

# Dorrance Brooks Square Historic District

**Borough of Manhattan**

**Proposed Action:** Calendared February 2, 2021;  
Public Hearing April 20, 2021



**West 136th Street between Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Boulevard and Frederick Douglass Boulevard,**  
Landmarks Preservation Commission

As we approach the 100th anniversary of the Harlem Renaissance, the proposed Dorrance Brooks Square Historic District would recognize this neighborhood's significant association with notable African Americans in the fields of politics, literature, healthcare, and education during the Harlem Renaissance from the early 1920s to the 1940s. The proposed district consists of intact streetscapes of a striking variety of 19th and early-20th century row houses, multi-family dwellings, and institutions, designed by prominent New York City architects within two sections on either side of Frederick Douglass Boulevard between West 136th Street and West 140th Street.

Development in the proposed historic district was prompted by the arrival of elevated railway service along Frederick Douglass Boulevard (then Eighth Avenue) in 1868. Several decades later, anticipation of the new IND 8th Avenue subway line (B and C trains) which opened in 1932, spurred further development along Edgecombe and St. Nicholas Avenues. Row houses, designed predominantly in the Renaissance Revival, Queen Anne and Romanesque Revival styles, dominate the streets within the proposed historic district, while mixed-use buildings and multi-family dwellings are more common on the avenues. In the early-20th century, African Americans who had been pushed by discrimination and demolition out of neighborhoods on the west side of Manhattan such as San Juan Hill and the Tenderloin, began moving to Harlem, and by the 1920s, the neighborhood had become a community of middle-class African Americans, including notable intellectuals, artists, actors, educators, and doctors.

Dorrance Brooks Square was dedicated in 1925, named after the Black serviceman who died in action while serving with a segregated military regiment in the First World War, and was the first public place in New York City to honor an African American in this way. It was the site of many notable political protests starting in the 1920s, and two visits from Harry S. Truman in 1948 and in 1952 when he received an award for his civil rights achievements, including desegregating the U. S. Armed Forces.

Anchored by Dorrance Brooks Square, the proposed historic district was home to many prominent residents and institutions. Among those associated with literature and the arts were the intellectual and essayist W. E. B. Du Bois, stage and motion picture actress Ethel Waters, and celebrated sculptor Augusta Savage. Savage and other artists had studios in the neighborhood, such as the Harlem Artist Guild and the Uptown Art Laboratory. In the apartment building at 580 St. Nicholas Avenue, Regina Anderson, Luella Tucker and Ethel Ray Nance hosted the "Harlem West Side Literary Salon," known simply as "580" to those who attended, which helped foster the careers of notable Harlem Renaissance artists Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes and many others. At a time when discriminatory barriers denied African American doctors the same privileges as their white counterparts, two small hospitals were founded within the historic district by African American doctors to serve the Harlem community: The Vincent Sanitarium and Hospital, and the Edgecombe Sanitarium. Several African American medical practitioners resided in the neighborhood, including Dr. May Edward Chinn, the only Black female doctor practicing in Harlem in the 1930s. The block of West 137th Street between Frederick Douglass and Adam Clayton Powell Boulevards was named John Henrik Clarke Place in honor of the prominent historian and educator and pioneer of Pan African Studies, who lived there. Historian Charles Seifert founded the Ethiopian School of Research History on West 137th Street in 1920s, which later became the Charles C. Seifert Library.

With its highly intact streetscapes of late-19th century and early 20th century architecture and rich associations with the Harlem Renaissance and Civil Rights movements, the proposed historic district is an important reminder of both the early development of the neighborhood as well as the contributions of the African American community to the history of New York City and the nation.