

Hamilton Heights-Sugar Hill Northeast Historic District

Historic District

150th-155th Streets between Edgecombe Avenue and St. Nicholas Place

Designation Date: October 23, 2001



385 EDGECOMBE AVENUE. New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission Hamilton Heights/Sugar Hill Northeast Historic District Designation Report. Photo by Carl Forster.

The Hamilton Heights-Sugar Hill Northeast Historic District is located on Edgecombe Avenue and St. Nicholas Place, from West 150th to 155th Streets. The district evokes a specific and cohesive period in the neighborhood's development during the early 20th century when speculative developers ceased building single-family houses and started constructing multiple dwellings. Nearly all the 32 buildings are apartment houses constructed between 1905 and 1930. Two attached single-family residences are also included in the district. Clad in granite and shingles, these picturesque residences were built in the mid-1880s, when many freestanding houses were located on St. Nicholas Place.

Most of the apartment buildings are five or six stories tall and were designed by New York City architects who specialized in apartment house construction, including Neville & Bagge, Schwartz & Gross, George F. Pelham, and Horace Ginsbem. In several instances, these architects received multiple commissions, fashioning identical designs for as many as eight contiguous lots. These buildings have brick and stone facades, reflecting a range of mostly neo-classical styles, especially Renaissance and Colonial Revival.

During the 1920s, the area became commonly known as Sugar Hill. Visible from central Harlem, where most tenants occupied older tenements and crowded rooming houses, these recently constructed apartment houses represented a world of domestic comfort and personal success. Many black professionals were attracted to the area, including jazz composer and big band leader Duke Ellington, whose family occupied a five-room apartment at 381 Edgecombe Avenue, from 1929 to 1939. He and his frequent collaborator, Billy Strayhorn, celebrated the neighborhood in song, urging listeners to "Take the A Train to go to Sugar Hill."

Other important residents were the composer and music publisher W. C. Handy, and the poet and playwright Langston Hughes. During the 1930s and 1940s, the most prestigious address in the district was 409 Edgecombe Avenue, near West 155th Street. Notable for its conspicuous height and illustrious tenants, the curving 13-story apartment house attracted such luminaries as Thurgood Marshall, Aaron Douglass, and W.E.B. Dubois. Virtually unchanged since this era, these long blocks of well-preserved multiple dwellings recall not only the neighborhood's architecture and physical origins, but also its vibrant social and cultural heyday.

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