

Dorrance Brooks Square Historic District

Historic District

West 136th-140th Streets between Frederick Douglass Boulevard and St. Nicholas Avenue

West 136th-137th Streets between Adam Clayton Powell Jr. and Frederick Douglass
Boulevards

Designation Date: June 15, 2021



Houses in the row from 233 through 261 West 137th Street. New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission Dorrance Brooks Square Historic District Designation Report. Photo by Jessica Baldwin, LPC, 2021.

As the nation celebrates the 100th anniversary of the Harlem Renaissance, the Dorrance Brooks Square Historic District is the only NYC Historic District named for an African American.

The Dorrance Brooks Square Historic District consists of approximately 325 buildings within two sections on either side of Frederick Douglass Boulevard, generally bounded by St. Nicholas Avenue to the west, West 140th Street to the north, West 136th Street to the south, and Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard to the east. The district features intact streetscapes of buildings designed by prominent New York City architects creating a striking collection of row houses, religious structures and apartment buildings designed in architectural styles popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in particular the Renaissance Revival, Queen Anne and Romanesque Revival styles. The residential enclave is significant for its 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.

Development in the 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. 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 in the early 20th century, and by the 1920s, middle-class African Americans, including notable intellectuals, artists, actors, educators, and doctors began to call this part of Harlem home.

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 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. DuBois, writer Nella Larsen, 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 and Langston Hughes.

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 Fredrick 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 the 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 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.

[Read the full NYC LPC designation report here.](#)

[Read our testimony supporting the designation here.](#)