



Central Harlem West 130th-132nd Streets Historic District

Borough of Manhattan

Proposed Action: Proposed for Calendaring December 12, 2017



West 131st Street, South Side, Barrett Reiter (LPC), 2017

The proposed Central Harlem West 130th-132nd Streets Historic District consists of approximately 164 properties, primarily row houses with a handful of apartment and institutional buildings, located on the mid-blocks of West 130th, West 131st, and West 132nd Streets, between Lenox and Seventh Avenues. Constructed during the speculative building boom that created Central Harlem's row house neighborhoods in the late 19th century, this highly intact district illustrates not only the architectural development of Harlem, but the rich social, cultural, and political life of Harlem's African American population in the 20th century.

Development within the proposed district occurred rapidly in the final decades of the 19th century as transportation and infrastructure improvements made Harlem an attractive neighborhood for New Yorkers looking to escape the overcrowding of Lower Manhattan. Central Harlem became a residential enclave for the middle and upper-middle class at the close of the nineteenth century. In less than two decades, architects like Cleverdon & Putzel, Charles Baxter, and William J. Merritt built row houses with standardized designs and materials, primarily in the neo-Grec style, filling the once empty blocks with single-family homes sold to families of Dutch, German, and English heritage.

By the turn of the century, Harlem began to attract middle-class African American families moving north to escape the conditions of New York's Tenderloin District, which historically was one of the few areas open to black families. The proposed Central Harlem West 130th-132nd Street District remained almost exclusively white through the 1910s, but by the 1920s the neighborhood was primarily a middle-class African American neighborhood. The concentration of academics, reverends, doctors, activists, artists, actors, and musicians created the conditions that made this area home to an impressive variety of cultural, religious, civic, and political activity. Professional and social organizations such as the New Amsterdam Musical Association (NAMA) which is the oldest African-American musical association in the United States and the Alpha Physical Culture Club, the first all-black athletic club in the United States, sought to meet the needs of a community that was kept out of the equivalent "white-only" groups of Manhattan. As a microcosm of the African American experience in greater Harlem, the proposed district is not only significant for its contributions to the social and political history of the immediate area, but to the nation as a whole, due to its role as the location of the planning headquarters for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963, which remains the nation's largest political demonstration. This event was instrumental in spurring the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Today, the proposed Central Harlem West 130th-132nd Street Historic District is not only a significant enclave of residential architecture representative of Central Harlem's first major phase of development, but a remarkable reminder of the substantial role that the African American community of Harlem played in creating political and social change in New York City and the nation.