

Metropolitan Baptist Church

Individual Landmark

151 West 128th Street

Designation Date: February 3, 1981



Metropolitan Baptist Church. Photo: Lorraine Colbert

Unlike established black churches that moved to Harlem from downtown locations, the Metropolitan Baptist Church was a new congregation. Organized as the Mercy Street Baptist Church by seven blacks in 1912, the congregation merged with the Zion Baptist Church and worshiped in the basement of a house at 45-47 West 134th Street, paying \$1.00 in annual rent.

When the Reverend W.W. Brown arrived from Pittsburgh to lead the church in 1914, the membership numbered 380. The congregation grew rapidly under Brown's direction, and services were moved to the Public Casino. In 1916, the Metropolitan Baptist Church purchased three lots on West 138th Street and constructed a temporary building that seated 1,500 persons. After this proved inadequate, the Church purchased the New York Presbyterian Church building on West 128th Street in 1918, at a cost of \$85,000. In 1929, the Church acquired the three adjoining row houses on West 128th Street with the intention of erecting a youth center. These were later torn down, but the center was never built.

Designed in two sections by different architects, the Metropolitan Baptist Church (originally the New York Presbyterian Church) is a fine example of the many new churches built in Harlem during the late 19th century, at a time when the local church represented wealth and stability to the community. The building is distinguished by a somewhat unusual blend of the Gothic and Romanesque Revival styles, both favored in part for their imposing character, and reflects the importance of its original congregation.

The earlier section of the rough-faced limestone church, fronting on West 128th Street, was planned by John Rochester Thomas in 1884. It housed a small lecture room/chapel and was erected with the intention of adding a principal auditorium structure later. The addition, comprising the Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard (formerly Seventh Avenue) facade, and the northern section of the church, was completed in 1890 and designed by Richard R. Davis. Davis's extension, with its dominating gable and towers, complemented the Thomas design, incorporating many details from the earlier structure.

Although the immediate neighborhood was not fully developed when the building was commissioned by the New York Presbyterian Church, greater Harlem was blossoming as New York's most fashionable suburb. Harlem derived its name from the village of Nieuw Harlem, established in the region by Peter Stuyvesant in 1658, and embraced the area of Manhattan above Morningside Heights between the Hudson and Harlem Rivers. The region remained rural until the turn of the century. Country estates in the western half of the district took advantage of magnificent views from Harlem Heights, while the eastern section, between present-day 110th and 125th Streets, was cultivated as farmlands. It was not until the 1830s, when the New York & Harlem Railroad ran trains to East 129th Street, that Harlem's potential as a residential suburb was recognized.

The transformation from rural village to fashionable upper and upper-middle-class neighborhood, however, did not occur until after the 1870s. Harlem suffered a decline in the 1830s when its lush farmlands were depleted, and many great estates were sold at public auction during this period. The striking vistas and beautiful unspoiled country nevertheless attracted fashionable downtowners on picnics and day trips, particularly after the 1860s. In the 1870s the rapid growth of New York City began to notably affect the status of nearby Harlem. The area was annexed to the city in 1873, and from 1877-1881, three lines of the elevated railroad were extended as far north as 129th Street, precipitating the development of new residential neighborhoods.

The building boom lasted until 1905. Exclusive homes, such as Strivers Row in the St. Nicholas Historic District on West 138th and 139th Streets, designed in part by Stanford White in 1891, were erected for affluent, established New Yorkers, people of wealth and taste, as Harlem came to epitomize the ultimate in fashion and elegance. An 1893 article in the *Harlem Monthly Magazine* correctly foresaw that "It is evident to the most superficial observer that the centre of fashion, wealth, culture, and intelligence, must, in the near future, be found in the ancient and honorable village of Harlem..." By 1900, luxurious apartment houses lined Malcolm X Boulevard (formerly Lenox Avenue) in the West 130s and 140s blocks, and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard (formerly Seventh Avenue), then one of the finest residential streets in New York. Harlem also boasted elegant rows of brownstones, the fashionable Polo

Grounds, and the distinguished Harlem Opera House, which opened on West 125th Street in 1889.

As exclusive neighborhoods shifted northward, most churches were compelled to follow their congregations to Harlem. Many expensive and imposing church edifices were erected for prestigious congregations whose membership often numbered in the thousands. When the leaders of the New York Presbyterian Church purchased the corner lots on Seventh Avenue and West 128th Street in 1884, they were criticized for planning such a costly project, but the church had anticipated the growth of the immediate neighborhood, and the healthy expansion of membership.

At the time, the New York Presbyterian Church was well established in the city. The roots of the Presbyterian faith, which is based on a modified form of Calvinism and a specific ecclesiastical hierarchy, date to 1754, when the Associate Presbytery was formed by members of the religious secession in Scotland. In 1782, the Associate Reformed Church was formed when the Associate Presbytery joined with the Reformed Church of America. Three churches of this order were established in New York but left a dissatisfied remnant group when they united as one in 1822. The small Scotch-Irish remnant, led by a representative of the Associate Reformed Synod, was established as the Associate Reformed Church of the City of New York in 1831, accepted into the New York Presbytery in 1867, and subsequently renamed the New York Presbyterian Church.

After occupying several downtown locations, the church decided to establish a permanent headquarters in Harlem, and commissioned John Rochester Thomas (1848-1901) to design the new building. Born and trained in Rochester, New York, Thomas was reputed to have designed more public and semi-public buildings than any other architect in the country. Among his works were the Eighth Regiment Armory, the 71st Regiment Armory, the Squadron A Armory (a designated New York City Landmark), an extension to the old New York Stock Exchange, buildings for the New York State Reformatory at Elmira, the New Jersey State Reformatory at Rahway, and the Eastern New York Reformatory.

Among the educational institutions from which he received commissions were the University of Rochester, Rochester Theological Seminary, Cornell University, and the University of Virginia. Thomas designed more than 150 churches, one of which was the Second Reformed Church at Malcolm X Boulevard (formerly Lenox Avenue) and West 123rd Street, now the Ephesus Seventh Day Adventist Church in the Mount Morris Park Historic District. Thomas is perhaps best known, however, for his 1889 design of the Hall of Records or Surrogates Court, a designated New York City Landmark.

Richard R. Davis, who designed the auditorium addition, was a Harlem architect who maintained an office at 247 West 125th Street. He was responsible for many fine apartments and row houses in the area.

The cornerstone of the Thomas-designed church building was laid in October 18, 1884, and the first service held in September, 1885. The north side of the church was finished with a temporary frame bay in anticipation of the future addition. Ground was broken for the main auditorium structure on Thanksgiving Day, 1889. Davis's addition completed the church,

incorporating the original design of both the exterior and interior. The new, wide, fan-shaped auditorium, which opened in October 1890, was partitioned from the original lecture room. When necessary, the two rooms were opened as one during large Sunday services.

While the reason for the two-part construction was probably financial, it remains unclear why Thomas did not complete the project he had commenced six years earlier. Davis, in fact, appears to have plagiarized his composition for the Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard (formerly Seventh Avenue) addition from the western section of the nearby Reformed Low Dutch Church of Harlem on Malcolm X Boulevard (former Lenox Avenue) and West 123rd Street, designed by Thomas in 1885. The similarity is too close to be coincidental. Evidently quite proud of the completed New York Presbyterian Church, Davis claimed the entire design as his own in an 1893 business advertisement.

Only a few years after the New York Presbyterian Church was completed, the character of Harlem began to undergo another transformation. Proposed subway routes to West Harlem sparked a wave of real estate speculation that continued until the bottom fell out of the market in 1904-1905. In 1904, a black businessman named Philip Payton founded the Afro-American Realty Company, which, during its short life, played a major role in the development of Harlem as a black community. In the aftermath of the real estate collapse, which produced a surplus of housing, Payton acquired five-year leases on white-owned properties and rented them at higher rates to black families.

Blacks who could afford high rents had begun moving to Harlem at the turn of the 20th century. A dramatic increase in Harlem's black population came, however, as hundreds of black families were uprooted when their homes in the Tenderloin area near 34th Street were destroyed during the 1906-1910 construction of Pennsylvania Station. For the first time, good housing in large quantities was available to New York's blacks. People talked of "moving up to Harlem." Just as Harlem had been an exclusive white community, it became an exclusive black community, with more than 50,000 blacks living there by 1914.

After the 1908 collapse of the Afro-American Realty Company, local churches played the most influential roles in the development of black Harlem. Traditionally, the church was the most stable institution in the black community. Church wealth and influence expanded concurrently with the growth of Harlem's black population, and membership enjoyed a healthy increase as churches began to purchase property and move to Harlem. During the early 20th century, many white denominations sold their church buildings to black congregations as "on to Harlem" movements brought black churches to the area. Selling their downtown properties at high rates, the black churches often invested their profits in local Harlem real estate. By the 1920s almost every well-established black church had relocated uptown. Many had congregations so large that it was necessary to hold several services on a single Sunday.

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