

Hamilton Heights-Sugar Hill Historic District

Historic District

West 145th-149th Streets between Edgecombe and Amsterdam Avenues

Designation Date: June 27, 2000



427, 429, 431, 433 West 147th Street. New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission Hamilton Heights / Sugar Hill Historic District Designation Report. Photo by Carl Forster.

West of Central Harlem lies the Hamilton Heights-Sugar Hill Historic District, among New York City's most architecturally distinguished and culturally significant neighborhoods. Built for middle- and upper middle-class white residents between the mid-1880s and the First World War, the area achieved its greatest fame during the 1930s and 1940s, when many black professionals, active in law, business, medicine and the arts, took residence here. The Historic District consists of 185 buildings, primarily long rows of well-preserved townhouses, as well as finely detailed apartment buildings. The boundaries extend irregularly from the north side of 145th Street to the south side of West 149th Street, generally from the west side of Convent Avenue to the east side of St. Nicholas Avenue, and in many cases, as far east as the west side of Edgecombe Avenue.

Two types of residential buildings, the rowhouse and the apartment house, dominate Hamilton Heights-Sugar Hill, and give the neighborhood its special architectural character. A cable car railway built along Amsterdam Avenue in the late 1880s spurred growth in the area, first with single-family houses at Nos. 729 to 731 St. Nicholas Avenue, followed by longer rows of speculatively built residences on West 146th and 147th Streets and Convent Avenue. Most

of these row houses were designed by New York architects specializing in residential construction, such as A. B. Jennings, Henri Fouchaux, and Frederick P. Dinkelberg.

These groups of row houses were frequently treated as block-long compositions in which the various materials and architectural features were arranged to create a distinct sense of place. Built in a succession of popular historical styles, these private residences display remarkable neo-Grec, Romanesque, and Renaissance Revival style details, including elaborate brickwork, stone carvings, and metalwork. During the first decades of the 20th century, following the opening of the City College of New York and the IRT subway station at Broadway and West 145th Street, apartment houses were erected along St. Nicholas Avenue, and later, Convent Avenue. Rising as many as seven stories, the 23 multiple dwellings in the Historic District include the exuberantly detailed Beaux Arts style 746 St. Nicholas Avenue and the neo-Gothic style 400 Convent Avenue.

During the mid-1920s, the area became known as "Sugar Hill." For blacks living on the Harlem plain, the elevated residential area to the west became increasingly desirable. It was perceived as a place where life was "sweet," where residents enjoyed prosperous and comfortable lives. By the mid-1930s, the apartments and row houses were occupied by successful blacks, including such noted cultural figures as the pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, Adam Clayton Powell Sr., who lived in the Garrison Apartments at 435 Convent Avenue, and the acclaimed novelist Ralph Ellison, who wrote *Invisible Man* while residing on St. Nicholas Avenue.

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