends bought the house and the pub.

"We were publishing 'The Ear,' a new



Downtown Express photo by Elisabeth Robert

Rip Hayman, owner of the James Brown House, home to the Ear Inn, with a century-old revolver, which he found in the house.

music journal, at the time and we decided to name the pub after it," said Hayman. The city Landmarks Commission didn't allow new signage, so a coat of black paint covering the curved neon tubes of the B in BAR was sufficient for EAR.

Although James Brown sold tobacco on the first floor, the shop has been a pub for at least 150 years, said Hayman, who has a

collection of whiskey jugs found in the basement of the place. The records show there was a bar in the building in 1835 and it was likely there for some years before.

Hayman keeps a revolver, which he found several years ago tucked in the chimney of the second floor fireplace. "It's a

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Continued from page 13

five-shot revolver made around 1900," he said. "I can imagine the circumstances when it was hidden."

Hayman, who is a principal in Odyssey Publications, a publishing firm with offices in the James Brown House, is no longer active in the Ear Inn. Nevertheless, Martin Sheridan, who runs the Ear, helps maintain the old house. It takes a lot of maintenance.

"We have crack gauges all over the

walls," Hayman said. "Whenever we have engineers inspect the place they go 'Oh boy,' and shake their heads."

Hayman says he is worried most about the proposed redevelopment by Nino Vendome of the adjacent property which shares a party wall with the old house. Vendome first planned to build a 36-story tower designed by Philip Johnson that would have cantilevered eight feet over the James Brown House. The developer had a tentative agreement to replace plumbing in the old house and provide space for a new

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exit and a kitchen expansion for the Ear Inn as part of the redevelopment.

But Vendome failed to get a zoning variance for the building and now plans an 11-story building.

"When he builds it we'll have to close and bring the whole building up to code," said Hayman. But help from the developer is not certain. "We may not survive the construction unless we get [structural and financial] help," he said.

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