

A Brief History of Harlem: Overview

The area north of 59th Street in Manhattan was called "Muscoota" ("flat place") by the Lenape. In 1658 Governor Peter Stuyvesant built the Dutch town of "Nieuw Haarlem" in Muscoota. With the arrival of the English in 1664, Nieuw Haarlem's name was simplified to "Harlem." In 1672 slaves built the first road from lower Manhattan to Harlem over an old Native American trail—we know it today as Broadway. The Manhattan street system, planned in 1811, altered Harlem's appearance from a valley of farmland to a residential area. In stages, Harlem's hills were leveled; streams were filled; and transportation was improved. Urbanization began with the building of the Croton Water Aqueduct in 1842 down present-day Amsterdam Avenue and the IRT (Inter-borough Rapid Transit) subway line in 1904.

Throughout the 1900s various ethnic groups migrated to different sections of Harlem, giving more definition to East, West, and Central Harlem. Subsequent deficits after the depression in 1929, urban flight to the suburbs beginning in the 1950s, continuously poor building maintenance, and abandonment of property hit Harlem hard. The mid-1960s saw the start of a large number of urban renewal projects, often at the request of involved community groups. Today Harlem is a center of diverse immigrant populations from the Middle East to South America. Artistically and communally, with restoration and renovation, and scores of new homeowners, artists, and immigrants attracted by the neighborhood's history and possibility, all of Harlem is currently said to be going through a second renaissance.

East Harlem

The most important development to affect East Harlem's growth was the construction from 1832 to 1835 of the New York and Harlem Railroad running along Park Avenue from City Hall to the Harlem River. A real estate venture, as well as a means of passenger and freight transportation, the railroad helped to unify the island but also created environmental problems and a barrier between East and Central Harlem.

The first group of Italian immigrants arrived in East Harlem in 1878; not long after, the eastern area was known as "Italian Harlem." At its height in 1930, Italian Harlem had 89,000 first- and second-generation Italian Americans residing. The western part of East Harlem was largely occupied by Eastern European Jewish communities, begetting the area, "Jewish Harlem." Tenements were built at rapid rates, specifically to keep up with the immigrant populations. These buildings tended to be overcrowded, in poor condition and not well maintained.

Consequently, the mid-nineteenth century saw the migration of the immigrant Jewish population from East to West Harlem. By the 1930s, the Puerto Rican immigrant community in East Harlem was sizeable, and by 1950, below 125th Street, the areas formerly known as Italian and Jewish Harlem, became known as *El Barrio*, or "Spanish Harlem," where some of New York's most famous artists, musicians, and writers have worked and lived, including Tito Puente, Ray Barretto, Julia de Burgos, and James de la Vega.

Central Harlem

As African Americans arrived in Central Harlem with the completion of the IRT, landlords raised rents and subdivided apartments, beginning a legacy of overcrowding and poor building maintenance that formed the foundation of slum conditions. Most African Americans were concentrated in Central Harlem, with East Harlem's Puerto Rican population growing in the 1930s, and areas to the West and North being almost exclusively White.

Jazz clubs provided jobs and income to the area. Theaters, libraries, and institutions like the YMCA provided outlets for cultural expression in the community. Poets, musicians, writers, performers of all kind came from or flocked to Central Harlem. Known as the heart of Harlem, Central Harlem quickly became the urban cultural center of America. Near its geographical

center, The Apollo Theater was founded in 1934 and became the spot to 'make it.' Sometimes launching a whole new genre of music altogether, The Apollo had a crucial role in the emergence of jazz, swing, be-bop, R&B, gospel, blues, soul, and hip-hop. Musical pioneers and legends such as Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn, Sammy Davis, Jr., James Brown, and so many more, got their starts on the Apollo stage.

West Harlem

Throughout the nineteenth century, Manhattanville, just south of West Harlem, bustled around a wharf active with ferry and daily river deliveries. It was the first stop on the northbound Hudson railroad, and the hub of daily stage coach, omnibus, and streetcar lines. Estates, hotels, and houses of entertainment shot up and made West Harlem an alluring suburban retreat from city life in lower Manhattan. Some of New York's most illustrious early families, such as the Delanceys, Bleekers, and Rikers maintained large estates there. The mid-nineteenth century saw an influx of Catholic Irish, Germans, and the immigrant Jewish population from East Harlem. The mass migration of African Americans into West Harlem began in 1904 with the advent of the IRT.

During the 1920s Harlem thrived as a major entertainment center and showcase for talented Black artists. Affluent African Americans began moving to Hamilton Heights. The Harlem Renaissance was in full swing, and many of the new residents were artists, writers, musicians, government workers, and professionals. It is because of these residents, and the institutional influence they were able to obtain, that West Harlem has been able to maintain its astounding beauty and architecture to this day.

Sources: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harlem> , <http://www.harlemtmorris.org/history.htm> , www.myharlem.org , <http://www.east-harlem.com> , http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_Harlem , <http://www.eastharlempreservation.org/docs/Information.htm> , www.westharlemcpo.org , www.weact.org , <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harlem>