
MOUNT MORRIS PARK
HISTORIC DISTRICT
DESIGNATION REPORT

1971

City of New York
John V. Lindsay, Mayor

Parks, Recreation and
Cultural Affairs Administration
August Heckscher, Administrator

Landmarks Preservation Commission
Harmon H. Goldstone, Chairman

MOUNT MORRIS PARK HISTORIC DISTRICT, Borough of Manhattan.

The property bounded by the eastern property line of 12 West 120th Street, West 120th Street, Mount Morris Park West (Nathan Davis Place), West 124th Street, the western property line of 35-38 Mount Morris Park West, the northern property lines of 3 through 25 West 123rd Street, part of the eastern property line of 270 Lenox Avenue, the eastern property lines of 272 and 274 Lenox Avenue, the northern property line of 274 Lenox Avenue, Lenox Avenue, the northern property line of 269 Lenox Avenue, part of the northern property line of 267 Lenox Avenue, the western property line of 267 Lenox Avenue, West 123rd Street, the western property lines of 259 through 241 Lenox Avenue, West 122nd Street, the western property lines of 104 West 122nd Street, of 229 Lenox Avenue and of 101 West 121st Street, West 121st Street, the western property line of 207-215 Lenox Avenue, part of the northern property line of 201-203 Lenox Avenue, the western property line of 201-203 Lenox Avenue, West 120th Street, the western property lines of 199 through 193 Lenox Avenue, the western and part of the southern property lines of 191 Lenox Avenue, the western property lines of 189 through 183 Lenox Avenue, part of the northern and the western property lines of 181 Lenox Avenue, West 119th Street, Lenox Avenue, the southern property lines of 86 through 20 West 119th Street, the eastern property line of 20 West 119th Street, West 119th Street, the eastern property line of 37 West 119th Street, part of the southern and part of the eastern property lines of 30 West 120th Street, and the southern property lines of 28 through 12 West 120th Street.

On November 22, 1966 (Calendar Item No. 3) the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on a proposed Historic District in this neighborhood, duly advertised, calendared and described as follows:

"The property bounded by the eastern property line of 12 West 120th Street, West 120th Street, Mount Morris Park West (Nathan Davis Place), West 124th Street, the western property line of 35-38 Mount Morris Park West, the northern property lines of 3 through 25 West 123rd Street, the eastern property lines of 270 through 274 Lenox Avenue, the northern property line of 274 Lenox Avenue, Lenox Avenue, the northern property line of 269 Lenox Avenue, part of the northern property line of 267 Lenox Avenue, the western property line of 267 Lenox Avenue, West 123rd Street, the western property lines of 259 through 241 Lenox Avenue, West 122nd Street, the western property lines of 104 West 122nd Street, of 229 Lenox Avenue and of 101 West 121st Street, West 121st Street, the western property line of 207-215 Lenox Avenue, part of the northern property line of 201-203 Lenox Avenue, the western property line of 201-203 Lenox Avenue, West 120th Street, the western property lines of 199 through 181 Lenox Avenue, West 119th Street, Lenox Avenue, the southern and eastern property line of 186 Lenox Avenue, part of the eastern property line of 188 Lenox Avenue, the southern property lines of 82 through 30 West 120th Street, part of the eastern property line of 30 West 120th Street and the southern property lines of 28 through 12 West 120th Street."

A representative of the Municipal Art Society spoke in favor of the proposed Historic District and a letter endorsing the proposal was received from the chairman of the Housing and Redevelopment Board.

Subsequent to the hearing there were discussions with members of the community and various City agencies as to the best method of effecting the designation for the greatest benefit of the community and the surroundings. There appeared to be substantial community support for the proposed designation.

The Housing and Development Administration, recognizing the stabilizing influence of Historic District designation and the benefit of funds that might be made available for the restoration and rehabilitation of Historic District structures, advised the Landmarks Preservation Commission that they had included in their development plan for this portion of the Milbank-Frawley Urban Renewal, the proposed Mount Morris Park Historic District with the boundaries heard by the Landmarks Preservation Commission on November 22, 1966 and with full

awareness of the controls that such designation would impose under Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York. Furthermore, the Housing and Development Administration informed the Landmarks Preservation Commission early in February 1970 that the development plan, including as an integral part of it the proposed Mount Morris Park Historic District, had been repeatedly reviewed and discussed with local community groups and that the plan shortly was to be submitted to the City Planning Commission for its consideration.

In view of these circumstances the Landmarks Preservation Commission at its meeting of February 17, 1970, a quorum being present, resolved as follows:

"Upon adoption by the Board of Estimate of the above described development plan, the Landmarks Preservation Commission will proceed promptly with the legal steps required to complete the designation of all or an appropriate portion of the area heard on November 22, 1966 as the Mount Morris Park Historic District. If, however, the development plan should fail of adoption by the Board of Estimate or should be so modified as to impair, in the judgment of the Landmarks Preservation Commission the validity of the Historic District as heard, then the Landmarks Preservation Commission reserves the right of appropriate independent action in regard to designating all or part of the District."

The Board of Estimate took affirmative action on the Milbank-Frawley Urban Renewal Plan on May 21, 1970 (Calendar item No. 10).

In view of this action by the Board of Estimate the Landmarks Preservation Commission held on June 23, 1970 (Calendar item No. 1) a public hearing on a proposed Historic District, duly advertised, calendared and described as follows:

"The property bounded by the eastern property line of 12 West 120th Street, West 120th Street, Mount Morris Park West (Nathan Davis Place), West 124th Street, the western property line of 35-38 Mount Morris Park West, the northern property lines of 3 through 25 West 123rd Street, part of the eastern property line of 270 Lenox Avenue, the eastern property lines of 272 and 274 Lenox Avenue, the northern property line of 274 Lenox Avenue, Lenox Avenue, the northern property line of 269 Lenox Avenue, part of the northern property line of 267 Lenox Avenue, the western property line of 267 Lenox Avenue, West 123rd Street, the western property lines of 259 through 241 Lenox Avenue, West 122nd Street, the western property lines of 104 West 122nd Street, of 229 Lenox Avenue and of 101 West 121st Street, West 121st Street, the western property line of 207-215 Lenox Avenue, part of the northern property line of 201-203 Lenox Avenue, the western property line of 201-203 Lenox Avenue, West 120th Street, the western property lines of 199 through 193 Lenox Avenue, the western and part of the southern property lines of 191 Lenox Avenue, the western property lines of 189 through 183 Lenox Avenue, part of the northern and the western property lines of 181 Lenox Avenue, West 119th Street, Lenox Avenue, the southern property lines of 86 through 20 West 119th Street, the eastern property line of 20 West 119th Street, West 119th Street, the eastern property line of 37 West 119th Street, part of the southern and part of the eastern property lines of 30 West 120th Street, and the southern property lines of 28 through 12 West 120th Street."

It will be noted that the area heard by the Landmarks Preservation Commission at its June 23, 1970 hearing was slightly larger than the area heard on November 22, 1966. Further study of the neighborhood by the Landmarks Preservation Commission had indicated the desirability of extending southward the southern boundary of the proposed Mount Morris Park Historic District so as to include a portion of both sides of West 119th Street between Fifth Avenue and Lenox Avenue. This extension all lay within the boundaries of the Milbank-Frawley Urban Renewal area and was proposed with the concurrence of the Housing and Development Administration

At the June 23, 1970 hearing, the Director of the Milbank-Frawley Urban Renewal Project and five other persons spoke in favor of the proposed Mount Morris Park Historic District as extended. One person spoke against the proposed designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Physically the proposed Mount Morris Park Historic District is a relatively level area extending generally from Mount Morris Park on the east to Lenox Avenue on the west, from 119th Street on the south to 123rd Street on the north. It faces but does not include Mount Morris Park itself in which a notable outcropping of rock rises to considerable elevation. Mount Morris Park interrupts Fifth Avenue which extends south from the south side and north from the north side of the Park.

The proposed Mount Morris Park Historic District is a fine residential area which has maintained its attractive late 19th century architectural character remarkably well. This part of the City was largely built up during the latter part of the 19th century, with rows of unusually handsome townhouses and several notable churches. Some of the most stately residences are to be found along Mount Morris Park West.

The buildings in this District represent many architectural styles including the Romanesque Revival, the French neo-Grec, the Queen Anne and a number of structures designed in the classical and Renaissance traditions popularized by the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago.

In the Romanesque Revival style are the Bethel Gospel Pentecostal Church, built originally for the Harlem Club, and St. Martin's Episcopal Church, both on Lenox Avenue. St. Martin's (formerly Holy Trinity) Church, with its noted carillon, is undoubtedly the handsomest example of this style of architecture remaining in Manhattan today. On the southwest corner of Mount Morris Park West and 122nd Street is the fine Mount Morris Presbyterian Church, designed in modified classical style. The Ephesus Seventh Day Adventist Church at the northwest corner of Lenox Avenue and West 123rd Street is also notable architecturally, and its lofty spire is in itself a landmark.

A large townhouse at the northwest corner of 123rd Street and Mount Morris Park West is a particularly fine example of the neo-Renaissance style introduced by the architects McKim, Mead & White. Among townhouses in the District, the brownstone rectory of the Mount Morris Presbyterian Church on 122nd Street is one of the handsomest and best preserved residences in the City. Here one finds the original interiors unchanged since the day they were built, furnished in complete harmony in Victorian style. The bold decorative detail of the residences in the District runs the gamut from the neo-medievalism of Viollet-le-Duc to the classical traditions of the turn of the century. The love and care lavished on these fine houses bears witness to the pride of both their original owners and their present occupants.

Recent Developments

This area was first built up with a fine assemblage of architecturally notable structures with a remarkable quality of homogeneity that gives the area a special character, readily recognized when one enters or leaves it. It is this character which distinguishes it as an Historic District.

Valiant efforts have been made to maintain the character of the neighborhood both as a residential community and as an area containing much notable architecture. Economic forces and several depressions have taken their detrimental toll but the fine architecture remains a source of pride to today's residents.

The conversion of once privately owned homes to rooming houses and the introduction of stores at the ground floor of residences along the Avenue are some of the inevitable consequences of economic change.

Redevelopment plans have been made for this area and it is considered that designation as an Historic District will be an added factor contributing to its preservation and upgrading. Present dangers to the area are renovations to existing buildings which destroy their original exterior character and the possible introduction of new buildings or additions of inappropriate exterior architectural character.

Importance of the District

The Mount Morris Park Historic District includes a remarkably interesting cross-section of turn of the century townhouses and churches. These buildings represent many styles of architecture spanning a period of over four decades. The churches and individual residences are among the finest in the City. The quality of design and workmanship of these buildings establishes the exceptional character of the District. Outstanding among them is the row of townhouses on Mount Morris Park West. The survival of a substantially unbroken row of handsome residences and churches facing a park is, in itself, rare in Manhattan.

HISTORY

Early Years (1658-1851)

The history of the Mount Morris Park Historic District goes back to 1658, the year Dutch settlers founded the town of Nieuw Haerlem. Mount Morris, a wooded promontory among the Round Hills, was called Slang Burg, or Snake Hill, by the Dutch. Between 1664 and 1674 New York passed back and forth between the Dutch and the English, with British rule finally established in 1674. In 1776, at the beginning of the Revolutionary War, Washington attempted to withstand the British army behind fortifications on Harlem Heights. The colonials tried valiantly, without success, to fend off the British from the fort they had erected earlier that year on Snake Hill, which commanded the mouth of the Harlem River. Washington was forced to retreat to Fort Washington and then to White Plains.

Until the mid-19th century, Harlem was a sparsely settled farming area. The largest landowners were members of the Benson family, descendants of Captain Johannes Benson who had settled there in 1696. The Mount Morris Park Historic District occupies a portion of the Benson "Race Course Farm," as it was called in the 19th century because it encompassed the Harlem Park Trotting Course. In 1851, Samson Adolphus Benson of Fishkill, N. Y., a sixth generation descendant of Johannes Benson, sold the farm, which had been divided into City lots a few years earlier, to John Bruce, a well-to-do Brooklyn resident and hardware dealer in New York. When Bruce sold the lots for development, the deeds included restrictive covenants which assured the future residential character of this District, bordering on picturesque Mount Morris Park. In the 1850s and, indeed, until considerably later, the streets in the District were unpaved and builders dumped surplus earth in the roads to improve their grading. Lenox Avenue was still known as "Sixth Avenue" and Mount Morris Park West was called "The New Avenue" on the 1848 map of Samson Adolphus Benson's property. This map also explains the sharp diagonal of the boundary of the Historic District, at the rear of Nos. 12-28 West 120th Street, which was established by the direction of the old Manhattan Road which passed through the Benson farm.

Mount Morris Park was acquired by New York City in 1839, and was first known as Mount Morris Square. Until late in the 1870s Mount Morris Park was a popular spot for weekend excursions. New Yorkers came here for country walks and picnics; the nearby race track was an added attraction. The opening of the "El" in 1872, however, was a pivotal point: Harlem became a suburb of the City, which was rapidly expanding northward.

Development of the District

Speculative building began in 1878 and continued into the early 20th century, encouraged by plans for an East Side subway line, resulting in successive booms in Harlem real estate. William B. Astor, Oscar Hammerstein, Henry Morgenthau and Oswald Ottendorfer were among those associated with speculation in the area. Elegant houses, generally built in rows, a few apartment houses, churches and public buildings began to appear in the last two decades of the 19th century. They were designed by such prominent New York architects as Arnold W. Brunner, Hugo Lamb of the firm of Lamb & Rich, George F. Pelham, William A. Potter, J. R. Thomas, Thom & Wilson and James E. Ware. In 1903, the New York Herald compared the houses along Mount Morris Park West favorably with the mansions along Fifth Avenue. Prominent political leaders, professionals, businessmen and tradesmen occupied these fine residences; many belonged to the Harlem Club and were members of the Harlem Board of Commerce.

Demographic Changes

The original residents of the Mount Morris Park Historic District were of Dutch, English and Irish descent. Soon after the turn of the 20th century, a few German Jewish families moved to the Mount Morris Park area. In 1903, Blacks first came to Harlem, and Lenox Avenue and 135th Street subsequently became the nucleus of a radiating Black population. Despite the influx of Blacks to Harlem before, during and after World War I, the Mount Morris Park area remained a middle-class white enclave until the Depression. Between 1935 and 1940 a great increase in the number of vacancies led to Mount Morris Park's transition to a Black neighborhood.

These demographic changes are reflected in the history of its religious buildings. For example, the Ephesus Seventh Day Adventist Church now occupies the structure erected in 1885-87 for the Reformed Low Dutch Church of Harlem, originally organized in 1660. Here, Johannes and Samson Benson served as deacons in colonial days; later, Samson Adolphus Benson served as an elder. In 1901, the church was enlarged to accommodate the expanding local population. Today, the congregants are Black and the Sunday school has been converted to a Baptist Temple. Mount Olivet Baptist Church, organized by Blacks in 1878, moved in 1924 in a building on Lenox Avenue at 121st Street which had been occupied since 1907 by a synagogue, Temple Israel of Harlem. This was the first Black church on Lenox Avenue. The pastor of St. Martin's Episcopal Church, the Reverend John H. Johnson, was an active member of the Citizens League for Fair Play, which picketed the 125th Street business area in 1933 in a successful effort to persuade white merchants to employ Blacks.

Churches in the District sponsored the appearance of many famous Americans, of which only a few are mentioned here. Booker T. Washington spoke at the Ephesus Seventh Day Adventist Church. Robert E. Perry appeared at the Mount Morris Baptist Church in 1916. In 1917, Marcus Garvey addressed a meeting at the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in his efforts to organize a Liberty League.

The District Today

The District includes well-maintained, owner-occupied residences, rooming houses, a few apartment buildings and a number of churches. In addition to these, two former residences on Lenox Avenue, a former parsonage and the buildings originally occupied by the Harlem Club and the Harlem Library have been converted to religious uses.

Mount Morris Park is currently regaining its stature as a focus of community activity, following a long period of neglect. It is serving once again "as the pleasure ground of a population many times greater than ... any of the small downtown squares," to quote the Harlem Local Reporter of 1890. Back in 1886, it had been the site of a spectacular Independence Day celebration and, in 1890, the City supported bi-weekly concerts in the band pagoda. Nowadays, the City's popular annual Summer Festival attracts people from the entire metropolitan area to the park. The Mount Morris Park Recreation Center and Amphitheater, created largely through the generosity of Richard Rodgers, serves as a facility for concerts, educational and cultural programs for all ages and for community recreation. The swimming pool complex, which opened last year, was constructed by the first Black-owned architectural firm to be awarded a Parks Department design contract.

The Mount Morris Park Historic District is served by several charities. Jewish Family Service and Catholic Charities, for example, offer counseling, homemaking courses and related services. In the area are the Central Harlem Referral Unit of the New York City Youth Board, the Narcotics Addiction Control Center at 10 Mount Morris Park West, the Mount Morris Child Health Center and the Mount Morris Children's Center. The latter, a church-related organization, serves over a hundred three to ten-year-olds. The major portion of the Mount Morris Park Historic District is included in the Milbank-Frawley Circle Urban Renewal Area, a program which it will enhance. The community is conveniently served by the many shops along 125th Street. It is also served by the Hospital for Joint Diseases, located on Madison Avenue between 123rd and 124th Streets. Educational facilities include, within a block of the District, an elementary school, a Catholic high school and the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library. Transportation facilities, buses, subways and railroads, are amply adequate for the community needs.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this area, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Mount Morris Park Historic District contains buildings and other improvements which have a special character and special historical and aesthetic interest and value and which represent one or more periods or styles of architecture typical of one or more eras in the history of New York City and which cause this area, by reason of these factors, to constitute a distinct section of the City.

In reaching this determination the Landmarks Preservation Commission, at its meeting of November 3, 1971, reviewed in detail the block-by-block series of photographs and architectural and historical research data previously prepared by the Commission's staff, on a house to house basis, all of which are maintained in the Commission's official files.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Mount Morris Park Historic District is a fine residential area in which the streets are served by commerce along the avenue, that this District is rendered especially attractive as it faces a park, one of the few open spaces of greenery in Harlem, that it represents a fine cross section of architectural styles of the latter part of the 19th and of the early part of the 20th centuries, that it has many fine rows of town houses, that those houses facing Mount Morris Park are exceptional in quality, character and location, that it has several handsome churches including the finest Romanesque Revival church in the City and that the quality of design and workmanship in the area is outstanding.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 63 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as an Historic District the Mount Morris Park Historic District, Borough of Manhattan, containing the property bounded by the eastern property line of 12 West 120th Street, West 120th Street, Mount Morris Park West (Nathan Davis Place), West 124th Street, the western property line of 35-38 Mount Morris Park West, the northern property lines of 3 through 25 West 123rd Street, part of the eastern property line of 270 Lenox Avenue, the eastern property lines of 272 and 274 Lenox Avenue, the northern property line of 274 Lenox Avenue, Lenox Avenue, the northern property line of 269 Lenox Avenue, part of the northern property line of 267 Lenox Avenue, the western property line of 267 Lenox Avenue, West 123rd Street, the western property lines of 259 through 241 Lenox Avenue, West 122nd Street, the western property lines of 104 West 122nd Street, of 229 Lenox Avenue and of 101 West 121st Street, West 121st Street, the western property line of 207-215 Lenox Avenue, part of the northern property line of 201-203 Lenox Avenue, the western property line of 201-203 Lenox Avenue, West 120th Street, the western property lines of 199 through 193 Lenox Avenue, the western and part of the southern property lines of 191 Lenox Avenue, the western property lines of 189 through 183 Lenox Avenue, part of the northern and the western property lines of 181 Lenox Avenue, West 119th Street, Lenox Avenue, the southern property lines of 86 through 20 West 119th Street, the eastern property line of 20 West 119th Street, West 119th Street, the eastern property line of 37 West 119th Street, part of the southern and part of the eastern property lines of 30 West 120th Street, and the southern property lines of 28 through 12 West 120th Street.