

Landmarks Preservation Commission  
February 3, 1981, Designation List 139  
LP-1133

SCHOMBURG COLLECTION FOR RESEARCH IN BLACK CULTURE (originally the West 135th Street Branch Library), New York Public Library, 103 West 135th Street, Borough of Manhattan.  
Built 1904-05; architect Charles F. McKim, of McKim, Mead & White

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1920, Lot 26.

On May 13, 1980, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Schomburg Collection for Research in Black Culture and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 5). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Two witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. Letters have been received in favor of designation.

#### DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Built as the West 135th Street Branch Library, the former Schomburg Collection building at 103 West 135th Street was designed in 1904 by the eminent firm of McKim, Mead & White. Small and dignified, the structure is one of the eleven elegant neo-classical buildings that the firm designed for the New York City Public Library system under a generous grant from Andrew Carnegie. Located in the heart of Harlem the Library Branch became a center of black cultural events during the 1920s, as the well-known Schomburg Collection on black history and culture, housed in the building, served as a magnet to countless intellectuals drawn to the area during the "Harlem Renaissance". Distinguished by a fine architectural design, the building is also nationally significant as a cultural center and a site where the documentation of the black experience was a long and important tradition.

#### Development of the Library System

Although a series of bills encouraging the growth of public libraries was passed by the New York Legislature in the 1830s, the city's first free circulating library was not established until 1878. By that time, New York City had excellent research facilities in a number of privately owned libraries, but few general libraries that offered a wide variety of popular and serious reading to the public. The Astor and Lenox Libraries, founded respectively by the will of John Jacob Astor in 1849 and by the famous book collector and philanthropist James Lenox (1800-1880) in 1870, both served as great research libraries opened to students and scholars. These two research institutions together with the funds of the Tilden Trust, established in 1886 by the will of Samuel J. Tilden (1814-1886), a former governor of New York, were consolidated in 1895 to form the New York Public Library. Despite these resources in research libraries, the reading needs of the general public, especially the poor and immigrant populations, went largely unmet by any institution throughout most of the 19th century.

The majority of early public libraries were the philanthropic efforts of wealthy New Yorkers interested in aiding and encouraging the self-education of the poor. Libraries were seen as an agent to the improvement of the city as well as the lot of the underprivileged. The historian Sidney Ditzion recounts that "the story of how a local library branch had driven a neighboring saloon out of business demonstrated one practical result of opening branches".<sup>1</sup> The New York Free Circulating Library was founded in 1878 and incorporated in 1880 with the express purpose, according to the First Annual Report (1880), of providing "moral and intellectual elevation of the masses." During its first few years the Library grew impressively, and the board of trustees began discussing the possibility of establishing branches in the various neighborhoods of New York. The first Branch of the New York Free Circulating Library, the Ottendorfer Branch at 135 Second Avenue, was formally opened on December 7, 1884.

The New York Free Circulating Library was maintained by private donations until public funding was added to its budget under state legislation in 1887. Among the many prominent and wealthy New Yorkers who supported the Library were Andrew Carnegie, J.P. Morgan, Cornelius Vanderbilt, Jacob H. Schiff, and Henry G. Marquand. Between 1884-1901 the New York Free Circulating Library grew tremendously, adding branches in various parts of the city and increasing circulation. By 1901, when the New York Free Circulating Library was incorporated with several smaller free circulating libraries in the city to form the Circulation Department of the New York Public Library (now the Branch Libraries System), the system had eleven branches throughout Manhattan and over 1,600,000 volumes, as well as a traveling branch.

The Library branch system owes most of its development to the great steel baron, Andrew Carnegie, who saw libraries as a means of educating the public by helping people to help themselves. Carnegie had long supported the New York Public Library, and made several contributions to it during the 1890s. His largest gift came in 1901. Early in the year Carnegie had sold his steel company to J.P. Morgan and was casting about for a serious philanthropy to which he could direct his attention and his millions. The Library was the fortunate recipient of both. In March of 1901 Carnegie pledged \$5,200,000 for the establishment of 65 library branches to cost \$80,000 each, with the stipulation that the City provide the sites and continuing maintenance.

An agreement was reached in July, 1901, in which the city would acquire the sites for 42 branches. The New York Public Library would construct and equip the libraries with the Carnegie funds and operate them as free circulating libraries on lease from the city, which would maintain the properties. In 1902 an amended agreement increased the number of proposed buildings to 50.

Responsible for the design of the branches, the New York Public Library appointed a committee of three to study the project: Charles F. McKim of McKim, Mead & White, Walter Cook (who designed Carnegie's home on 91st Street) of Babb, Cook & Willard, and John M. Carrère of

Carrère & Hastings, designers of the main building of the New York Public Library at Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street. The group proposed that the branch libraries be uniform in materials, character, and scale, achieving variety from their respective sites and a difference in dimensions. Such a scheme would link the buildings aesthetically and prove economical at the same time. The architects were to come from the three firms represented by the members of the committee. Although Carnegie advocated competitive bidding, this plan, which gave the commissions to the three firms, was eventually carried out. The branch buildings all followed a general pattern of a three-story building with an adult circulation department on the ground floor, a children's room on the second story, and an adult reading room above.

#### The West 135th Street Branch Library

The first Carnegie-funded branch, the Yorkville Branch on East 79th Street ( a Designated New York City Landmark) was opened in December, 1902. Although the city intended to build ten branches per year, it was stymied by various bureaucratic problems. Delays caused an increase in cost as property values rose so that fewer buildings than originally planned could be built with the Carnegie funds. In all, 39 branches were constructed with money from the Carnegie contribution. The last, the Hunt's Point branch, was completed in 1929.

The West 135th Street Branch was one of the first structures completed under the Carnegie plan. Finished in 1904, the three-story limestone library dominated the Harlem blockfront with its classically elegant facade on 135th Street. The Branch is attributed to Charles McKim and William Kendall of McKim, Mead & White, the firm responsible for eleven of the branch libraries constructed with Carnegie funds. The firm was one of the most productive and famous in the history of American architecture and played a leading role in promoting classical styles in America during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The influence of McKim, Mead & White was especially strong in New York. The firm designed many buildings, both private and public, in and around the City, of which approximately 75 have been designated New York City Landmarks or are in New York City Historic Districts. Their designs for the New York Public Library branches, while all different, are variations on the same, strictly classical theme.

At the time of the West 135th Street Branch's construction, Harlem had become a fashionable suburb. The area was annexed to the City in 1873, and from 1878-1881 three lines of the elevated railroad were extended as far north as 129th Street, precipitating the development of new residential neighborhoods. Exclusive homes, such as Striver's Row (in the St. Nicholas Historic District) which was designed in part by Stanford White in 1891, were erected for affluent, established New Yorkers, people of wealth and taste. Harlem came to epitomize the ultimate in fashion and elegance.

When the West 135th Street Branch was completed the immediate neighborhood was composed of middle - and upper - middle class Jewish families, but the character of Harlem was just beginning to undergo a major transformation. At the turn of the century, 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 Harlem's development 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 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 1906-10 construction of Pennsylvania Station. Harlem offered good housing in large quantities to New York's blacks for the first time. People talked of "moving up to Harlem", and just as it had been an exclusive white community Harlem became an exclusive black community, with more than 50,000 blacks living there by 1915.

During the early 1920s the West 135th Street Branch Librarian, Ernestine Rose, began to compile a small collection of black literature and history for the Library. Situated in a community that was now predominantly black, the collection was frequently in demand, and in 1925 the Branch was officially renamed the 135th Street Branch Division of Negro Literature. The scope of the collection increased dramatically the next year with the acquisition of the famed Schomburg Collection, purchased by the New York Public Library with a \$10,000 Carnegie Corporation gift. Compiled by a black Puerto Rican named Arthur A. Schomburg, the collection offered a comprehensive view of black culture and history. It was composed of more than 5,000 volumes, 3,000 manuscripts, and 2,000 etchings, highlighted by several very rare and early black-authored works.

Arthur Schomburg (1874-1938) spent much of his life trying to disprove a teacher's remark that the "negro had no history." Born in Puerto Rico, he came to New York in 1891, and later joined the Bankers Trust Company where he worked for over twenty years. Schomburg wrote countless articles on black life and culture while conducting a continuous, world-wide search for material to add to his collection of books and manuscripts.

In 1930 Schomburg became Curator of the Negro Collection of the Fisk University Library in Tennessee, and in 1932 a grant from the Carnegie Corporation enabled the New York Public Library to appoint him Curator of the Schomburg Collection. He remained with the Library until his death in 1938.

During the 1920s there was a significant rise of black scholars and writers whose ability was recognized by both blacks and whites. Harlem became the center of the "new Negro Renaissance: and attracted intellectuals from across the nation. Theater, art, and political groups thrived and the Library became the cultural center of Harlem, the scene of weekly social and political discussions as well as lectures by such notable figures as Franz Boas, W.E.B. DuBois, and Carl Van Doren. The building housed a W.P.A. Writers Project and the American Negro Theater, where such actors as Harry Belafonte and Sidney Poitier made acting debuts on the basement stage.

The Collection benefited from constant contributions and eventually outgrew its home. A 1941 rear addition designed by Louis Abramson, the Countee Cullen Branch Library at 104 W. 136th Street, doubled the size of the building, and the collection was installed on the third floor. The McKim, Mead & White building subsequently housed a children's reading room. In time, the new addition proved inadequate for the growing collection, which was renamed the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in 1972. A new Schomburg Center erected on Lenox Avenue between 135th and 136th Streets was dedicated in September, 1980, providing excellent housing for the Collection, now composed of 55,000 volumes, 4,500 recordings, hundreds of thousands of manuscripts, sheet music, prints, posters, microfilm, clippings, and tapes.

### Description

Symmetrically massed, the Library building is characterized by a formal neo-classical design that is typical of the work of McKim, Mead & White. The three-story limestone building has a rusticated ground floor pierced by square-headed openings set over panels and cleanly cut into the facade. A recessed entry with double doors appears on the right, approached by a short stoop with iron railings and flanked by handsome, Renaissance-inspired lanterns. A window on the far left of the facade balances the placement of the entry, while a double window with narrow flanking lights marks the center of the wall. A rectangular transom appears over the door. The first story is divided from the floors above by a wide band course ornamented with a richly carved alternating pattern of wreaths and open books.

The second and third floors are incorporated in a handsome composition broken into three bays by tall pilasters that span both stories. The outer bays are composed of large double-hung windows with tiny third story windows above, while the central bay is lit by a handsome Palladian window. The crowning fanlight, capped by a heavy cartouche carved with the seal of New York, is distinguished by a handsome, decorative wrought-iron grille. The building is crowned by a broad, modillioned, overhanging cornice and a simple entablature, ornamented with round plaques and the inscription, "New York Public Library". The composition is dignified and emphatically ordered, typical of the sober approach that the firm of McKim Mead & White took to their institutional building designs.

Although the West 136th Street Countee Cullen Branch addition is still used as a public Library Branch, the McKim Mead & White Building currently stands vacant. Plans are underway to convert the structure into a museum connected with the new Schomburg Center building. The McKim, Mead & White structure is a fine example of the firm's work and makes a distinctive addition to the blockfront. It is an important link in the development of the New York Branch Library System which had

a profound impact on the city, and is historically significant as a national center of black culture.

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Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Sidney Ditzion, *Arsenals of a Democratic Culture, A Social History of the American Public Library Movement in New England and the Middle States from 1850-1900* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1947), p. 101.



## FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the building of the Schomburg Collection for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Schomburg Collection building is one of eleven elegant branch buildings designed by McKim, Mead & White for the New York Public Library system; that it is distinguished by fine neo-Renaissance design; that it was a center for black cultural events during the 1920s; that it housed the famed Schomburg Collection on black history and culture; and that it is nationally significant as a site where the documentation of the black experience was a long and important tradition.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly 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 a Landmark the Schomburg Collection for Research in Black Culture (originally the West 135th Street Branch Library), New York Public Library, 103 West 135th Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1920, Lot 26, Borough of Manhattan as its Landmark Site.

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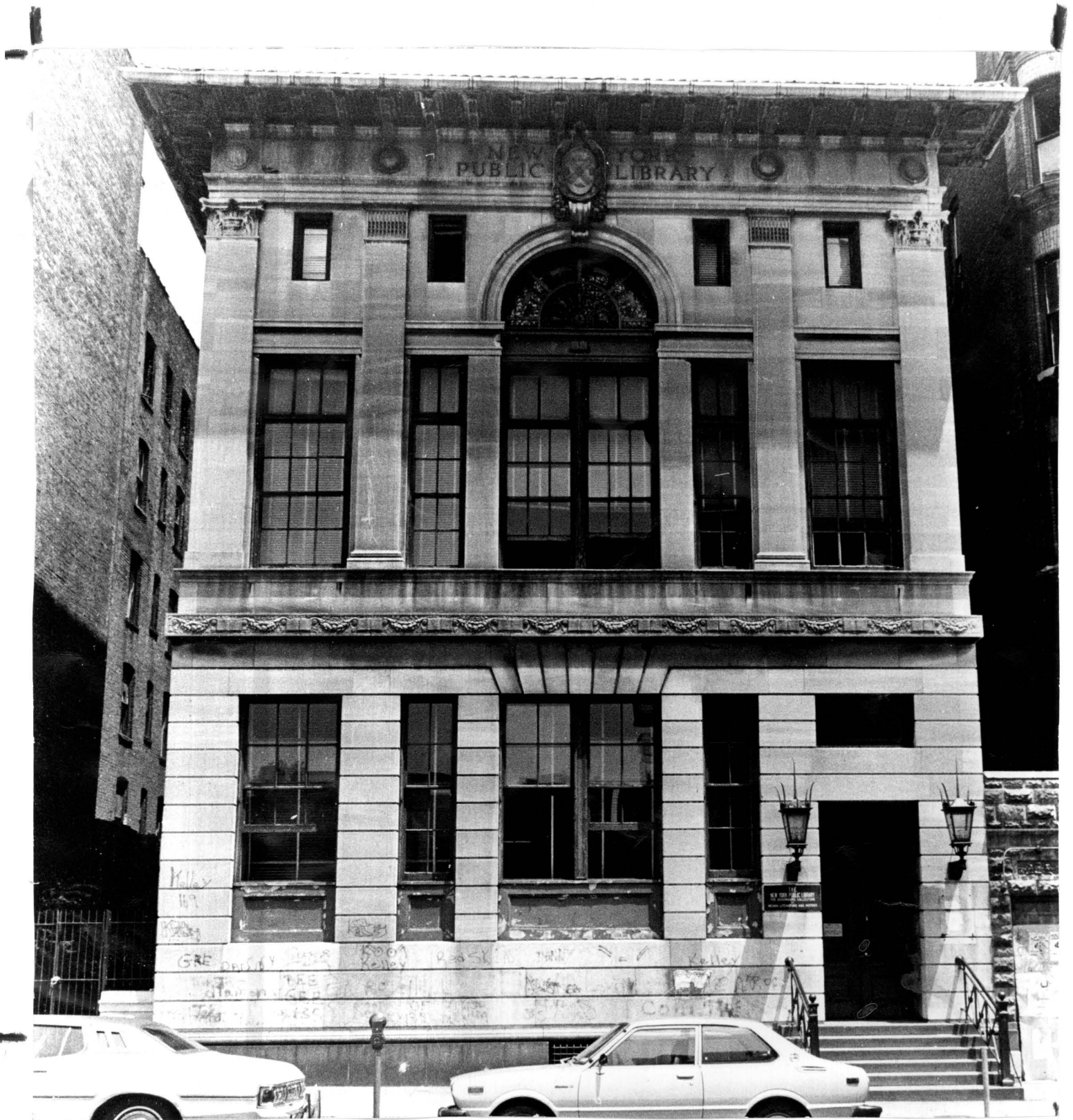
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Schomburg Collection. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.





Schomburg Collection for Research in Black Culture  
103 West 135th Street  
Built 1904-1905

Architects: McKim, Mead & White