

Baptist House of Prayer

Individual Landmark

78-82 West 126th Street



View of the Baptist House of Prayer. Photo: Melanie Nanez

The Baptist House of Prayer was founded in 1909 and has been holding services at 80-82 West 126th Street since the early 1970s. However, the history of the building stretches back to 1888, when famous dance instructor, George W. Wallace, commissioned architect, George Keister, to design a new dance academy in Central Harlem. Along with the school at 80-82 West 126th Street, Keister also designed a house for Wallace, at building 78 on the same block. Both buildings were completed in 1889 with contrasting architectural styles.

The school blended the style of an Italian villa with Romanesque Revival, featuring a brick facade with arched first floor openings, versus thick stone columns on the second floor. A large second floor window features stained glass transoms formed to mimic peacock tails and is wrapped with arched medieval columns made of bullnose brick. The only elements the school and house building share are identical stone stoops, and a combination of brick and stone facade basement levels.

The dance academy doubled as a rentable entertainment space until 1904. It contained a large hall, a bowling alley, and various studios that served the Harlem Wheelman bicycle club, the Barnard School for Girls' commencement exercises in 1898, and the Metropolitan Third Church of Christ Scientists Sunday services. George W. Wallace called the space the Ellerslie, and then the Ellsmere, in 1906. The building would go on to host the 10th anniversary

celebration of the School Commissioner, John A. Wilbur, and his wife in 1906, and a dance for the Colonial Bowling Club in 1909.

Wallace turned over operation of his dance academy to Roderick C. Grant in 1914, and in December of that same year, the Plantation Club, run by George and Connie Immerman, occupied the building. The nightclub served only white customers, with an all-black staff and entertainers. It competed with the Cotton Club by stealing away Cab Calloway for headliner entertainment. This resulted in the Plantation Club being vandalized by rival gangsters on January 16th, 1930, and the club owners paying an estimated \$25,000 to repair the damages. The Plantation Club closed in 1940 and sold its furniture and fixtures at auction.