

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD
Name of Property
Tompkins County, NY
County and State
05000018
NR Reference Number

**DRAFT**

**State/Federal Agency Certification**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,  
I hereby certify that this  additional documentation  move  removal  
 name change (additional documentation)  other  
meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic  
Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

Signature of Certifying Official/Title:

Date of Action

**National Park Service Certification**

I hereby certify that this property is:  
 entered in the National Register  
 determined eligible for the National Register  
 determined not eligible for the National Register  
 removed from the National Register  
 additional documentation accepted  
 other (explain:) \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD
Name of Property
Tompkins County, NY
County and State
05000018
NR Reference Number

## SUMMARY

The Ithaca Downtown Historic District, listed on the National Register in 2005, encompasses almost the entire commercial core of the city of Ithaca and is characterized by small-scale multi-story, primarily brick buildings with first-story storefronts and residential or other commercial spaces above. The district is defined by uniform streetscapes of buildings that are almost all three bays wide and one to four stories tall, with regular fenestration and stamped metal or corbelled brick cornices. The district is significant under criteria A and C in the areas of commerce, community planning and development, and architecture and documents the district as an intact representative example of a central New York commercial area illustrating characteristic patterns of development between 1818 and 1954. The district is also distinguished by a large collection of intact commercial architecture in a variety of popular styles dating from the same period.

The purpose of this additional documentation is to add areas of significance to the district under criterion A for Social History/LGBT and Social History/Women's History to document the contributing building at 141-143 East State Street as the headquarters of Firebrand Books, a multiple award-winning lesbian and feminist publishing house. Firebrand, founded by activist, editor, and publisher Nancy K. Bereano in 1984, became a nationally recognized leader in the publishing revolution that occurred during the Second Wave Feminist, Women in Print, and lesbian and gay (today, LGBT) movements of the 1970s and 1980s. The press produced work in a wide variety of genres by ethnically and racially diverse authors, including Dorothy Allison, Alison Bechdel, Cheryl Clarke, Leslie Feinberg, Jewelle Gomez, Audre Lorde, and Minnie Bruce Pratt. Bereano has been recognized by scholars for her contributions to small press publishing, women's history, and LGBT scholarship. The press was headquartered on the second floor of the building at 141-143 East State Street, and the three rooms in which Bereano and her colleagues worked have remained nearly unaltered since the press closed in 2000. This documentation also adds an additional period of significance for these areas, 1984-1993.

## DESCRIPTION

### Location and Setting

The building at 141-143 East State Street is on the south side of The Commons, which is a landscaped pedestrian mall located on East State Street between Cayuga, Tioga and North Tioga Streets between East Green and East Seneca. The Ithaca Commons was modeled after the Boston Common and constructed in 1972-75 to accommodate a wide variety of activities; it included a fountain, a children's play area, diverse forms of seating and plantings, covered pavilions, and a modest amphitheater.<sup>1</sup> Designed by architect Anton J. Egner and Associates with Marvin Adelman as landscape architect, the Commons was the first pedestrian mall in New York State.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Daniel R. Snodderly, *Ithaca and Its Past: The History and Architecture of Downtown Ithaca* (n.p.: DeWitt Historical Society of Tompkins County, 1982), 21-24.

<sup>2</sup> Jane Marsh Dieckmann, *A Short History of Tompkins County* (Ithaca: DeWitt Historical Society, 1986), 53-54.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD
Name of Property
Tompkins County, NY
County and State
05000018
NR Reference Number

Firebrand Books was located on the second floor of the building at 141-143, a late-nineteenth century Italianate brick row building constructed in 1872 for the bookseller and printer Andrus, McChain, & Lyons (later Andrus & Church). It was designed by prominent Ithaca architect Alfred B. (A.B.) Dale in an eclectic design that displays several distinctive characteristics of the Italianate style, in addition to other decorative features, such as incised and vermiculated stonework. The building is directly across from other late-nineteenth century commercial row buildings that span the north side of The Commons. The Home Dairy Alley runs along the east, side, elevation of the property, and an adjacent brick row building, 137-139 East State Street, flanks the west, side, elevation. The rear, south, elevation faces East Green Street.

The building at 141-143 East State is a four-story, four-bay, red brick commercial building with brick load-bearing walls and a limestone foundation. It is rectangular in shape and symmetrical in form and massing. The north, principal, elevation is composed of pressed face brick, and the remaining elevations are constructed of common brick. The brick walls are laid in a running bond. The windows on the second, third, and fourth stories are round-arched double-hung wood sash with keystones, vermiculated impost blocks, stone sills, and voussoirs composed of brick headers. The first-story cast-iron façade—a common feature of Italianate commercial buildings—was replaced, or possibly covered, with an oak wood and stone veneer façade around 1929, when ownership transferred from Andrus & Church to the Home Dairy Cafeteria. The building has a sloping asphalt roof (front to back) and a metal cornice and brick corbels at the top of the facade. Two entrances face The Commons: the first, located in the third bay, leads to the first-story retail space; the second, located in the fourth bay, leads to the rental spaces located on the upper three stories (listed under the address 141 East State Street, or, 141 The Commons). The late-nineteenth century Italianate commercial brick row building retains its original commercial function and is one of the most architecturally sophisticated on The Commons. The three second-floor rooms that housed the headquarters of Firebrand Books retain original features such as historic plan, staircases, flooring, baseboard moldings, wainscoting, and window and door trim. The second floor is largely unaltered from the period of significance.

**Exterior**

North Elevation (façade)

The façade of 141-143 East State Street is the north elevation, which fronts onto The Commons (Figures 2.1 and 2.2). There are four bays. The first-floor storefront has a stone veneer bulkhead and a painted oak façade that contains pilasters and a signboard. Stone quoins that are alternately incised and vermiculated articulate the corners of the building. The quoins are topped with vermiculated stone consoles. A large, multi-pane display window spans the first two bays. The transom area above the display window is composed of small, square panes of prism glass. A non-historic small wood canopy with a sloped copper roof supported by decorative triangular braces is installed above the display window. The main entrance is recessed from the façade and contains a carved wood door with a single

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD
Name of Property
Tompkins County, NY
County and State
05000018
NR Reference Number

segmental-arched glass pane and a stained-glass transom. The secondary entrance is also set back from the façade and contains a stone sill, a single-pane glass door in a wood frame, and a transom window. A metal blade sign is affixed to the pilaster that separates the primary and secondary entrances. The painted oak façade contains a stained-glass sign board that reads “The Yellow Deli” in the frieze band area and is crowned with a metal cornice.

The second, third, and fourth stories of the north elevation are constructed of pressed-face brick. The second floor has four round-arched double-hung wood sash windows with stone sills, voussoirs composed of brick headers, keystones, and vermiculated impost blocks. A belt course and a row of corbels separates the second floor from the third, and the bays are divided by brick pilasters with stone capitals. The window in the fourth bay is narrower in width than those in the first three bays.

The third floor, like the second, has four round-arched double-hung wood sash windows with stone sills, brick voussoirs, keystones, and vermiculated impost blocks. A belt course and a row of corbels also separates the third floor from the fourth, and the bays are divided by brick pilasters with stone capitals. The window in the fourth bay is narrower in width than those in the first three bays.

The fourth floor, like the second and third, has four round-arched double-hung sash windows with painted wood frames, stone sills, brick voussoirs, keystones, and vermiculated impost blocks. The bays are divided by brick pilasters. The front elevation is topped with brick corbels and a metal cornice with dentils and bracket-like consoles. The cornice is emphasized on either side by stone capitals.

### East Elevation

The east, side, elevation stretches from The Commons to the rear of the property, accessible via the Home Dairy Alley (Figure 2.3). The main four-story block contains five bays. A one-story brick extension, used as Andrus & Church’s storage room, is original to the building. A 1929 two-story stucco addition also extends from the rear of the building along the Home Dairy Alley (Figure 2.4).

The first floor contains two large two-over-two round-arched windows with stone sills, transoms, and oak wood frames in the first and third bays. A side round-arched entranceway, set back from the Home Dairy Alley, is in the fifth bay and contains an oak door with two panels, a single glass pane, and sidelights. A round-arched transom window with two panes is located above the doorway. The second, third, and fourth floors all contain five round-arched two-over-two, double-hung wood sash windows with voussoirs of brick headers and stone sills in a rhythm of three to two. The elevation is topped with a simple stone cornice that spans the length of the building’s east side.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD
Name of Property
Tompkins County, NY
County and State
05000018
NR Reference Number

South Elevation (rear)

The south, rear, elevation is four stories and has three bays (Figure 2.5). The first floor contains a two-story addition constructed in 1929 of red brick laid in a running bond. The addition is topped with metal flashing at the roofline. The second, third, and fourth floors each contain three round-arched two-over-two, double-hung wood sash windows with vousoirs of brick headers and stone sills. A cast-iron fire escape is attached to the building on the third and fourth floors. The rear elevation has a metal gutter at the roofline and is crowned with simple stone capitals on each side.

West Elevation

The west, side, elevation abuts the adjacent property located at 137-139 East State Street.

**Interior**

First Floor

The first floor contains a restaurant/cafe in the front and a kitchen and bakery in the rear. The restaurant/cafe area is divided down the center with table and booth seating to the east and a coffee and drink bar to the west. The front of the first floor retains much of its wood trim and pressed-tin ceiling from its 1929 conversion from a retail space to the Home Dairy Cafeteria. The rear 1929 addition to the original 1872 building contains a kitchen and food preparation areas on the first floor and a bakery on the second floor.

Second Floor

The second floor is accessed by the stairway located inside the secondary entrance in the building's fourth bay (Figure 2.6). The wood staircase, balustrade with turned posts, and trim are original. The second floor is composed of a narrow hallway to the west with rooms to the east (Figure 2.7). The hallway retains its original brick wall, wood floorboards, and door and wall trim. A small round-arched window with wood trim is located above the stairwell on the north wall. Moving from front to rear, or north to south, there are two rooms followed by a historic wood staircase with a balustrade of turned posts that leads to the third and fourth floors. The staircase is followed by two additional rooms and a bathroom. At the end of the hallway, a non-historic metal door with a round-arched transom leads to the two-story addition at the rear of the building where the kitchen and food storage areas are located.

The headquarters of Firebrand Books was located in the second, third, and fourth rooms (plus the rear bathroom) of the second floor, all of which are largely unaltered from the period of significance. In 1929, prior to the period of significance for Firebrand Books, the storefront was renovated when the printer and bookseller Andrus & Church was replaced with the Home Dairy Cafeteria. At this time, the building's original cast-iron storefront was renovated to the current oak façade. At the same time, a second-story addition was added to the rear of the building to house a kitchen and bakery for the Home Dairy. These changes have acquired their own significance over time and characterized the building

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD
Name of Property
Tompkins County, NY
County and State
05000018
NR Reference Number

during the Firebrand Books period. The front room of the second floor was the office of journalist Janis Kelly during the Firebrand years and vacant after 1990. It was subdivided into two spaces ca. 2002. The press was initially housed in the second room; however, it later expanded to include the third and fourth rooms. The second room was then used as Firebrand's storage and file room. The third room was the office of Nancy K. Bereano's administrative assistant (Figure 2.9), and the fourth was Bereano's personal office.<sup>3</sup> The fifth room, at the rear of the building, was subdivided off for a bathroom in 1979. This appears to explain why Nancy Bereano's personal office, now in the fourth room, has no windows, as it was subdivided to create a bathroom for the second floor.

The first room, which overlooks The Commons, contains three substantial round-arched double-hung wood sash windows with their original wood trim along the north wall. This room, the largest on the floor, was divided into separate office/studio spaces ca. 2002. The full height wall that divides the room into two spaces is constructed around the original materials. The second, or middle, room is rectangular in plan and retains its historic wood floorboards, trim, wainscoting, and crown molding (Figure 2.8). Three substantial round-arched double-hung wood sash windows line the east wall facing the Home Dairy Alley. A doorway centered in the north wall connects to the first room. A second doorway, centered in the south wall, connects to the stairwell that leads to the building's upper floors. The third room is similar to the second in layout and composition but contains two round-arched double-hung wood sash windows, and the fourth room is windowless. The bathroom has windows overlooking the rear addition.

### Third and Fourth Floors

Building permits, accessible at City Hall in Ithaca, indicate that in 1964, the second floor was used for business offices, the third floor was a dance studio, and the fourth floor was a ballroom. In 1979, approximately five years before Firebrand Books occupied the second floor, the second floor was vacant, the third floor was used for a photography studio, and the fourth floor was vacant. During Firebrand's time in the building, the third floor was the studio of Jon Reis, a noted Ithaca-based photographer.

### **Integrity**

The building at 143 East State Street is highly intact and conveys its historic function as a prominent commercial building in downtown Ithaca and a publishing headquarters for Firebrand Books. The location and setting of the building are largely unchanged from the district's period of significance. The exterior of the building retains its historic character and materials with few exceptions. In 1929, prior to the period of significance for Firebrand Books, the storefront was renovated, when the printer and bookseller Andrus & Church was replaced with the Home Dairy Cafeteria. At this time, the building's

<sup>3</sup> Nancy K. Bereano, telephone interview by Jeff Iovannone, April 19, 2023.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD
Name of Property
Tompkins County, NY
County and State
05000018
NR Reference Number

original cast-iron storefront was renovated to the current oak façade. At the same time, a second-story addition was added to the rear of the building to house a kitchen and bakery for the Home Dairy. These changes have acquired their own significance over time and characterized the building during the Firebrand Books period.

In 2003, the aluminum-framed primary entrance door was replaced with an oak door and stained-glass transom that remain in place today, and the glass finials that topped the brick capitals on either side of the cornice were removed. Between 2019 and 2020, the distinctive vermiculated keystones on the second, third, and fourth floor windows of the primary façade were shaved off. The HOME DAIRY CO. signboard was removed from the storefront on June 29, 2022. During the fall of 2022, the oak facade of the first floor storefront was painted, new muntins were added to the display window to create simulated divided lights, and a small wood canopy with a sloped copper roof was installed above the plate-glass display window atop the historic materials. These changes do not compromise the original design or the building's appearance during the period it served as the headquarters of Firebrand Books and the majority are reversible.

The building also retains its significant associations with Firebrand Books, Women in Print, and the LGBT movement, and on the interior, the second-floor rooms that housed the headquarters of Firebrand Books are virtually unaltered from the period of significance, enhancing integrity of feeling.

## SIGNIFICANCE

### Period of Significance

The period of significance for criterion A, social history/LGBT and social history/women's history begins in 1984, when Nancy K. Bereano founded Firebrand Books and established its headquarters on the second floor of 141-143 East State Street, and ends in 1993 with press's publication of Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*, one of the earliest, most important, and most influential works of transgender fiction. *Stone Butch Blues* was also the press's best-selling title and remained so until Firebrand closed. This period also takes in Nancy Bereano's significant and successful advocacy for LGBT rights in Ithaca during the time in which she ran the publishing house. In 1984, she worked to ensure the passage of an ordinance that banned discrimination based on sexual orientation in Ithaca, one of the first United States municipalities to do so, and in 1991, she and other local activists successfully advocated for a Tompkins County-wide anti-discrimination law, known as "Local Law C."<sup>4</sup>

### Significant Dates

**1984** (founding of Firebrand Books)

**1985** (publication of Firebrand's first titles)

<sup>4</sup> Joel Simonetti, "County OKs gay rights law after debate," *Ithaca Journal*, December 3, 1991.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD
Name of Property
Tompkins County, NY
County and State
05000018
NR Reference Number

- 1986** (publication of the first compilation of Alison Bechdel's comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*);  
**1988** (Audre Lorde's *A Burst of Light* receives the Before Columbus Foundation National Book Award);  
**1989** (Minnie Bruce Pratt's *Crime Against Nature* is the Lamont Poetry Selection by the Academy of American Poets; Dorothy Allison's *Trash* wins the Lambda Literary Award for "Best Lesbian Small Press Book" and the Lambda Literary Award for "Best Lesbian Fiction")  
**1993** (publication of Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*)

**Criteria Considerations**

Firebrand Books meets criteria consideration G in the areas of social history/LGBT and Social history/women's history for its exceptional significance as a nationally recognized leader in the the revolution in print culture that occurred as part of the Second Wave Feminist, Women in Print, and lesbian and gay (LGBT) movements.<sup>5</sup> Founded by renowned publisher and activist Nancy K. Bereano, Firebrand Books is widely recognized by scholars as one of the earliest and most prestigious lesbian, gay, and feminist publishers of the 1980s and 1990s. The press was among the first to publish the work of important lesbian, trans, and queer artists, including Leslie Feinberg, author of *Stone Butch Blues*, one of the earliest and most influential works of transgender fiction. Other important writers and books published by Firebrand included Alison Bechdel's comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*, Audre Lorde's *A Burst of Light*, Minnie Bruce Pratt's *Crime Against Nature*, and Dorothy Allison's *Trash*. These books and writers had a tremendous influence on literary and popular culture, which is evidenced by the press's numerous awards. Operating for sixteen years, Firebrand Books is also rare for its unusual longevity within the context of other small women's presses, most of which were small-scale operations that lasted approximately two to five years. During its time in business, its books won more Lambda Literary Awards than any other press, and many of its titles are now considered classics of feminist and LGBT literature, studied and taught in academic settings. A number of these authors continue to publish and are now associated with major publishing houses. Today, Firebrand Books' records are housed in Cornell University's Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections Human Sexuality Collection. Firebrand Books meets the exceptional criteria for its early date, precedent-setting scholarship, and lasting impact.

**Summary Paragraph**

The Ithaca Downtown Historic District is significant under **Criterion A and Criteria Consideration G** in the areas of **Social History/LGBT** and **Women's History** for its association with Firebrand Books, one of the most revolutionary, renowned, and impactful small presses to emerge as part of the national LGBT and women's movements and from the city of Ithaca and Tompkins County, which was a regional center of printing and publishing. Firebrand, which had its headquarters on the second floor of the building at 141-143 East State, in the heart of the historic district, was founded by activist, editor,

<sup>5</sup> Today the gay community is more inclusively referred to as the LGBTQ community; however, this nomination will use LGBT because it was the appropriate terminology during the 1980s and 1990s.



**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD
Name of Property
Tompkins County, NY
County and State
05000018
NR Reference Number

and publisher Nancy K. Bereano in 1984 and became a nationally recognized leader of the publishing revolution that occurred during the Second Wave Feminist, Women in Print, and lesbian and gay movements of the 1970s and 1980s. The press produced work in a wide variety of genres by ethnically and racially diverse authors, including Dorothy Allison, Alison Bechdel, Cheryl Clarke, Leslie Feinberg, Jewelle Gomez, Audre Lorde, and Minnie Bruce Pratt. Print culture was essential to the establishment and growth of LGBT and women's movements and communities. From the 1970s through the 1980s, feminists and LGBT people had access to a variety of community-specific newsletters, newspapers, leaflets, pamphlets, journals, poetry, fiction and nonfiction books, and other publications, all of which were critical to the formation of a cohesive, interconnected community focused on gay liberation. As a feminist press, Firebrand was also a vital link in a women-centered network of artists, readers, and publishers devoted to the expression and dissemination of women's thoughts and experiences. The Women in Print Movement led to the founding of numerous small lesbian and feminist presses and women's bookstores across the country in the 1980s and 1990s, and Firebrand was distinctive among them for six primary reasons. First, the press was founded with an expressly anti-racist sensibility. Of Firebrand's 105 published titles, approximately one-third were authored by women of color. Second, Firebrand published work in multiple genres, including poetry, literary fiction, popular fiction, nonfiction, and theory. Third, Bereano routinely published works by writers with perspectives outside the urban mainstream of the lesbian and gay movement. Fourth, Firebrand's geographic proximity to Cornell University helped elevate the press's reputation. Fifth, over its lifespan, Firebrand won more Lambda Literary awards than any other publisher. Finally, the press was able to survive into the 1990s by publishing queer and transgender titles rather than retain an exclusive feminist and lesbian focus. By this time, Firebrand Books had secured its reputation as one of the most widely renowned and prestigious lesbian, gay, and feminist publishers in the country. Due to the changing economics of the book trade, Firebrand closed its doors in 2000 after sixteen years in operation. As a multiple award-winning lesbian and feminist publishing house that published cutting-edge queer and transgender titles, Firebrand Books left a powerful legacy that continues to be felt to this day.

**Narrative Statement of Significance**

**141-143 East State Street**

In 1824, William Andrus Sr., a traveling bookseller and auctioneer from Connecticut, came to Ithaca and established a printing and bookselling business with Ebenezer Mack, a printer from Owego, New York, and the former proprietor of the *Ithaca Journal*, under the name Mack & Andrus.<sup>6</sup> Andrus's older brother, Silas, also owned a printing firm, the Andrus Bindery, in Hartford, Connecticut, from 1831 to 1839.<sup>7</sup> William Andrus was, according to the *Ithaca Journal*, "one of the early settlers of Ithaca [who]

<sup>6</sup> Dieckmann, *A Short History of Tompkins County*, 199-200; "William Andrus, Second Oldest Business Man of Ithaca," *Ithaca Daily Journal*, January 5, 1905.

<sup>7</sup> Sharon K. Yntema, "William Andrus Sr.-1824," *Ithaca Area Bookstores: Two hundred years of bookstore history in Tompkins County, 1819-2019* (Ithaca: Skylark Ink, 2023), 24-25.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD
Name of Property
Tompkins County, NY
County and State
05000018
NR Reference Number

played an important part in the development of the community and Cornell University.”<sup>8</sup> In 1831, Mack and Andrus purchased the three-story brick building then located at 143 East State Street from William B. Skidmore. In 1836, the firm became Mack, Andrus, & Woodruff, and in 1842, Mack left the firm and John Payne Gauntlett, the foreman of the bookbinding department, became a partner. Gauntlett later became the thirtieth president of Ithaca. The firm was then known as Andrus, Woodruff, Gauntlett, & Co. William Andrus Jr. entered the firm in 1852.<sup>9</sup>

The business underwent a number of additional changes in partners until, from 1878 to 1929, the firm was known as Andrus & Church.<sup>10</sup> In April of 1871, the original three-story brick Andrus Block was destroyed by fire. The construction of a new building commenced in late 1871 and was ready for occupation by January of 1872. The new building, which survives today, was eighty feet deep, and the storefront measured twenty-four feet, six inches.<sup>11</sup> The 1888 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map depicts a four-story brick building with a narrow rectangular footprint that is described as a bookseller. The printing office and bindery, which occupied the second and third stories of the original building, were housed in a separate three-story brick building in the rear, to the southeast. Both buildings were designed by noted Ithaca architect A.B. Dale.<sup>12</sup> The Andrus firm’s financing of a building with sophisticated architectural composition and fine detailing testifies to the prominence of publishing and bookselling as commercial enterprises in late-nineteenth century Ithaca.<sup>13</sup>

William Andrus Jr. died on December 18, 1917, and the building was inherited by his daughter, Florence S. Andrus. The building continued to house book-related businesses until 1930, when the city directory lists the occupants as the Home Dairy Cafeteria, Monroe M. Sweetland (lawyer), and Harvey L. Van Pelt (physician). The Home Dairy Company, a chain of cafeteria-style restaurants and bakeries that specialized in “old-fashioned” home cooked foods, was founded by Frank E. Allen, a businessman from Pittsford, New York. By the mid-twentieth century, Allen owned twenty-eight Home Dairy locations throughout Upstate New York and one in Pennsylvania. He later opened an additional location in St. Petersburg, Florida. The Ithaca Home Dairy, which opened on August 26, 1929, was co-owned by Allen and brothers Emery and Leigh Howell.<sup>14</sup> Directly prior to opening, the original cast-iron storefront—which featured an entablature, three columns that divided the display window, and a

<sup>8</sup> “William Andrus, Second Oldest Business Man of Ithaca,” *Ithaca Daily Journal*, January 5, 1905.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas W. Burns, “Initial Ithacans: John Payne Gauntlett,” *Ithaca Daily Journal*, February 19, 1903; “William Andrus, Second Oldest Business Man of Ithaca,” *Ithaca Daily Journal*, January 5, 1905.

<sup>10</sup> “William Andrus Church: Member of the Firm of Andrus & Church,” *Ithaca Daily Journal*, January 9, 1905; “Ithaca Printer is in Business For Sixty Years,” *Ithaca Daily Journal*, March 15, 1912.

<sup>11</sup> D. Morris Kurtz, *Ithaca and Its Resources* (Ithaca: Journal Association Book and Job Print, 1883), 97-98; “Improvements of 1871,” *The Ithaca Journal*, January 2, 1872.

<sup>12</sup> “Improvements of 1871,” *The Ithaca Journal*, January 2, 1872. Architectural historian Mary Raddant Tomlan’s research on the Andrus family was instrumental in the identification of A.B. Dale as the architect and builder of 143 East State Street.

<sup>13</sup> Dieckmann, *A Short History of Tompkins County*, 201.

<sup>14</sup> “Lease Andrus, Church Store to Dairy Co.,” *Ithaca Journal-News*, February 22, 1929.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD
Name of Property
Tompkins County, NY
County and State
05000018
NR Reference Number

bulkhead—was replaced or covered with a wood façade of golden oak and a signboard with gilt lettering.<sup>15</sup> Prism glass, a popular feature of early twentieth-century storefronts, was added to the transom area above the display windows to provide better interior lighting. A two-story addition was constructed on the rear of the building to create a bakery and kitchen.<sup>16</sup> Significant changes were also made to the first floor interior. A cafeteria was installed, and the ceilings were lowered to accommodate Home Dairy's business (Figures 12 and 13).<sup>17</sup> The first floor remained in use as a dairy from 1929 until 2002. After these few changes, the Averys made no significant alterations to the exterior of 143 East State Street aside from sandblasting around the mid-1970s.<sup>18</sup>

On November 29, 1979, Thomas D. Hoard, the City of Ithaca Building Commissioner, approved a proposal submitted by the Averys to rehabilitate the second floor of 143 East State Street into two business offices following a walk-through inspection. At the time, the second and fourth floors of the building were vacant, while the third was used for a photography studio. During the 1960s, the second floor was previously used for business offices, the third for a dance studio, and the fourth as a ballroom.<sup>19</sup> Following the 1979 rehabilitation of the second floor, the upper three stories of the building continued as rental space for a host of Ithaca businesses, including, from 1984 to 2000, Firebrand Books.

## **SOCIAL HISTORY/LGBT AND WOMEN'S HISTORY**

### **LGBT Print Culture**

The gay liberation and women's movements of the 1970s resulted in the emergence of a thriving gay and lesbian (today, LGBT) print culture made by and for the community. Publications developed alongside the growth of organizations throughout the United States, the establishment of annual Gay Pride marches, and an increased number of LGBT people coming out.<sup>20</sup> Print media was not merely a result of gay liberation. Networks of readers that formed around publications allowed LGBT people to build community in ways that supported the broader movement. According to historian Benjamin Serby, "these symbolic connections, forged in text, were critical to the coalescence and growth of gay liberation after Stonewall."<sup>21</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Snodderly, *Ithaca and Its Past*, 40.

<sup>16</sup> Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Ithaca, New York, Sheet 5, November 1929.

<sup>17</sup> "F.E. Allen Dies at 78; Home Dairy Founder," *Democrat and Chronicle*, March 16, 1958; "Home Dairy at 'home' for 50 years," *The Ithaca Journal*, August 25, 1979.

<sup>18</sup> "Home Dairy at 'home' for 50 years," *The Ithaca Journal*, August 25, 1979.

<sup>19</sup> "143 East State Street," City of Ithaca Building Division Records.

<sup>20</sup> John D. Emilio, "The Leading Edge of Change: The LGBT Press in the 1970s," in *Gay Press, Gay Power*, edited by Tracy Baim, 9. Chicago: Prairie Avenue Productions and Windy City Media Group, 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Benjamin Serby, "'Not to Produce Newspapers, but Committed Radicals': The Underground Press, the New Left, and the Gay Liberation Counterpublic in the United States, 1965–1976," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (January 2023): 2.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD
Name of Property
Tompkins County, NY
County and State
05000018
NR Reference Number

Homophile organizations of the 1950s and 1960s produced subscription-based magazines such as *The Ladder*, *Mattachine Review*, and *ONE*; however, by the 1970s, LGBT people had access to a wide variety of newsletters, newspapers, leaflets, pamphlets, journals, poetry, fiction and nonfiction books, and other publications. These forms of print culture were essential in fostering community and countering negative representations of LGBT people found in a hostile mainstream media where the community, if mentioned at all, was portrayed as criminal, mentally ill, socially stigmatized, and/or sinful.<sup>22</sup>

In the wake of the Stonewall uprising of 1969, newspapers and magazines such as the Gay Liberation Front's *COME OUT!*, *GAY*, *Drag*, *Gay Community News*, *Fag Rag*, *Sojourner*, *Tapestry*, and *The Lesbian Tide* emerged in large cities on the east and west coasts in addition to a variety of regional and local publications in smaller cities and rural towns throughout the United States. As Serby explains, "the social identities and solidarities on which the gay and lesbian movement depended took shape on the page as much as in the bars or on the streets."<sup>23</sup> Beyond the printed page, gay bookstores, such as the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop in Manhattan, Lambda Rising in Washington, D.C., or the Walt Whitman Bookshop in San Francisco, functioned as de facto community centers and gathering spaces during the early 1970s through the 1990s.

If not for the emergence of LGBT print culture, vital information and a new perspective on what it meant to be LGBT would have been otherwise unavailable. As trailblazing gay historian John D'Emilio observes, publications "played a decisive role in building [LGBT] organizations and communities and in fostering political mobilization."<sup>24</sup>

### **Second Wave Feminism**

Second Wave feminism, alternatively known as the Women's Movement, refers to the period of feminist activism that emerged in the United States in the early 1960s and was active until roughly the early 1980s (a third wave began in the early 1990s). While First Wave Feminism was centered on securing the right to vote, this phase of feminist activity focused largely on issues of gender equality and discrimination. Second Wave feminism can be broadly divided into two primary camps or philosophies: liberal feminism and radical feminism (also referred to as women's liberation). Liberal feminists sought to integrate women into society through a civil rights model. Radical feminists, in particular separatist feminists, advocated for structural change through the creation of a variety of women-centered and women-controlled institutions. Women of color feminists further drew attention to the ways systems of gender, race, sexuality, and class intersected to shape women's oppression and challenged white feminists for their centering of white, middle-class women's lives and issues. Women's liberation was

<sup>22</sup> D'Emilio, "The Leading Edge of Change," 9-10.

<sup>23</sup> Serby, "Not to Produce Newspapers, but Committed Radicals," 4.

<sup>24</sup> D'Emilio, "The Leading Edge of Change," 10.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD
Name of Property
Tompkins County, NY
County and State
05000018
NR Reference Number

not one univocal movement but, in the words of cultural scholar Jamie Harker, “a combative, simultaneous, and complicated braid of multiple conversations, movements, and manifestos.”<sup>25</sup> By the mid-1970s, the perspectives of “socialist feminism” and “cultural feminism” emerged from women’s liberation. Socialist feminists worked to build a diverse coalition of women to address economic inequality. Cultural feminism, according to historian Sara M. Evans, “focused on creating a ‘women’s culture’ including art, music, and a variety of woman-run institutions. Given its primary emphasis on lifestyle, cultural feminism drew much of its energy from the emergence of a lesbian community, now visible to itself and open to the world for the first time.”<sup>26</sup>

### **Women in Print**

Women in Print, a sub movement of Second Wave Feminism, focused on the representation and distribution of women’s experiences through printing, publishing, and bookselling, is located within the cultural feminist strand of women’s liberation. Influenced by Marxism, cultural feminists, including those involved in Women in Print, strove to change the economic organization of society as well as the contents of its culture.<sup>27</sup> The compatibility of cultural feminism and lesbian identity further illustrates why a majority of those involved in feminist print culture were lesbian.

Cultural and literary historian Trysh Travis’s definition of Women in Print is worth quoting at length:

A product of Second Wave feminism, the Women in Print Movement was an attempt by a group of allied practitioners to create an alternative communications circuit—a woman-centered network of readers and writers, editors, printers, publishers, distributors, and retailers through which ideas, objects, and practices flowed in a continuous and dynamic loop. The movement’s goals were nothing short of revolutionary: it aimed to capture women’s experiences and insights in durable—even beautiful—printed forms through a communications network free from patriarchal and capitalist control. By doing so, participants believed they would not only create a space of freedom for women, but would also and ultimately change the dominant world outside that space.<sup>28</sup>

Printing, publishing, and bookselling became a major component of women’s liberation, and women believed expression free from patriarchal, heterosexist, and racist institutions were essential to a feminist revolution. A popular slogan of Women in Print was, “freedom of the press belongs to those who own the press.”<sup>29</sup> Feminist print culture created a network of political and social connections that upheld the

<sup>25</sup> Jamie Harker, *The Lesbian South: Southern Feminists, the Women in Print Movement, and the Queer Literary Canon* (Chapel Hill: The U of North Carolina P, 2018), 9.

<sup>26</sup> Sara M. Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century’s End* (New York: The Free Press, 2003), 142-144.

<sup>27</sup> Trysh Travis, “The Women in Print Movement: History and Implications,” *Book History* Vol. 11 (2008): 277-278.

<sup>28</sup> Travis, “The Women in Print Movement,” 275-300.

<sup>29</sup> Barbara Smith, “A Press of Our Own: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press,” in *Ain’t gonna let nobody turn me around: forty years of movement building with Barbara Smith*, ed. Alethia Jones and Virginia Eubanks (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014),

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD
Name of Property
Tompkins County, NY
County and State
05000018
NR Reference Number

women's movement. As a 1971 editorial from *Women: A Journal of Liberation* explained, "an important part of the women's liberation movement has been the many publications that have emerged from the struggle. They have been key in providing an exchange of ideas and bringing new women into the movement."<sup>30</sup> According to cultural scholar Agatha Beins, "periodicals served a number of different purposes: circulating information, building and reinforcing networks, creating an imagined community of feminists, articulating theories, and telling women's stories. The publications constituted sites where readers formed relationships with the women's liberation movement."<sup>31</sup>

Feminist publications began appearing around 1968, and the 1970s saw the establishment of numerous small women's presses, often founded by women who had no prior experience in publishing, but who understood the necessity of print culture to the overall health and success of women's liberation. The accessibility of mimeograph machines at this time contributed to the growth of feminist print culture, as women could create and disseminate their own publications at a relatively low cost.<sup>32</sup> By 1973, approximately 560 feminist periodicals existed in the United States.<sup>33</sup> Women's bookstores emerged in cities throughout the United States as a vehicle for the distribution of emerging feminist books and periodicals. A feminist bookstore network was established as part of the broader Women in Print Movement.

Feminist groups worked at all points of a text's lifecycle, from writing, to publication, to printing, to distribution. The national Women in Print Conference, a gathering of women involved in publishing—including printers, owners of small presses and women's bookstores, editors, and bookstore workers—brought together activists in all areas of print culture.<sup>34</sup> The first conference, held in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1976 in a Campfire Girl campground, was organized by publishers June Arnold and Parke Bowman, co-founders of the press Daughters, Inc., based in Plainfield, Vermont, and lesbian activists Charlotte Bunch and Coletta Reid, former members of the lesbian separatist collective The Furies. Approximately 132 women representing 80 organizations attended the conference.<sup>35</sup>

The conference helped establish a national network of, in the words of cultural scholar Kristen Hogan, "bookwomen," and empowered them with the technical skills of print culture and the book trade. Carol Seajay, co-founder of the Old Wives Tales women's bookstore in San Francisco, California, also began production of *Feminist Bookstores Newsletter* (after 1984, *Feminist Bookstore News*), a trade

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154.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Agatha Beins, *Liberation in Print: Feminist Periodicals and Social Movement Identity* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2017), 8.

<sup>31</sup> Beins, *Liberation in Print*, 3.

<sup>32</sup> Beins, *Liberation in Print*, 8.

<sup>33</sup> Travis, "The Women in Print Movement," 278.

<sup>34</sup> Beins, *Liberation in Print*, 9.

<sup>35</sup> Travis, "The Women in Print Movement," 279-280.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD
Name of Property
Tompkins County, NY
County and State
05000018
NR Reference Number

publication that “united not only booksellers, but Women in Print activists from every part of the communications circuit for nearly twenty-five years.”<sup>36</sup> As Hogan further observes of the connections forged at the first Women in Print conference: “This conversation among the bookwomen grew into a feminist literary advocacy network that would change both the vocabularies of feminism and reading and publishing in the United States.”<sup>37</sup>

The Second National Women in Print Conference was held in Washington, D.C., in 1981. Significantly, approximately twenty-five women of color involved in publishing attended. Black feminist writer and activist Barbara Smith announced Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, “the first publisher owned and operated by, for and about women of color.”<sup>38</sup> Kitchen Table was founded in Boston, Massachusetts, at an October 1980 meeting of African American and Afro-Caribbean women in response to the fact that, at the time, writing by women of color was not noticed by the literary and academic establishments or the general reading public. The press sought to be a publisher for all women of color, a resource network for women of color worldwide, and an agent of political change via a women of color controlled means of communication.<sup>39</sup> The third and final iteration of the conference was held in 1985 in San Francisco, California, and focused largely on skill-sharing.<sup>40</sup>

Small women’s presses and feminist bookstores worked in tandem within the movement, and, by the 1980s, there was a women’s bookstore in nearly every major city throughout New York State. Bookstores provided presses with a stable retail outlet for their publications as well as providing space for book tours, readings, workshops, and the general creation of community and exchange of information. Titles by white heterosexual women tended to be the most marketable, but presses such as Aunt Lute, Crossing, Firebrand, Kitchen Table, and Persephone foregrounded works by lesbians and/or women of color.

As Hogan observes, “the bookstores and presses, interdependent, were both necessary. While the presses worked to publish, reprint, and distribute women’s work, the bookstores gathered this physical evidence for the energy of women’s authorship and artwork.”<sup>41</sup> Women’s bookstores were also community spaces where ideas from feminist books and periodicals were read, discussed, argued over, and put into practice. The first feminist bookstore in the United States, Information Center Incorporate (ICI): A Woman’s Place, located in Oakland, California, opened in 1970. By 1977, there were approximately

<sup>36</sup> Travis, “The Women in Print Movement,” 288.

<sup>37</sup> Kristen Hogan, *The Feminist Bookstore Movement: Lesbian Antiracism and Feminist Accountability* (Durham: Duke UP, 2016), 30.

<sup>38</sup> Julie R. Enszer, “The Whole Naked Truth of Our Lives: Lesbian-Feminist Print Culture From 1969 Through 1989” (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2013), 204.

<sup>39</sup> Smith, “A Press of Our Own,” 153-155.

<sup>40</sup> Pam Mitchell, “Controversy & Dialogue at Women in Print,” *Gay Community News*, June 22, 1985.

<sup>41</sup> Hogan, *The Feminist Bookstore Movement*, 9.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD
Name of Property
Tompkins County, NY
County and State
05000018
NR Reference Number

eighty-six feminist bookstores, and by 1978, there were ninety-six.<sup>42</sup> Women's bookstores were, in short, important historic sites in the context of women's liberation that essentially functioned as resource centers in addition to their commercial purposes.

Women's presses and bookstores also showed mainstream commercial publishers, perhaps inadvertently, that there was a market for feminist books. Due to the changing economics of the book trade in the mid-to-late 1990s, women-owned presses and bookstores declined when large publishing houses began to produce works by women in greater numbers and big box retailers, such as Borders and Barnes & Noble, increasingly carried titles with feminist, LGBT, and anti-racist content. Chain stores and the rise of internet retail further diverted business away from feminist bookstores and diminished their numbers. As queer geographer Jen Jack Giesecking observes, "like most LGBTQ businesses—once a central part of the American urban landscape from the 1970s through the 2000s—LGBTQ bookstores (and presses and publishers) are steadily disappearing."<sup>43</sup> By the 1990s, few women's presses founded during the 1970s and 1980s remained. Feminist publishing thus saw an ideological shift in focus from revolutionary social change to the promotion of print culture as a lifestyle.<sup>44</sup>

### **Gay Liberation and the Women's Movement in Ithaca**

The City of Ithaca and Cornell University have a rich history of gay and lesbian (LGBT) and feminist organizing. The Cornell Student Homophile League, the second gay student organization in the United States, was founded in May 1968. By 1970, the organization changed its name to Cornell Gay Liberation Front (GLF) to reflect the "out and proud" stance of the broader Gay Liberation Movement.<sup>45</sup>

Cornell GLF initially met in 24 Willard Straight Hall, the student union located on Cornell's central campus, but students had few expressly gay spaces in which to socialize. When a new bar, Morrie's, opened at 409 Eddy Street in Collegetown in the spring of 1969, gay and lesbian Cornellians decided to make the space their own. Morris F. Angell, the bar owner, initially welcomed their business but became hostile over fears that Morrie's growing reputation as a gay bar would damage his involvement in local Democratic politics. Following multiple instances of discrimination wherein Angell ejected Cornell GLF members from his bar, the organization called for a boycott. Conflict between the bar and gay and lesbian students and local residents culminated in a 200-300 person demonstration on October 15, 1970,

<sup>42</sup> Hogan, *The Feminist Bookstore Movement*, 6; 37-38.

<sup>43</sup> Jen Jack Giesecking, "LGBTQ Spaces and Places," in *LGBTQ America: A Theme Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer History*, ed. Megan E. Springate (Washington, D.C.: National Park Foundation, 2016), chapter 14, page 26.

<sup>44</sup> Travis, "The Women in Print Movement," 288-292.

<sup>45</sup> "Name Change," *Cornell Gay Liberation Front News*, Vol. 2, No. 2, October 1970; Betsy Brenner, "An Invisible Minority: Gay Cornellians," *The Cornell Daily Sun*, April 20, 1972.



**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD
Name of Property
Tompkins County, NY
County and State
05000018
NR Reference Number

considered the first protest in the United States organized by gay students.<sup>46</sup> By March 1971, Cornell GLF concluded its boycott after Angell, following negotiations with the organization, issued an apology.<sup>47</sup>

Some gay and lesbian students were less interested in taking over bars and thought both gay students and community members needed a space they controlled.<sup>48</sup> Under the leadership of Cornell GLF, the Ithaca Gay People's Center opened at Sheldon Court on 410 College Avenue in April 1972 (the center relocated to 306 East State Street in 1975). Open to students at Cornell, Ithaca College, and local residents, the Gay People's Center became the place from which Cornell GLF enacted the four central facets of its mission: education, peer counseling via the organization's "Gayline," social opportunities, and political engagement. The center was jointly financed by the university, Cornell GLF, and the Graduate Coordinating Council.

In the 1970s, Tompkins County was also home to Lavender Hill, a lesbian and gay commune in Newfield, a town located just southwest of the city of Ithaca. The eighty-acre property, located on Tupper Road, was purchased in 1973 by the Lavender Hill Corporation. Members of the group, who formerly lived in a communal house in the Catskills and on Staten Island, wanted to relocate to a rural setting to further their experiment of collective living.<sup>49</sup> The group chose Ithaca, in part, because Cornell had a gay student organization. In 1977, Lavender Hill member and writer Larry Mitchell founded a small gay press, Calamus Books, which he initially ran out of several spare bedrooms in a residence he owned at 323 North Geneva Street in downtown Ithaca.<sup>50</sup> Mitchell's first and most successful book, *The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions*, published by Calamus in 1977, is part gay liberation fable, part radical manifesto, and largely based on his experiences at Lavender Hill.<sup>51</sup> Fellow Lavender Hill member Ned Asta created the book's illustrations in Mitchell's North Geneva Street house in the second floor front room with a bay window that looked out onto the street.

The Cornell Women's Studies Program, founded in 1982, was the first at an Ivy League university.

<sup>46</sup> Genny Beemyn, "The Silence is Broken: A History of the First Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual College Student Groups," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 21, no. 2 (2003): 220-221.

<sup>47</sup> "The Lowdown On Morrie's," *Cornell Gay Liberation Front News*, Vol. 2, No. 3, November-December 1970; Philip Dixon, "Gay Liberation Front Calls Boycott Against Morrie's," *The Cornell Daily Sun*, December 3, 1970; "Boycott Morrie's," *The Cornell Daily Sun*, December 4, 1970; "GLF Concludes Boycott of Bar," *The Cornell Daily Sun*, March 1, 1971; Betsy Brenner, "An Invisible Minority: Gay Cornellians," *The Cornell Daily Sun*, April 20, 1972.

<sup>48</sup> "An Intergenerational Conversation With Gay Activist Ken Popert," Think Queerly Podcast Leadership Interview with Co-Host, Jeff Iovannone, January 26, 2022. <https://thinkqueerly.com/an-intergenerational-conversation-with-gay-activist-ken-popert-58296cdfa17c>.

<sup>49</sup> Ned Asta, interview by Jeff Iovannone, March 21, 2023.

<sup>50</sup> Calamus Books informational leaflet, 1977. Larry Mitchell Papers, #7820. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. Box 1, Folder 33.

<sup>51</sup> Lavender Hill Farm has been determined eligible for the National Register and a nomination is forthcoming.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD
Name of Property
Tompkins County, NY
County and State
05000018
NR Reference Number

Women were excluded from traditional academic disciplines, and in 1969, author and activist Sheila Tobias organized a feminist conference at Cornell, which drew 2,000 attendees. The conference, in addition to a spring 1970 course entitled “The Evolution of Female Personality,” prompted graduate students to organize for additional courses and workshops. This led faculty to form an ad hoc committee focused on women’s studies.<sup>52</sup>

Feminist students connected with community activists such as those involved in the City Federation of Women’s Organizations, among others. The federation, originally founded in 1910, owned and operated the Women’s Community Building, which had opened at a new location at 100 West Seneca Street on February 14, 1960. Its goal was “to act as a catalyst for the improvement of the lives of women in Tompkins County.”<sup>53</sup> By the mid-to-late 1970s, the Women’s Community Building was home to approximately forty community organizations, offered a variety of classes and programs, and served as a meeting place for any social group (for a small fee).<sup>54</sup>

The *Women’s Resource Guide to Ithaca*, published in June 1976 through the Office of the Dean in Cornell’s College of Arts and Sciences, compiled a variety of women’s services and spaces that existed for women in Ithaca at the time. It covered such diverse areas as political groups, women’s publications (including writing groups, libraries, and bookstores), meeting places, community centers, arts & crafts, and women’s music.<sup>55</sup> The diversity of women’s identities was acknowledged through inclusion of resources such as the Gay People’s Center (then located at 306 East State Street) and the Southside Community Center (which serves Ithaca’s Black community). In the area of publications, the guide lists the Ithaca Women’s Center Library (located at 101 North Geneva Street), the Women’s Studies Library, located in Room 431 of Cornell’s White Hall, *Women Writing*, a newsletter that provided information about women’s feminist presses that was published in Newfield, New York, and Smedley’s Bookshop (located at 119 East Buffalo Street).<sup>56</sup>

Smedley’s, according to the guide, was “a feminist and socialist bookstore committed to women, politics, beauty, and fun. The titles range from the intensely personal to the widely social. They [the bookstore] are working toward positive alternative ways to make life more livable.”<sup>57</sup> Smedley’s first opened in 1976 under the ownership of a Marxist-feminist collective and was named after the journalist,

<sup>52</sup> Kathy Hovis, “‘Still a long way to go’: Looking back on the start of women’s studies at Cornell,” Department of History website, November 1, 2021. <https://history.cornell.edu/news/still-long-way-go-looking-back-start-womens-studies-cornell>.

<sup>53</sup> Judy Jensvold, “Federation’s work has strengthened women’s voices,” *The Ithaca Journal*, April 8, 1988.

<sup>54</sup> *Women’s Resource Guide to Ithaca*, Office of the Dean, College of Arts and Sciences, Cornell University, June 1976, 105. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

<sup>55</sup> The *Women’s Resource Guide* was only published once in 1976 and was compiled by Diane Brown, Susan Gumbiner, Caryn Spector, and Beth Willensky.

<sup>56</sup> *Women’s Resource Guide to Ithaca*, 77-78.

<sup>57</sup> *Women’s Resource Guide to Ithaca*, 78.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD
Name of Property
Tompkins County, NY
County and State
05000018
NR Reference Number

feminist, and spy, Agnes Smedley. At that time, the bookshop was collectively owned and operated by Harriet Bronsnick (later, Alpert), Kate Dunn, and Camille Tischler.<sup>58</sup> Tamar Asedo Sherman, writing for the *Ithaca Journal*, described Smedley's original location as follows:

The bookshop's entranceway is lined with periodicals not sold anywhere else and with various posters and notices of interest to the feminist community. The larger main room includes sections of Afro-American and Native American literatures, struggles in the Third World, gay liberation, and books related to alternate lifestyles such as vegetarian cookery, alternate energy, building your own house and repairing your own car. One corner is set aside for non-sexist children's books... Smedley's is more than just a bookstore. It is also an information center. A table and chairs sit in the middle of the main room and customers are encouraged to sit down with a cup of coffee and read or talk. Men are as welcome as women.<sup>59</sup>

In 1981, the collective sold the business to writer and editor Irene "Zee" Zahava, who turned Smedley's into a more all-encompassing women's bookstore. In 1984, the bookshop moved from 119 East Buffalo Street to 307 West State Street.<sup>60</sup> Under Zahava's ownership, Smedley's was not only a bookstore, but served as a gathering place, information center, and haven for all kinds of women. In addition to books, the small store sold every women's periodical available at the time, women's music, and featured a community bulletin board that acted as a vibrant women's communication network.<sup>61</sup>

Cornell students often learned about Smedley's from Biddy Martin, then an out lesbian assistant professor in the German department, who started a gay and lesbian studies reading group.<sup>62</sup> Lisa L. Moore, a PhD student in English literature at Cornell during the 1980s, remembers Smedley's vividly:

On Friday afternoons I made my way down the infamously steep Buffalo Street hill—trudging if I was lucky, slipping on the ice and sliding down the precipice on my butt for half a block if I was not—to face a quiet weekend. Smedley's Bookshop on State Street was my rest stop. The

<sup>58</sup> Yntema, "Smedley's Bookshop Part 1-1976," *Ithaca Area Bookstores*, 99-101.

<sup>59</sup> Tamar Asedo Sherman, "In the Interest of Women and Politics," *The Ithaca Journal*, October 28, 1976.

<sup>60</sup> Nanci A. Hoetzlein, "Giving voice to women's words," *The Ithaca Journal*, April 28, 1990; Wendy Skinner, "Feminist bookstore's spirit will live in writing center," *The Ithaca Journal*, August 26, 1994; "Smedley's Bookshop, 307 West State Street," Ithaca LGBTQ History Walking Tour. <https://pocketsights.com/tours/place/Smedleys-Book-Shop-307-West-State-Street-23861:2959>.

<sup>61</sup> *Women's Resource Guide to Ithaca*, Office of the Dean, College of Arts and Sciences, Cornell University, June 1976, 105. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library; Nanci A. Hoetzlein, "Giving voice to women's words," *The Ithaca Journal*, April 28, 1990; Wendy Skinner, "Feminist bookstore's spirit will live in writing center," *The Ithaca Journal*, August 26, 1994; "Smedley's Bookshop, 307 West State Street," Ithaca LGBTQ History Walking Tour. <https://pocketsights.com/tours/place/Smedleys-Book-Shop-307-West-State-Street-23861:2959>. Irene "Zee" Zahava, interview by Jeff Iovannone, April 12, 2023.

<sup>62</sup> Lisa L. Moore, "The Dream of a Common Bookstore," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, April 20, 2013. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-dream-of-a-common-bookstore/>. Martin later became the Provost of Cornell University from July 1, 2000 until August 31, 2008.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD
Name of Property
Tompkins County, NY
County and State
05000018
NR Reference Number

store was located in an 1860s wood-frame house like so many in that part of town. The owner, Irene “Zee” Zahava, lived upstairs, and she was always there. I don’t remember ever seeing an employee. I would come into the warmth of the store from the biting wind and freezing temperatures, stomp the snow off my fleece-lined boots, loosen my face-shrouding hood and drop my giant pink down-filled coat in the entryway. Thus unburdened, I would browse for an hour or so. I usually bought the papers in order to get the news about my new lesbian world: *Sojourner*, *Off Our Backs* (and later *On Our Backs*, its naughty younger sister), and *Gay Community News* for the Alison Bechdel cartoons. If I had some cash I might buy pleasure reading: novels like Isabel Miller’s *Patience and Sarah* or Andrea Freud Loewenstein’s *This Place*, an anthology of lesbian poetry called *Naming the Waves*.<sup>63</sup>

The feminist community that formed around Smedley’s helped to nurture the political career of activist and organizer Roey Thorpe, an organizer and doctoral candidate in U.S. women’s history at SUNY Binghamton, who, in 1994, became the first openly gay person elected to the City of Ithaca Common Council.<sup>64</sup> Thorpe also taught a course on lesbian history geared towards community members, as opposed to an academic audience, at Smedley’s. Her approach incorporated both social history and works of literature, including *The Well of Loneliness*, *Stone Butch Blues*, *The Price of Salt*, Ann Bannon’s Beebo Brinker novels, local author Claudia Brenner’s memoir *Eight Bullets* (published by Firebrand Books), and writings by Joan Nestle, Audre Lorde, and Gloria Anzaldúa.<sup>65</sup>

Smedley’s regularly hosted events featuring notable feminist writers who spoke at Cornell and then gave free community readings at the bookstore. As Zahava remembers of the poetry readings she hosted, “the poets who would come from out of town [to do readings at Smedley’s] were like rock stars. It wasn’t a poetry-being-shunted-off kind of thing. And especially Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde. The poetry was very elevated.”<sup>66</sup> Several of these writers, including Dorothy Allison, Cheryl Clarke, and Audre Lorde, were published by Firebrand Books. The local relationship between Firebrand and Smedley’s (Firebrand published authors whose books Smedley’s would then sell) was a microcosm of the larger Women in Print Movement.<sup>67</sup>

Smedley’s closed in August of 1994 with plans to transition the business into the Emma’s Writing Center for Women. “When Smedley’s first opened,” Zahava told the *Ithaca Journal*, “it really was the only source for a lot of things. Now you can get almost everything I carried at other bookstores in

<sup>63</sup> Moore, “The Dream of a Common Bookstore,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, April 20, 2013.

<sup>64</sup> Wendy Skinner, “Bringing new energy to council: Alderwoman Roey Thorpe works for change,” *The Ithaca Journal*, January 21, 1994.

<sup>65</sup> Wendy Skinner, “Bringing new energy to council: Alderwoman Roey Thorpe works for change,” *The Ithaca Journal*, January 21, 1994; Roey Thorpe, interview by Jeff Iovannone, April 19, 2023.

<sup>66</sup> Quoted in Moore, “The Dream of a Common Bookstore,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, April 20, 2013.

<sup>67</sup> Travis, “The Women in Print Movement,” 279.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD
Name of Property
Tompkins County, NY
County and State
05000018
NR Reference Number

town.”<sup>68</sup> In addition to Smedley’s, Ithaca and Tompkins County have been a center of bookselling since the early nineteenth century. Sharon K. Yntema, a local historian of Ithaca area bookstores, observes that in the two-hundred-year period between 1819 and 2019, Ithaca was home to fifty-four bookstores of substance, with twenty-seven in existence since 1975. Many of these stores also operated small, independent presses.<sup>69</sup>

**Nancy K. Bereano**

Nancy Kirp Bereano was born on August 17, 1942, to a middle-class Jewish family in the Bronx (Figure 2.10). She earned a bachelor’s degree in English from Queens College and moved to Ithaca during the 1960s, when her then-husband, Philip Bereano, secured a teaching position in Cornell University’s engineering department. Bereano became involved in the local anti-war movement and welfare organizing, but she was not initially involved in the women’s movement or gay liberation.

Institutional changes at Cornell following the takeover of Willard Straight Hall by the Afro-American Society on April 18, 1969, provided Bereano the opportunity to deepen her activism. In response to student demands, Cornell established the Human Affairs Program (HAP), “an interdisciplinary and interdepartmental program that provided students with theoretical and practical instruction in human and social problems across various communities.”<sup>70</sup>

In 1970, HAP funded The Storefront, a consumer advocacy and information center focused on welfare rights located at 140 West State Street, where Bereano worked as a welfare counselor, legal advisor, and, by 1977, coordinator of the organization. HAP allowed students to engage in community service for academic credit, and Bereano taught a course on the politics of the American welfare system. It was through her work with HAP that she formed connections with women who introduced her to feminism. Bereano’s involvement in the women’s movement led her to her lesbian identity and then to LGBT culture, liberation, and to feminist books.<sup>71</sup>

On May 15, 1972, Bereano and five other women, all mothers of young children, organized a blockade of Ithaca’s Selective Services Office to protest Richard Nixon’s mining of the harbor at Haiphong, Vietnam. The six women were arrested and charged with fourth-degree criminal trespass (the charges

<sup>68</sup> Skinner, “Feminist bookstore’s spirit will live in writing center,” *The Ithaca Journal*, August 26, 1994.

<sup>69</sup> Yntema, *Ithaca Area Bookstores*, 10-11.

<sup>70</sup> Cornell University Human Affairs Program records, #53-29-4281. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

<sup>71</sup> Lew Perdue, “‘Storefront’: Social Services Clearinghouse,” *Ithaca Journal*, July 29, 1970; Tamar Sherman, “Storefront Needs Public Support for Survival,” *Ithaca Journal*, July 16, 1974; George Zachar, “Storefront Will Close,” *Ithaca Journal*, September 15, 1977; Carol Eisenberg, “High Demand Seen in Legal Services for Poor,” *Ithaca Journal*, January 27, 1979; Cornell University, Society for the Humanities, “Rural Poetics: Part 2 with Nancy Bereano,” July 28, 2021. <https://societyhumanities.as.cornell.edu/pod-s01-e08>.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD
Name of Property
Tompkins County, NY
County and State
05000018
NR Reference Number

were later dropped) as they sang “We Shall Overcome” in the police station.

Bereano worked for The Storefront for eight years until the center closed in 1978. Newly divorced and in need of employment, she applied and was offered a job editing the Feminist Series at Crossing Press, a small publishing house founded by Ithaca College English professors John and Elaine Gill, then located in Trumansburg, New York (the press later relocated to Freedom, California). Her work as an editor had a profound effect on her emerging feminist and lesbian consciousness. As she explains:

It totally changed my life. I came out at the same time that I was doing this. Each book took me to a different place. I was reading all of these amazing magazines, a plethora of wonderful feminist magazines existed at the time. So there was always new literature to read as well as articles that talked about substantive things that you had to then stop and think about—and what did this mean in terms of your life?<sup>72</sup>

Bereano published seventeen titles over her four years at Crossing. Despite bringing notoriety to the press through her keen editorial eye and acquisition of titles by emerging feminist icons like Michelle Cliff, Judy Grahn, Audre Lorde, and Pat Parker, she was fired in October 1984. Crossing incorrectly claimed the Feminist Series was not making enough money, though several titles in the series were Crossing’s bestsellers, and that Bereano’s dedication to the publication of lesbian books was “uppity.”<sup>73</sup> However, through her work at Crossing, Bereano had become one of the most well-known and respected editors of feminist and lesbian books in the country. After she informed her authors of her termination, one month later, in November 1984, she founded Firebrand Books in Ithaca with financial support from family and friends, including the well-known lesbian feminist poet Adrienne Rich and fellow Crossing editor Andrea Fleck Clardy. Some women’s presses founded during the Women in Print era operated as collectives, but Firebrand was established as a sole proprietorship.

In a letter to writer Dorothy Allison, dated October 12, 1984, Bereano explained the name of her press:

The name has been decided upon: Firebrand Books. It has an honorable linguistic history dating back to the 13th century; I like the sense of controlled fierceness it conveys; I can use a dragon (a much male-maligned creature) as a logo. After I leave Crossing on November 19th (it is doubtful that they will negotiate anything with me), my new address will be Nancy K. Bereano, Firebrand

<sup>72</sup> Nancy K. Bereano, interview by Jeff Iovannone, September 27, 2019; *The Humanities Pod*, “Rural Poetics: Part 2 with Nancy Bereano.”

<sup>73</sup> David Green, “Crossing Press: First to Publish an Anthology of Poems by Homosexuals,” *Ithaca Journal*, May 3, 1975; Judith Horstman, “A Requiem for Kosmos: the ‘60s Are Gone,” *Ithaca Journal*, December 29, 1977; Nancy K. Bereano letter to Dorothy Allison, October 12, 1984; Firebrand Books Records, #7670. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library, Box 28, Folder 24; Nancy K. Bereano letter to Julia Penelope, October 15, 1984; Firebrand Books Records, #7670. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library, Box 33, Folder 1; Nina Nirenberg, “Crossing Press Continues its Long Journey,” *Ithaca Journal*, February 28, 1986.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD
Name of Property
Tompkins County, NY
County and State
05000018
NR Reference Number

Books, 141 The Commons, Ithaca, New York 14850.<sup>74</sup> Bereano chose the second floor of 143 East State Street (listed under the address 141 The Commons) as the business headquarters of her press. The prominent location of The Commons made the building an ideal choice for Bereano who, true to the name “Firebrand,” wanted to make her mark on the publishing world. Firebrand author Jewelle Gomez explains the significance of the press’s location as follows, linking the history of social justice movements and print culture in Ithaca and Tompkins County:

As a landmark literary organization, Firebrand found its home on The Commons in Ithaca which was most fortuitous. The intellectual community which had fostered the movement for women’s rights was still alive and well one hundred years after Suffragists came to Tompkins County. Just as the area’s granges had facilitated rural women moving into decision-making positions, publishing helped women find their own voices to support the democratic principles on which our country was founded.<sup>75</sup>

In 1985, Bereano attended the third Women in Print Conference, which had an important influence on her early years as a publisher, namely Firebrand’s commitment to anti-racism and publishing women writers of all identities. At the conference, Bereano co-facilitated a workshop with Betty Powell of Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press on “The Politics of Survival: Women’s Publishing at Mid-Decade.”<sup>76</sup> The workshop spoke to the importance of longevity for feminist publishers and how the books they published allowed women readers to live more fully realized lives. It also secured Bereano’s commitment to anti-racism in feminist small press publishing.<sup>77</sup>

Crossing Press was disinterested in publishing the final titles Bereano acquired as editor of the Feminist Series. The authors, after learning of her firing, willingly transferred their contracts to the fledgling Firebrand Books. The making of a nationally significant feminist and lesbian press was well underway.<sup>78</sup>

### **Firebrand Books**

Firebrand’s headquarters was initially located in the second room (moving from front to rear, or, north to south) of 141-143 East State Street’s second floor. As the press grew in size and reputation, its operation expanded into the third and fourth rooms as well. At this time, the second room became Firebrand’s storage area, housing books and the records of the press. The third room was the office of Bereano’s

<sup>74</sup> Nancy K. Bereano letter to Dorothy Allison, October 12, 1984. Firebrand Books Records, #7670. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library, Box 28, Folder 24. Bereano ultimately chose a griffin, not a dragon, as Firebrand’s logo.

<sup>75</sup> Jewelle Gomez, Letter to Ithaca Landmarks Preservation Commission, August 12, 2022.

<sup>76</sup> Women in Print Third National Conference program. Firebrand Books records, #7670. Box 64, Folder 49. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

<sup>77</sup> “Third National Women in Print Conference,” *Off Our Backs*, August-September 1985.

<sup>78</sup> Nancy K. Bereano, interview by Jeff Iovannone, September 27, 2019.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD
Name of Property
Tompkins County, NY
County and State
05000018
NR Reference Number

administrative assistant and, sometimes, an intern (typically a student from Ithaca College or Cornell University). The fourth room was Bereano's personal office. Over its fifteen years in operation, Firebrand had one employee in addition to Bereano, plus freelance editors, proofreaders, and graphic designers who did not work on site. Bereano occasionally met with authors on the premises and sold books to women passing through Ithaca who telephoned the press. Bereano had an amicable relationship with her landlords, Robert and Nancy Avery, the building's owners and proprietors of the Home Dairy. This speaks to Ithaca's reputation as a regional and national center of small press publishing and as an LGBT-friendly and social justice-oriented city. The Averys did not find it particularly remarkable that their building housed the headquarters of a noted feminist, lesbian, and anti-racist press.<sup>79</sup> Firebrand Books published its first three titles in the spring of 1985 with three more following in September through October of that same year. The press had an explicitly lesbian and feminist focus and followed "an open submissions policy for manuscripts" that encouraged "inquiries about theory, fiction, and poetry."<sup>80</sup> Bereano continued to produce three to ten titles per year, and by 2000, Firebrand had 105 titles in print. The press acquired both local and national significance, influencing not only feminist and LGBT publishing but print culture as a whole, in that its popularity encouraged mainstream presses and booksellers to carry similar content.

Firebrand Books was nationally distinctive from other women's presses, such as Daughters, Inc. and Naiad, in several important ways. The press was founded with an expressly anti-racist sensibility. As such, Firebrand challenged the long-held idea that white women could not be allies to women of color.<sup>81</sup> At the 1985 Women in Print Conference, Bereano stood alongside a group of white women who supported the women of color in attendance after a rift occurred during one of the panels.<sup>82</sup> As Pam Mitchell, writing for *Gay Community News*, reported:

In the closing plenary session, one caucus after another expressed concern over the absence of women of color from the conference. The low level of participation by women of color—less than a dozen were present—and the lack of workshops addressing Third World and anti-racist issues was in marked contrast to the last Women in Print Conference... In a statement read at the plenary, the Women of Color criticized the exclusion from the conference of the category of writers.<sup>83</sup>

Of Firebrand's first three titles, released in 1985, *Mohawk Trail* by Beth Brant, *Moll Cutpurse* by Ellen Galford, and *Jonestown and Other Madness* by Pat Parker, two were by lesbians of color (Brant and Parker). Jewelle Gomez says the following of Bereano's commitment to publishing women writers of

<sup>79</sup> Nancy K. Bereano, interview by Jeff Iovannone, April 19, 2023.

<sup>80</sup> "Bereano Finds Firebrand," *Motherroot Journal*, Winter 1984.

<sup>81</sup> Beins, *Liberation in Print*, 9.

<sup>82</sup> *The Humanities Pod*, "Rural Poetics: Part 2 with Nancy Bereano."

<sup>83</sup> Pam Mitchell, "Controversy & Dialogue at Women in Print," *Gay Community News*, June 22, 1985.



**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD
Name of Property
Tompkins County, NY
County and State
05000018
NR Reference Number

diverse identities:

Firebrand Books... launched the careers of so many of us who were not those whites publishers focused on. We were the ones who'd been overlooked or rejected by the mainstream industry. As part of a global "Women in Print" movement of the 1980s and 1990s, Firebrand Books contributed to the world of literature by opening its doors and its presses to some of the most significant lesbian and transgender writers of that period... The number of young people studying the writers given a platform by Firebrand Books continues to grow. That is in part due to Nancy Bereano's ability to see that the millions of "others" that mainstream publishing chose to shortchange were the dedicated writers/readers/activists/voters who could change the world.<sup>84</sup>

Bereano's editorial sensibility and Firebrand's catalog included a wide variety of genres, blurring the line between "literary" and "popular" writing. Works of poetry, such as Cheryl Clarke's *Living as a Lesbian* (1986) and Minnie Bruce Pratt's *Crime Against Nature* (1990), and literary fiction, such as Dorothy Allison's short story collection *Trash* (1988) and Leslie Feinberg's novel *Stone Butch Blues* (1993), stood alongside compilations of Alison Bechdel's comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* and works of genre fiction like Jewelle Gomez's black lesbian vampire novel *The Gilda Stories* (1991), Karen Cadora's science fiction novel *Stardust Bound* (1994), or mystery novels by Marion Foster and Carole LaFavor.

Bereano regularly published writers with perspectives outside the urban geographic focus of the mainstream Women's and LGBT movements (New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco). Firebrand authors such as Dorothy Allison, Leslie Feinberg, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and Mab Segrest wrote from an explicitly Southern feminist or working-class perspective. The press, therefore, helped expand the consciousness of the Women's and LGBT movements beyond large, cosmopolitan cities.

Firebrand's proximity to Cornell University also helped Bereano elevate the profile of her publications through university-sponsored events and readings from authors such as Dorothy Allison, Beth Brant, and Joan Nestle. It was common for Firebrand authors to read at Smedley's Bookshop following their time at Cornell, thus supporting the local relationship between feminist publishing and bookselling. The press further engaged the local feminist and LGBT community by sponsoring a women's softball team, the Firebrand Flames. In return, members of the Flames volunteered to package and mail Firebrand's semi-annual catalogs, released every fall and spring.<sup>85</sup>

***Notable Firebrand Authors, Titles, and Awards***

Firebrand Books was a multiple award-winning press and helped launch and sustain the careers of noted authors, including Dorothy Allison, Alison Bechdel, Leslie Feinberg, Jewelle Gomez, Audre Lorde, and

<sup>84</sup> Gomez, Letter, August 12, 2022.

<sup>85</sup> Firebrand Books, Spring 1997. Firebrand Books catalogs, #7604. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD
Name of Property
Tompkins County, NY
County and State
05000018
NR Reference Number

Minnie Bruce Pratt, among others. While at Crossing Press, Bereano established a professional relationship with the eminent Black lesbian feminist poet Audre Lorde and suggested that she publish a volume of her collected essays and speeches. Lorde, who primarily saw herself as a poet, was reluctant but eventually agreed. The result was *Sister Outsider*, published by Crossing in 1984. Lorde asked Bereano to pen the introduction to the book, and the pair edited the manuscript at the Lesbian Herstory Archives when it was located in co-founder Joan Nestle's Upper West Side residence, 215 West 92nd Street, apartment 13A, in Manhattan.<sup>86</sup> *Sister Outsider* became, and remains, Lorde's most well-known and oft-read work and is a testament to Bereano's editorial instincts. When the small feminist press Persephone folded, Bereano, through Crossing, acquired and reprinted Lorde's memoir, or "biomythography," as she called it, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), the first autobiographical work authored by an out Black lesbian.<sup>87</sup> In 1988, Firebrand published a second volume of Lorde's essays, entitled *A Burst of Light*. The collection, a series of forceful and self-possessed meditations on Lorde's years-long battle against liver cancer, won the 1988 Before Columbus Foundation National Book Award. A new edition was released by AK Press in 2017.

Dorothy Allison's collection of semi-autobiographical short stories, *Trash* (1989), is based on her upbringing in Greenville, South Carolina, and touches on issues of social class, poverty, family violence, feminism, and Southern lesbian identity. "Publishing [Allison's] first book, *Trash*, made me understand just how good lesbian literature could be," observed Bereano, "I really understood at that point that the reason our books didn't get published by the mainstream had nothing at all to do with the quality."<sup>88</sup> Following the success of *Trash*, Allison secured a contract and advance from Dutton (an imprint of Penguin Books) for her novel *Bastard Out of Carolina*, which allowed her to complete the manuscript. *Bastard* became a finalist for the National Book Award in 1992.

Firebrand also helped propel lesbian cartoonist Alison Bechdel to mainstream recognition. Bechdel's syndicated comic strip, *Dykes to Watch Out For*, chronicled the lives of a group of lesbian and queer friends and ran in gay newspapers throughout the country beginning in 1983. Bechdel described the strip as, "half op ed column and half endlessly serialized Victorian novel."<sup>89</sup> Bereano approached Bechdel and proposed publishing a series of book-form strip collections of her comic. At the time, *Dykes to Watch Out For* was one of the earliest and most significant representations of lesbians in popular culture, and Firebrand published nine collections of the strip between 1986 and 2000.<sup>90</sup> Following Bechdel's career as a Firebrand author, her best-selling graphic memoir *Fun Home: A Family*

<sup>86</sup> Amanda Davis, "Joan Nestle Residence," NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, May 2018.

<https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/joan-nestle-residence/>.

<sup>87</sup> Cornell University, Society for the Humanities, "Rural Poetics: Part 2 with Nancy Bereano," July 28, 2021.

<sup>88</sup> Kanani Kauka, "A Life's Work: An Interview with Firebrand Books Publisher Nancy Bereano," *Lambda Book Report*, May 1997, 8.

<sup>89</sup> Quoted in Dwight Garner, "The Days of Their Lives: Lesbians Star in Funny Pages," *New York Times*, December 2, 2008.

<sup>90</sup> Garner, "The Days of Their Lives," *New York Times*, December 2, 2008.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD
Name of Property
Tompkins County, NY
County and State
05000018
NR Reference Number

*Tragicomic* was published by Houghton Mifflin in 2006 and was later adapted into a Tony Award-winning stage musical, which premiered Off-Broadway in 2013.

Minnie Bruce Pratt, a lesbian poet, essayist, and activist raised in Alabama, received the 1989 Lamont Poetry Prize (today known as the James Laughlin Award) for her collection of poetry *Crime Against Nature* (1990). Pratt's award is arguably the most historically significant honor received by a Firebrand author. The Lamont was one of the most prestigious poetry prizes in the nation, and Pratt's book was one of the first works of lesbian literature to receive recognition from the dominant literary establishment. *Crime Against Nature* explores Pratt losing custody of her sons after divorcing her husband and coming out as a lesbian during the 1970s. According to feminist scholar and poet Julie R. Enszer, "Pratt's award is significant because it was given to a book that is very political, to a poet who was intimately involved in lesbian print culture beginning in 1977, and to a book published by the feminist press, Firebrand Books."<sup>91</sup>

Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories*, the first Black lesbian vampire novel, was published by Firebrand in 1991. Beginning in Louisiana in 1850, the novel traces the life of its protagonist, Gilda, over the course of 200 years with each chapter set in a different historical period and geography. Unlike traditional patriarchal vampire mythology, Gilda is a benevolent vampire who leaves behind a useful thought or idea in return for the blood she takes from others. The novel won the 1992 Lambda Literary Award for both fiction and science fiction. Gomez later adapted the book for the stage, entitled *Bones & Ash: A Gilda Story*, which was performed by the Urban Bush Women, an African American women's dance company, in thirteen U.S. cities. The novel has been in print since its initial publication, and its success secured Gomez's place as one of the founding mothers of the literary genre today known as Afrofuturism. *The Gilda Stories* is currently being adapted for television by the noted Black lesbian director and screenwriter Cheryl Dunye.<sup>92</sup>

In 1996, Bereano herself was recognized with the Lambda Literary Publisher's Service Award for, in the words of the organization, "being in the forefront of lesbian and small press publishing for over ten years."<sup>93</sup> Firebrand received its first Lambda Literary Awards (or, "Lammies," as they were commonly known) the year the awards were founded in 1989: two for Allison's *Trash* in the categories of Lesbian Fiction and Small Press Book.<sup>94</sup> Between 1989 and 2000, Firebrand publications were awarded more "Lammies" than any other publishing house, a dozen in total.<sup>95</sup>

<sup>91</sup> Enszer, "The Whole Naked Truth of Our Lives," 20-21.

<sup>92</sup> Jewelle Gomez, *The Gilda Stories* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1991); Jewelle Gomez interview, 1998 #7662. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

<sup>93</sup> Firebrand Books Catalog, Spring 1997.

<sup>94</sup> Lambda Literary Awards Program, 1999. Firebrand Books records, #7670. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. Dorothy Allison, *Trash*, (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1988).

<sup>95</sup> Kauka, "A Life's Work," 1; 8-9.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD
Name of Property
Tompkins County, NY
County and State
05000018
NR Reference Number

Unlike many other women's presses founded during the 1970s and 1980s, Firebrand survived throughout the 1990s in part due to Bereano's publication of titles with queer and transgender, as opposed to specifically lesbian and feminist, content. Enszer further observes that, "as lesbian-feminist presses like Naiad and Firebrand forged into the 1990s, the works they published reflected new identity formations, focusing more on queer and lesbian than on the hybrid identity of lesbian-feminist."<sup>96</sup> Such titles included Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* and Riki Wilchins's *Read My Lips: Sexual Subversion and the End of Gender* (1997), a collection of essays that explored transsexual identity.

***Leslie Feinberg***

Leslie Feinberg was born on September 1, 1949, to a working-class Jewish family in Kansas City, Missouri. They relocated to Buffalo, New York, where Feinberg spent her formative years, shortly after her birth. She struggled with her gender nonconformity from a young age and, as a result, dropped out of school at age fourteen, working various low-wage jobs to support herself. Feinberg found community in Buffalo's factories and gay bars, despite the harassment she faced for her masculine gender expression. She joined Workers World Party (WWP), a Marxist–Leninist communist party, in 1973 through its Buffalo branch. Through her organizing with WWP, Feinberg began to examine the historical roots of transgender oppression. Building on WWP member Bob McCubbin's 1976 pamphlet "Roots of Gay and Lesbian Oppression," Feinberg developed the first Marxist analysis of transgender oppression, for which she became known. By 1974, Feinberg was living in New York City, "passing" as a man for reasons of safety, and employed as a writer for the Workers World newspaper, of which she eventually became managing editor.<sup>97</sup>

These early experiences shaped Feinberg's first, and most celebrated, book, *Stone Butch Blues*, a groundbreaking work about the complexities of gender. Published in 1993 by Firebrand Books, the novel tells the story of Jess Goldberg, a so-called "he-she" from a working-class background who, like Feinberg, comes of age in Buffalo. Despite similarities to Feinberg's own biography, she insisted the novel was a "work of fiction, written by an author who has lived the non-fiction."<sup>98</sup> According to Feinberg's longtime partner and spouse, Minnie Bruce Pratt, "Over the years, comrades and friends have related to Leslie through a range of pronouns. But Leslie's preferred pronouns with close friends and family were she/her and ze/hir."<sup>99</sup> Based on Feinberg's preferences and for readability, the pronouns she/her are used throughout this form.

<sup>96</sup> Enszer, "The Whole Naked Truth of Our Lives," 538.

<sup>97</sup> Minnie Bruce Pratt, "Transgender Pioneer and *Stone Butch Blues* Author Leslie Feinberg Has Died," *The Advocate*, November 17, 2014.

<sup>98</sup> Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues*, 20th anniversary edition (self-published by author, 2014).

<sup>99</sup> Pratt, "Transgender Pioneer and *Stone Butch Blues* Author Leslie Feinberg Has Died."

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD
Name of Property
Tompkins County, NY
County and State
05000018
NR Reference Number

*Stone Butch Blues*, released in March 1993, went on to win the 1994 Lambda Literary Award and the Stonewall Book Award-Barbara Gittings Literature Award from the American Library Association. It was translated into Chinese, Dutch, German, Italian, Slovenian, Turkish, and Hebrew. By 1996, the novel became Firebrand's bestseller with 30,000 copies, a significant number for a small feminist publishing house. *Stone Butch Blues* resonated with readers and became a touchstone feminist and LGBT text because, according to Bereano, "it opened transgender issues to a much wider audience than had existed before."<sup>100</sup> Feinberg became internationally known for her theoretical work on transgender oppression, as well as, in the words of Pratt, "her activism for workers' rights; lesbian, gay, bi, trans and queer liberation; the rights of women, prisoners and people with disabilities; and against racism and imperialism."<sup>101</sup>

Feinberg died on November 15, 2014, at age 65 from complications related to late-stage Lyme disease in the home she shared with Pratt in Syracuse, New York. In June 2023, the *New York Times* named *Stone Butch Blues* one of the most influential works of post-World War II queer literature.<sup>102</sup>

### ***Changes in the Publishing Industry and Bereano's Retirement***

Changes in the publishing and bookselling industry during the 1990s, namely the inclusion of books by women and LGBT authors in mainstream publishing houses and chain bookstores coupled with the rise of internet retail, forced Bereano to close Firebrand in 2000 and sell the press to her distributor, Logan Publisher's Consortium, in 2001. Bereano also felt that, by the late 1990s, gay readership had changed. Lesbian and gay readers wanted books that emphasized assimilation into the mainstream, whereas she had a different politics.<sup>103</sup> She didn't believe LGBT people were or should be just like everyone else. Rather, she thought that they should embrace their distinctiveness. Despite changes within the feminist and gay publishing industry, Firebrand had secured its reputation as a nationally recognized leader of the publishing revolution that occurred from the 1970s onward. Stephen Landesman, writing about Bereano's retirement for the *Ithaca Journal*, described Firebrand Books as a "widely renowned press," and, "one of the most prestigious lesbian, gay, and feminist publishers in the world."<sup>104</sup>

### ***Bereano After Firebrand***

Bereano continued her activism during her tenure as Firebrand's editor and publisher, demonstrating the intertwined nature of feminist publishing, advocacy, and politics. In 1984, she worked to ensure the passage of an ordinance that banned discrimination based on sexual orientation in Ithaca, one of the first

<sup>100</sup> Kauka, "A Life's Work."

<sup>101</sup> Pratt, "Transgender warrior Leslie Feinberg united all struggles for liberation."

<sup>102</sup> Kurt Soller, et al., "The 25 Most Influential Works of Postwar Queer Literature," *New York Times*, June 22, 2023, updated June 29, 2023.

<sup>103</sup> Stephen Landesman, "Firebrand founder speaks up: Gay publishing industry has changed, Ithacan says," *The Ithaca Journal*, May 9, 2001.

<sup>104</sup> Landesman, "Firebrand founder speaks up."

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD
Name of Property
Tompkins County, NY
County and State
05000018
NR Reference Number

United States municipalities to do so, and in 1991, she and other local activists successfully advocated for a Tompkins County-wide anti-discrimination law, known as “Local Law C.”<sup>105</sup>

Following Firebrand’s closure in 2000, Bereano returned to her community organizing roots. She volunteered for Tompkins County Hospicare (Hospice) and was a member of the Ithaca Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) Task Force and the Tompkins County Working Group on LGBT Aging. In 2004, through her role on the LGBT Task Force, she worked to support the rights of same-gender couples in Ithaca, though she was critical of marriage as a social and political institution. Local marriage equality advocacy resulted in the “Ithaca 50” lawsuit, wherein twenty-five same-gender couples sued the city and New York State based on rejected marriage applications. According to the History Center in Tompkins County, “this allowed the couples to sue the City of Ithaca (with the city officials’ ‘blessing’) under the claim that the marriage prohibition was unconstitutional,” and resulted in the New York Supreme Court case *Seymour v. Holcomb*. The case was defeated in the Court of Appeals in 2006, but it gained national attention for Ithaca as a leader in the fight for marriage equality.<sup>106</sup>

The entirety of Firebrand’s records, including the posters that lined the walls of its headquarters, were acquired by Cornell University’s Human Sexuality Collection, part of the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections in the Carl A. Kroch Library. Brenda Marston, Curator of the Human Sexuality Collection, long recognized Firebrand’s significant contributions to feminist and LGBT small press publishing and initiated talks with Bereano in 1996 regarding the eventual acquisition of its records.

A June 22, 2023, *New York Times* article, “The 25 Most Influential Works of Postwar Queer Literature,” recognized three books edited and/or published by Bereano: Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues*, Audre Lorde’s *Sister Outsider*, and Alison Bechdel’s *Dykes to Watch Out For*.<sup>107</sup> Most recently, on June 15, 2024, the City of Ithaca, in partnership with Friends of Firebrand Books, a group of the press’s advocates and supporters, revealed a historic marker on The Commons as a permanent testament to Firebrand’s legacy.

### **Conclusion**

Nancy K. Bereano’s Firebrand Books was one of the most revolutionary, renowned, and impactful small presses to emerge as part of the national LGBT and women’s movements and from the city of Ithaca and Tompkins County, which was a regional center of printing and publishing. Print culture was essential to

<sup>105</sup> Joel Simonetti, “County OKs gay rights law after debate,” *Ithaca Journal*, December 3, 1991.

<sup>106</sup> Nancy K. Bereano, “LGBT Boomers, get ready to age,” *Ithaca Journal*, April 18, 2005; Benedetta Luciana Sara Carnaghi, “How Ithaca played crucial role in gay marriage fight,” *Ithaca Voice*, October 30, 2015; Roger DuPuis II, “Gay Marriage and Ithaca: Peterson Defers to state,” *Ithaca Journal*, March 2, 2004; The History Center in Tompkins County, “LGBTQ+ History in Tompkins County,” <https://thehistorycenter.net/LGBT-history#:~:text=In%201984%20the%20City%20of,as%20%22Local%20Law%20C.%22>.

<sup>107</sup> Soller, et al., *New York Times*, June 22, 2023.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD

Name of Property  
Tompkins County, NY

County and State  
05000018

NR Reference Number

the establishment and growth of LGBT and women's movements and communities. From the 1970s through the 1980s, feminists and LGBT people had access to a variety of community-specific newsletters, newspapers, leaflets, pamphlets, journals, poetry, fiction and nonfiction books, and other publications. The Women in Print Movement also led to the founding of numerous small lesbian and feminist presses and women's bookstores across the country.

Firebrand Books was founded in Ithaca in 1984 out of the energy of these movements and Bereano's personal and professional commitment to getting quality lesbian and feminist books in print and into the hands of readers. Like other activists involved in Women in Print, she believed that books could change not only print media, but the dominant culture as a whole. The press's headquarters on The Commons retains a high level of integrity to Firebrand Books' tenancy and provides a tangible link to these important themes and events.

During its tenure, Firebrand was distinctive among other women's presses in numerous ways. It was founded, and operated under, an anti-racist philosophy; it published work in a wide range of genres by diverse authors; it had a broad geographic focus that expanded notions of women's lives; its proximity to Cornell enhanced its efficacy and reputation; it won multiple awards; and during the 1990s it published cutting-edge queer and transgender titles. At the time of Bereano's retirement and Firebrand's closure in 2000, the press had secured a reputation as a nationally recognized leader of the publishing revolution that occurred from the 1970s onward. The effects of Firebrand's legacy continue to be felt to this day.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD

Name of Property  
Tompkins County, NY

County and State  
05000018

NR Reference Number

**Figure 2.1.** North elevation (front) view of 141-143 East State Street, looking south. Photo by Jeff Iovannone, May 15, 2023.





**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD

Name of Property  
Tompkins County, NY

County and State  
05000018

NR Reference Number

**Figure 2.2.** View of 141-143 East State Street looking southwest down The Commons towards Cayuga Street. Photo by Jeff Iovannone, September 27, 2022.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD

Name of Property  
Tompkins County, NY

County and State  
05000018

NR Reference Number

**Figure 2.3.** East elevation view of 143 East State Street, looking southwest. Photo by Jeff Iovannone, May 15, 2023.



**Figure 2.4.** East elevation view of 143 East State Street depicting the two-story addition on the south, rear, elevation, looking southwest. Photo by Jeff Iovannone, May 15, 2023.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD

Name of Property  
Tompkins County, NY

County and State  
05000018

NR Reference Number



**Figure 2.5.** South elevation view of 143 East State Street, looking northwest. Photo by Jeff Iovannone, March 8, 2022.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

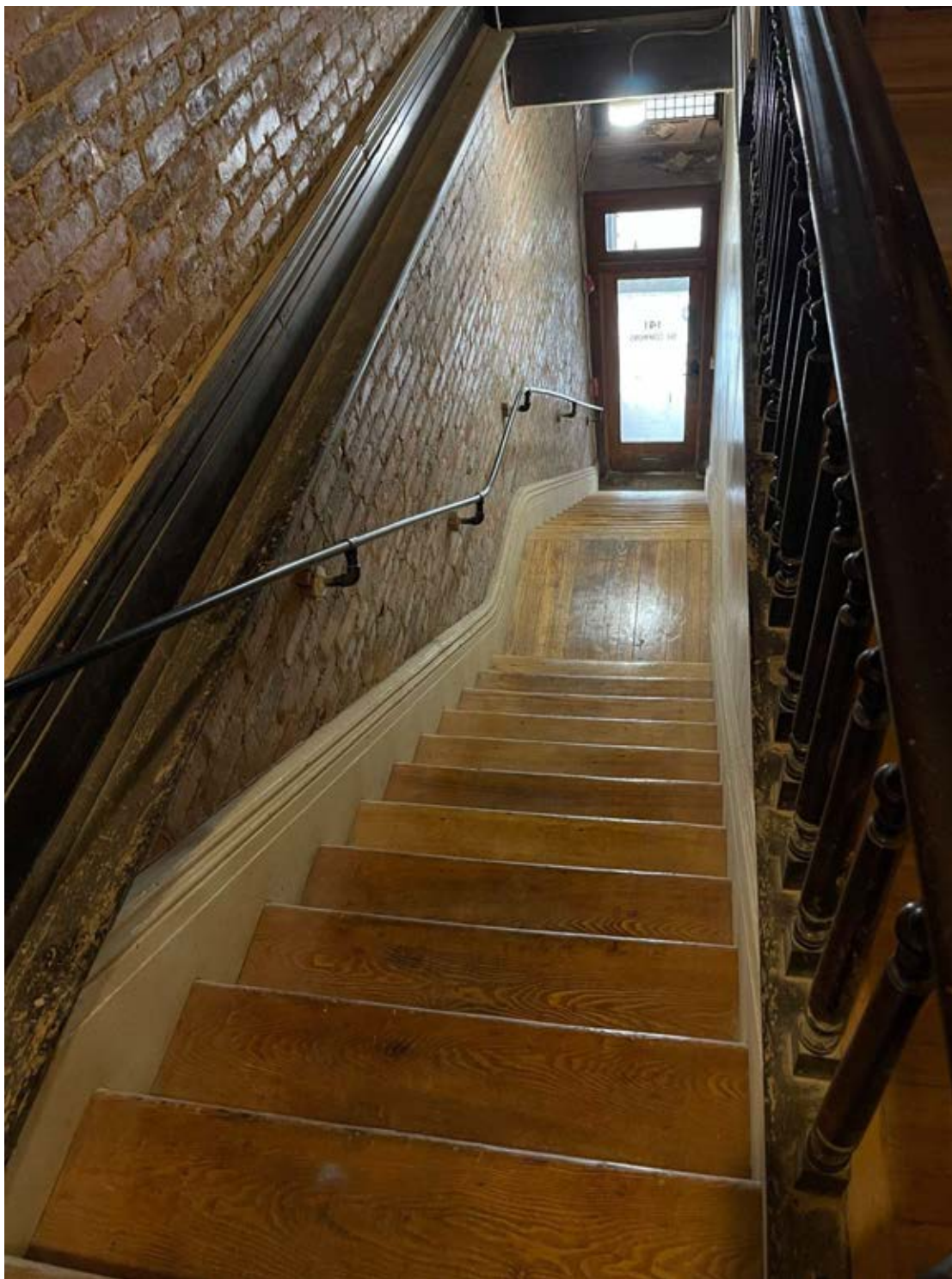
National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD

Name of Property  
Tompkins County, NY

County and State  
05000018

NR Reference Number



**Figure 2.6.** Staircase leading to the second floor of 141 East State Street (141 The Commons), looking north. Photo by Jeff Iovannone, April 18, 2023.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD

Name of Property  
Tompkins County, NY

County and State  
05000018

NR Reference Number



**Figure 2.7.** Second floor hallway of 141 East State Street (141 The Commons), looking south. Photo by Jeff Iovannone, April 18, 2023.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD

Name of Property  
Tompkins County, NY

County and State  
05000018

NR Reference Number



Figure 2.8. Second floor, second room of 141 East State Street (141 The Commons), looking northeast. Photo by Jeff Iovannone, April 18, 2023.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD

Name of Property  
Tompkins County, NY

County and State  
05000018

NR Reference Number



**Figure 2.9.** Interior photograph of the third room on 141 East State Street’s second floor that was the office of Nancy K. Bereano’s administrative assistant, Leigh Cotnoir. Kelly A. Zito, “Local fills alternative book gap,” *Ithaca Journal*, May 23, 1996.

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD

Name of Property  
Tompkins County, NY

County and State  
05000018

NR Reference Number



**Figure 2.10.** Portrait of Nancy K. Bereano, ca. 1990. Courtesy of Nancy K. Bereano.



**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD

Name of Property  
Tompkins County, NY

County and State  
05000018

NR Reference Number



Nancy K. Bereano in front of 141 The Commons, 2001

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD

Name of Property  
Tompkins County, NY

County and State  
05000018

NR Reference Number



Nancy K. Bereano is front of the Firebrand Books Marker, 2024

Photo by Shira Evergreen

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

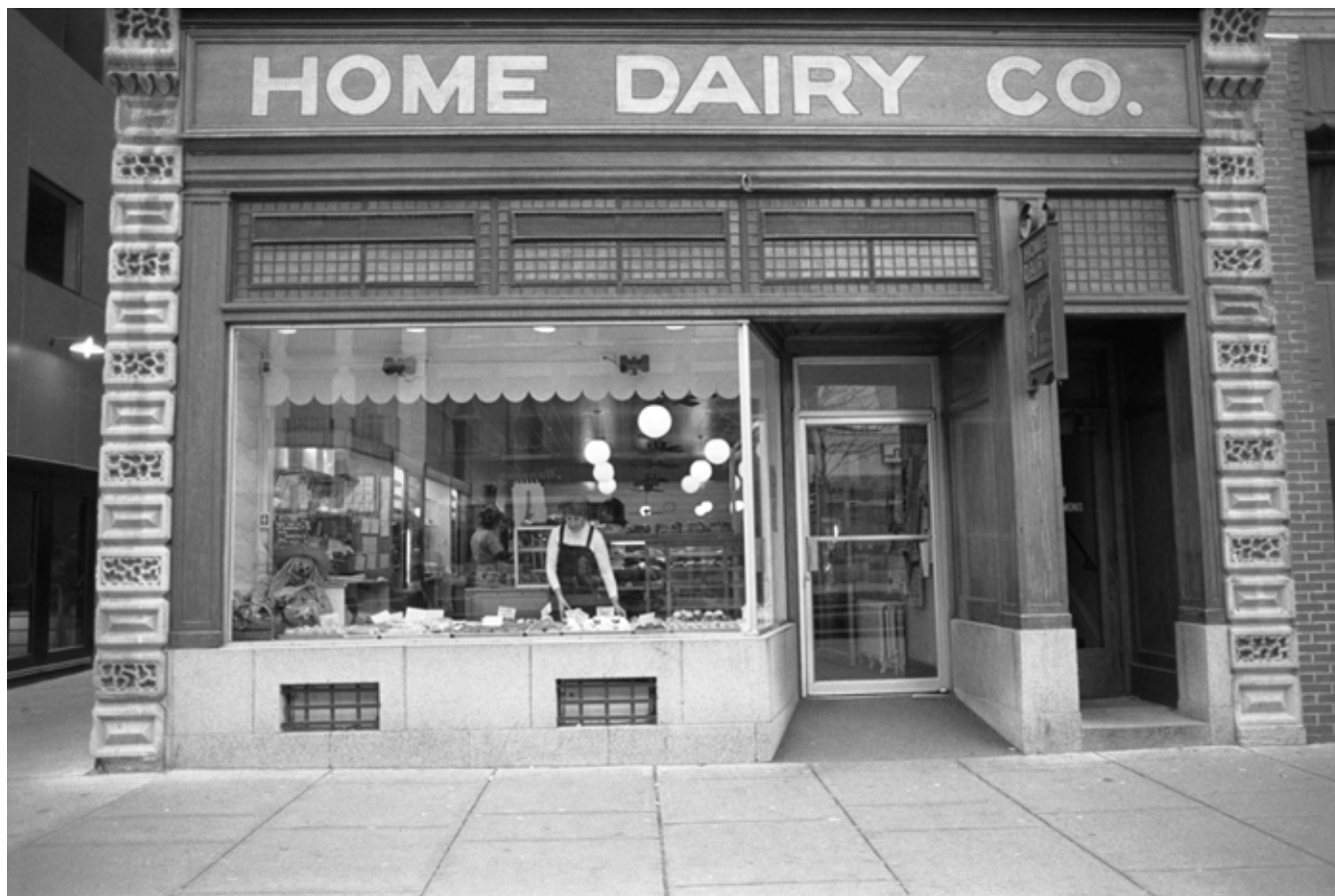
**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD

Name of Property  
Tompkins County, NY

County and State  
05000018

NR Reference Number



Building during the period Firebrand occupied it

**United States Department of the Interior**  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places**  
**Continuation Sheet**

Ithaca Downtown Historic District AD
Name of Property
Tompkins County, NY
County and State
05000018
NR Reference Number

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**Continuation Sheet**

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**Continuation Sheet**

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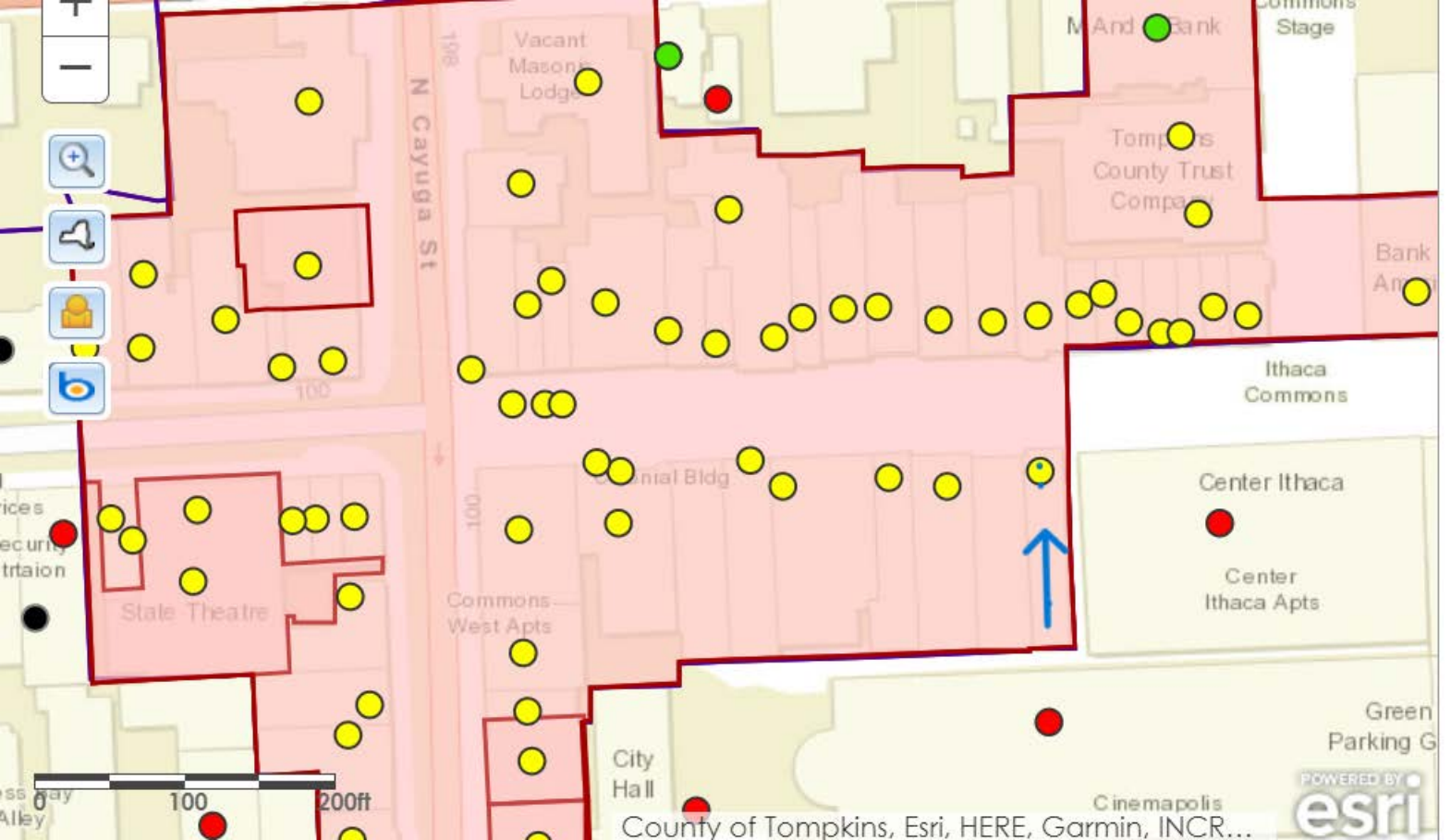
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Commons Stage

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Center Ithaca

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State Theatre

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