

Young Men's Christian Association Building, Harlem Branch

Individual Landmark

181 West 135th Street

Designation Date: December 13, 2016



The Harlem YMCA, also known as the Claude McKay Residence. Photo: Wikipedia

Built in 1918-19, the 135th Street Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) building was one of the first African American YMCA buildings constructed in New York City and became the center of intellectual and social life for African Americans in the first half of the 20th century. Designed by John Jackson, a specialist in YMCA buildings, the building followed design guidelines that were developed and used to give branches across the United States a uniform look. This branch is typical of branches built at that time. It is designed in the Italian-Renaissance Revival style, and has a high base with alternating arched and rectangular openings, surmounted by a cornice bearing the inscription "Young Men's Christian Association." It has arched windows at the second story and the expression of an arcade at the sixth story.

African American YMCAs were the direct result of the national organization's policy of racial segregation, from its beginnings in the United States in 1851 until 1946. Though excluded from

white YMCAs, African Americans were encouraged to form separate branches, which became autonomous community centers. The Great Migration and World War I fueled the need for the YMCAs in New York and in other cities across the nation. In 1910, Julius Rosenwald, president of Sears & Roebuck, pledged \$25,000 to any city that raised \$75,000 for a new YMCA building, with high quality amenities for African American men. Thousands of African American citizens in New York City and across the country rose to the challenge and supported the YMCA's building fund drives with contributions from 25¢ to \$1,500. With the success of a local fundraising campaign, and donations from both the public and private sectors, this branch opened in November 1919.

By the mid-1920s, the 135th Street YMCA became a center of the Harlem Renaissance, where the African American literati met to exchange ideas, lectures were given, and plays and music performed. Among the noteworthy individuals associated with the 135th Street YMCA were James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, Paul Robeson, John Henrik Clarke, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison. In 1938, this building became the home of the Boys Department of the Harlem YMCA. In 1947, it was here that Jackie Robinson and his teammate Roy Campanella began coaching and mentoring the children of the 135th Street YMCA, an association that would last for the rest of Robinson's life. The building was dedicated to him and renamed the Jackie Robinson YMCA Youth Center in 1976.

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

[Read testimonies supporting the designation here.](#)