

Langston Hughes House

Individual Landmark

20 East 127th Street

Designation Date: August 11, 1981



Langston Hughes House. Photo by Melanie Nanez

This modest brownstone row house, built in 1869, was designed in the Italianate style by architect Alexander Wilson. Built by two real estate developers, James Meagher and Thomas Hanson, it is typical of row houses built in Harlem during the period after the Civil War. The house achieves its significance, however, as the home for 20 years of Langston Hughes, author and poet, and one of the foremost figures of the Harlem Renaissance, a literary movement of the 1920s-30s that focused on the question of Negro identity.

Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri, on February 1, 1902, son of James Nathaniel Hughes and Carrie Mercer Langston Hughes. The family moved frequently during his youth; he graduated from grammar school in Lincoln, Illinois in 1915, and from high school in Cleveland, Ohio, where he lived with his mother. At that time his father was manager for an electric company in Toluca, Mexico.

Hughes came to New York to attend Columbia College, graduating in 1929. While at Columbia, Hughes established friendships with young Harlem writers who participated in the Harlem Renaissance movement and began to write himself. His book about the blues and jazz scene, *The Weary Blues*, was published in 1926, while *Fine Clothes to The Jew* was published in 1927. The 1930s were a productive time as Hughes published four books, wrote the play *Mulatto*, which was produced at the Vanderbilt Theater in New York in 1935, and

established the Harlem Suitcase Theater as a showcase for plays by black writers with black actors, directors, and scene designers.

Hughes continued to travel, working as a seaman on voyages to Europe and Africa, spending a year in the Soviet Union in 1932–1933, and serving as the Madrid correspondent for the *Baltimore Afro-American* in 1937. He always returned to Harlem, from which came the greatest source of his literary inspiration. Even as a youth, Harlem had fascinated him: “More than Paris, or the Shakespeare country, or Berlin, or the Alps, I wanted to see Harlem.”

Sometime during the 1930s Hughes met Emerson and Ethel (Toy) Harper, whom he came to regard as his adopted uncle and aunt. In 1940, he dedicated his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, to them. Hughes’s years with the Harpers were most productive. He continued to publish poetry, most notably *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942) and *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951). He used humor to protest and satirize the existing injustices with his most famous fictional character, Jesse B. Semple (just be simple) in a series of humorous books beginning with *Simple Speaks His Mind* (1950) through *Simple Uncle Sam* (1965). Hughes also explored various aspects of black culture in such books as *The First Book of Negroes* (1952), *Famous American Negroes* (1954), *First Book of Rhythms* (1954), *First Book of Jazz* (1954), *First Book of the West Indies* (1955), *Book of Negro Folklore* (1958), and *First Book of Africa* (1960). He also enjoyed a career as a librettist and lyricist for the opera *The Barrier*, and the musicals *Just Around the Corner*, *Trouble Island*, and *Street Scene*.

Hughes purchased “Langston Place” with money he earned from *Street Scene*, a Broadway opera that was based on Elmer Rice’s Pulitzer Prize-winning play about the pungent life of people living in a Manhattan tenement. Rice collaborated with composer Kurt Weill, and they surprisingly invited Hughes to write the lyrics. It is remarkable, and virtually without parallel, that two highly successful white artists, with scores of white lyricists at their command, asked a black writer to join their work on a drama almost exclusively about white people.

On December 12, 1947, Emerson Harper purchased 20 East 127th Street, serving as a front man for Langston Hughes, whose fame would have certainly increased the sale price, but whose *Street Scene* income made the purchase possible. The price was \$12,500, with a mortgage of \$5,800 carried by the sellers. Three days later, the deed was conveyed into joint ownership by Hughes and Harper; a few months later, Toy Harper also joined legal ownership of the house. Hughes moved into the house the last week in July 1948. Six months after his 46th birthday, Hughes, for the first time, was living in his own home, where he would reside for the rest of his life.

Langston Hughes died on May 22, 1967. He was the first African American author to support himself through his writing. He wrote 16 books of poetry, including children’s poetry, two novels, three collections of short stories, 20 plays, and dozens of magazine articles. The residence on 127th Street, where Hughes spent the last 20 years of his life, was the only one he occupied for any length of time. It is the tangible symbol of his association with Harlem, which continuously inspired his literary career.

The house is three stories high above a basement and is faced with brownstone. A brownstone stoop with cast-iron railings leads to the entrance at the parlor floor level. A small areaway by the stoop is enclosed by a similar cast-iron railing. The entranceway and the windows on all three floors have arched brownstone enframements. The parlor floor windows are full length, and all windows have a double-hung sash. The facade is crowned by a bracketed and modillioned sheet metal roof cornice. A grape ivy vine planted in the areaway garden extends over the facade and, during four or five months of the year, the leaves hide the decorative architectural features. The house was designated a landmark in 1981.

The Langston Hughes House opened to the public as a museum in 2023. On display are Hughes's typewriters, photos of Hughes, original articles, and copies of his books. The museum has partnered with various organizations in Harlem to produce events and educational programs.

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