

Harlem Branch of the New York Public Library

Individual Landmark

9 West 124th Street

Designation Date: June 15, 2021



Harlem Branch of the New York Public Library, 2021. Image courtesy of the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission.

Located on West 124th Street across from Marcus Garvey Park (formerly Mount Morris Park), the Harlem Branch of the New York Public Library is one of 67 circulating libraries constructed for the city's three public library systems in the early 20th century, with funding from steel magnate Andrew Carnegie. The elegant Classical Revival style building was designed by the prominent architectural firm of McKim, Mead & White in 1907 and opened in 1909, one of 12 Carnegie libraries designed by the firm for the New York Public Library, including five in Harlem.

The circulating library that became the New York Public Library's Harlem Branch was originally established as a privately-operated subscription library in 1825 when Harlem was an isolated village then centered around Third Avenue. As development increased in Harlem in the late 19th century, the trustees of the Harlem Library purchased a lot at 32 West 123rd Street where they erected a four-story building (Edgar K. Bourne, 1891-92, located within the Mount Morris Park Historic District), with the library on the ground floor and income-producing apartments on the upper floors. The Harlem Library became a free circulating

library in 1897 when it dropped its subscription fees, and in 1903 it merged with the New York Public Library's circulating branch system which had been established in 1901.

Since its construction, the Harlem Branch has served as an important civic space for the neighborhood with a variety of resources and programs, as well as providing space for civic and cultural activities, which in the late 1930s included community theater. The African American actor/playwright Ossie Davis, who performed with the Rose McClendon Players Workshop based in the Harlem Branch, referred to the library as "the only home I had...the very temple of my existence, my craft, the place that trained me, the first institution to welcome me."

The library's limestone facade is raised on a low granite base and features large recessed arched openings at the first and second stories, decorated with rosettes at the first story and alternating roundels and diamond-shaped lozenges at the second. The window openings of the third story are flatheaded with simple surrounds slightly recessed from the plane of the wall. Double-height pilasters with Corinthian capitals frame the fenestration of the second and third stories, their bases resting on a denticulated sill course at the second story. Below the denticulated cornice, the frieze bears the words "New York Public Library" separated by plaques in the form of open books with fleur-de-lis. The library underwent a renovation between 2002 and 2004 that included minimal sensitive alterations to the exterior, including the replacement of the entrance door and windows.

Intended by its designers to be easily recognizable as an important civic institution, the Harlem Branch with its classically-inspired limestone facade has continuously served its South Central Harlem community as a place to find recreational and educational resources as well as a space for civic engagement and cultural enrichment.

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

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