

Hamilton Heights Historic District

Historic District

West 140th-145th Streets between St. Nicholas and Amsterdam Avenues

Designation Date: November 26, 1974



Quarters of FDNY Engine 80 Ladder 23. Photo by Jim Henderson, distributed under a [CC-BY 4.0 DEED license](#).

The land on which the Hamilton Heights Historic District is located was part of the Common Land of Harlem and known as Jachem Pietersen's Hills. Jochem Pietersen Kuyter was a Dane who, in 1639, was granted a 400-acre farm on the flat lands at the foot of these hills. In the mid-1650s, both Pietersen and his wife were killed by Indians, who claimed all of the lands north of 130th Street to Spuyten Duyvel. The Indian claims were finally settled in 1715, when a special tax was raised by the freeholders of Harlem to pay for the land.

During the 18th century, northern Manhattan attracted wealthy merchants of New York City who built country seats there because of the beautiful views it offered. The area in the Historic District north of West 142nd Street was within the estate of John Maunsell, a general in the British Army who was granted property about 1763 because of the part he played in the storming of Havana, Cuba, in 1762. Maunsell left this country in 1775, ostensibly to report to the British Government on conditions in the New York colony. However, in his personal correspondence, Maunsell states that the real reason he left New York was to avoid taking up

arms against the Americans, many of whom were his personal friends. He returned briefly in 1775 to bring his wife Elizabeth Stillwell, an American, back to Britain. Maunsell returned to New York in 1784, where he died in 1795.

During the Revolutionary War, several redoubts and breastworks were built just north of the Historic District. Three redoubts flanked Amsterdam Avenue between West 146th and 149th Streets, and three others flanked Broadway between West 145th and 149th Streets. They were interconnected by a maze of breastworks that stretched from the Hudson River to St. Nicholas Avenue, just north of West 146th Street. The district is located within the area where the Battle of Harlem Heights was fought in 1776. The battle raged between West 130th and 155th Streets and proved to be a victory for the Americans. The importance of the victory lay not so much in its strategic value, but in the invigorating effect that it had on the morale of the American forces who, until that time, had fared badly in their encounters with the British.

At the beginning of the 19th century, the area comprising the Historic District became part of the property of Alexander Hamilton, who built his country seat, The Grange, in 1801 near the southeast corner of West 143rd Street and Amsterdam Avenue. He named The Grange after the ancestral seat of his grandfather in Scotland and moved his family there in the spring of 1802. The house was moved to its present location on West 141st Street in 1889.

Hamilton was born in the West Indies in 1757 but left the islands in 1772 to further his education. In 1774 he entered Columbia, then King's College, and became noted as an orator and a pamphleteer. His strong respect for central authority limited him to denouncing the excesses of Parliament while affirming his allegiance to the King, an aspect of his conservative political philosophy which remained constant throughout his life. The main thrust of his service during the Revolutionary War was administrative rather than military. Serving for four years as George Washington's secretary, he re-organized the Continental Army, drew up a system of regulations for it, and conducted all the correspondence with Congress.

As a result of a reprimand from Washington, he resigned in 1781. He returned to New York, served in Congress from 1782-83, and settled down to a legal practice in the city, aided no doubt by the connections of his wife Elizabeth, the daughter of Philip Schuyler, a member of one of the most distinguished New York families. Convinced of the weakness of the central government set up by the Articles of Confederation, he began agitating to make it stronger.

In 1787 he was elected to the New York State Legislature and was a member of the state's delegation to the Second Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. Although the constitution that was drafted there fell short of his desires, he devoted a great deal of energy to its ratification, serving as co-author, with James Madison and John Jay, of the Federalist Papers, a detailed explanation of the new constitution and its virtues. These efforts guaranteed him a post in the new government.

As the first Secretary of the Treasury, a post to which he was named by President Washington, he demonstrated the same talents that had marked his tenure as Washington's secretary. He convinced Congress to assume the entire war debt, to impose severe taxes to cover it, and to establish the first Bank of the United States. His attempts to influence the

foreign policy, however, brought him into conflict with Thomas Jefferson, then Secretary of State. In 1795, financial pressures caused Hamilton to resign from Cabinet. His service as Inspector General of the Army from 1798–1800 was his last public office.

Although out of public office, Hamilton continued to try to influence policy through his personal contacts in the Cabinet of President Adams, and this led to a falling out between the two. In 1801, after the deadlocked election of the previous year, he overcame his dislike of Jefferson and supported him over Aaron Burr, whom he considered ambitious and ruthless. In 1804, Hamilton involved himself in politics one final time, vigorously and successfully opposing Burr's candidacy for governor of New York. The long history of animosity between the two men culminated in some statements attributed to Hamilton by Dr. Charles Cooper which Burr considered libelous; Burr demanded satisfaction, and a duel was fought on July 11, 1804, in Weehawken, New Jersey. Hamilton was shot in the duel and died the next day. He is buried in Trinity Church Graveyard.

Hamilton's life at The Grange encompassed the least political period of his life. Jefferson was President, and Hamilton had no influence in the Cabinet. He once again retired to his private law practice, enjoying what he called the "life of a common citizen and good paterfamilias." He left his wife and seven children, to whom he had written in 1803, the year before he died, "You see that I do not forget the Grange...nor anyone who inhabits it."

The Hamilton Heights Historic District remained largely rural until 1879, when Upper Manhattan began to develop as an urban area, because of the extension of rapid transit north of West 125th Street along Eighth Avenue (now Frederick Douglass Boulevard). The Great West Side Movement is generally considered to have begun in 1879, but in 1880 the development of the West Side was still largely restricted to individual entrepreneurs. Slowly, however, in the early 1880s speculative builders were attracted to the West Side. The demand for residential dwellings there had burgeoned because of the overflow from the East Side, where land values had increased spectacularly.

Two large sales of former estates, known as the Carman sale and the Jumel sale, also speeded the opening of the area to development. All of the row houses, and low-rise apartment houses within the district were built within a 20-year period, between 1886 and 1906, as a prime residential neighborhood. Following the completion of the College of the City of New York in 1907, many staff members and professors resided in the Historic District.

The evolution of black Harlem began after the building boom in Harlem and upper Manhattan came to a halt in 1907, when a financial panic left many newly constructed residences vacant. Phillip A. Payton, a realtor with offices on West 133rd Street, persuaded many owners to sell or rent their vacant properties to black families who were living in Manhattan's West 50s, a section of Hell's Kitchen known as San Juan Hill.

Demographic changes in Harlem were speeded by World War I when many blacks from the south and from the West Indies migrated north looking for industrial jobs. This migration continued after the war due to economic opportunities in the north. Another important influence in the movement of black families from other areas of the city into Harlem was St.

Philip's Episcopal Church. The church, which had moved to West 134th Street in 1911, bought property in the area and rented it to black families.

Affluent black families began moving into the Historic District and the surrounding area in the early 1930s, during the Depression. Many of these first families to move into the district still live in Hamilton Heights.

The pride of the residents in their District is expressed not only in the generally excellent maintenance of the individual houses, but in the streets as well. A Mollie Parnis Award was granted this year in recognition of the work of beautification along Convent Avenue, an activity which is now being extended to Hamilton Terrace. The Block Associations have been instrumental in promoting a sense of community pride and unity of action throughout the district.

The Hamilton Heights Historic District continues to have a wide appeal as a fine residential neighborhood and counts among its citizens many people who are active in the political, legal, medical, and artistic life of New York City.

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