

Proposed Manhattan Avenue North Historic District



Left: Manhattan Avenue between West 120th–121st Streets. Photo: Melanie Nanez

The proposed Manhattan Avenue North Historic District consists of rows of townhouses surrounded by apartment buildings on Morningside Avenue, the east side of Manhattan Avenue, the west side of St. Nicholas Avenue, and it is anchored on the north by Mannie L. Wilson Towers, formerly Sydenham Hospital, at the corner of West 123rd Street and Manhattan Avenue.

Most of the row houses in the proposed District were built during Harlem's speculative real estate boom spurred by the extension of the Eighth Avenue (now Frederick Douglass Boulevard) elevation train to 104th Street in 1879, the installation of electric service in 1887, the completion of improvements to Mount Morris Park (now Marcus Garvey Park) in 1887, and the installation of telephone service in 1888.

According to a report in the April 7, 1886 issue of the *Real Estate Record and Builder's Guide*, the Morningside Park Association wanted to make the area surrounding the park, "a decent middle and upper middle-class neighborhood." The Association also urged developers to construct high-quality buildings. Between 1886 and 1895, more than 100 row houses for upper and middle-class families were constructed in the proposed District. Builders could quickly erect rows of houses; because of the mechanization of the building process, they no longer needed trained craftsman and architects. Instead, they could order complete buildings cut to size from a catalog. Additionally, cheap labor was abundant, as millions of immigrants came to Manhattan, increasing the population from 1,919,000 in 1880 to 2,000,693 in 1890. Developer J. A. Webster built five blocks of row houses between 1887 and 1892.

The architectural styles of the row houses in the proposed District are neo-Grec, Renaissance Revival, and Queen Anne, the predominant style.

The neo-Grec can be identified by its smooth, unarticulated brownstone façade, incised pressed metal cornices, and rectilinear window lintel and door pediments. Nos. 507 to 527

Manhattan Avenue, constructed between 1885 and 1887, are examples of this style.

The Renaissance Revival style often has a mix of different materials on the façade (brownstone on the basement and parlor floor, and limestone or yellow brick on the upper floors), classical inspired wreath and garland ornamentation and fluted pilasters at the door enframingent, and carved floral panels between the parlor floor windows. Nos. 351 to 360 West 120th Street, constructed between 1895 and 1896, are examples of this style.

The Queen Anne style is characterized by one or more of the following elements: a mix of building facade materials, high ornamentation, gable roofs, asymmetrical fronts with bay windows or oriels, and architectural details borrowed from other styles. Because of the eclectic use of various architectural elements, Queen Anne buildings do not have a standardized form. Nos. 345 to 363 West 123rd Street, constructed between 1885 and 1886, and Nos. 341 to 361 West 122nd Street, constructed between 1888 and 1889, are examples of this style.

367 West 123rd Street is an unusual building in the district. It is of the neo-Grec style with an added prefabricated, metal oriel. It is likely the buyer requested customization, and the builder added the oriel during construction, since the oriel does not seamlessly integrate into the building fabric.

By the end of the 1800s, the price of undeveloped lots in Harlem had dramatically increased, and speculative development changed from rowhouses to the more profitable luxury apartments for the affluent, some offering hotel services and servant's quarters, and tenements for the working class and new immigrants.

In 1922, Sydenham Hospital purchased the plot of land at the corner of Manhattan Avenue and West 123rd Street. The hospital's previous facility, nine adjacent brownstones in use since its founding in 1892, was no longer capable of handling the demand for services caused by Harlem's growing population. The hospital ceased operations in 1980, a victim of New York City's financial crisis, and disinvestment in communities of color. The building remained closed until 2021 when it was reopened and converted to affordable housing apartments.

[Read about the Manhattan Avenue West 120th-123rd Streets Historic District on the National Register.](#)