



At Home in Harlem



From its pre-history to the Nieuw Haarlem settlement and forward to present-day, Harlem has always been a dynamic and ever-changing neighborhood.

Early Harlem

Before the arrival of settlers, the neighborhood we call Harlem was inhabited by the Native American People known as the Lenape. Named for the Dutch city of Haarlem, under the leadership of Governor Peter Stuyvesant of the Dutch West India Company, the settlement of Nieuw Haarlem a farming village was incorporated in 1660. In 1664, the English took control of the Dutch colony of New Netherlands, which included settlements such as

Schenectady, New Amsterdam and Heemstede (known today as Hempstead). Under English control, Nieuw Haarlem became Harlem. The village remained small and rural, growing slowly. In the 1700s, Harlem became the area in which the wealthy of New York City, then confined to the very southern tip of Manhattan Island, vacationed. One such example is the oldest remaining house in the borough of Manhattan, the Morris-Jumel Mansion located in Washington Heights, built in 1765 for Roger Morris.

Harlem during Hamilton's time

During the American Revolution the Continental Army under George Washington's command began to fortify the New York City area, including the area around Harlem, to prepare for a likely British invasion force. After early victories in the area the British had established their base in North America at lower Manhattan. As the British marched north, they encountered the Continental Army in Harlem. On September 16, 1776 the Battle of Harlem Heights was fought in western Harlem near the area of what is now West 125th street. Captain Alexander Hamilton was among the ranks of the Continental Army who engaged the British. Although the Continental Army was outnumbered 5,000 to 2,000, the British were outflanked and nearly became surrounded, forcing them to retreat south to present-day 106th St. and earning General Washington's first victory in the war.

Through this encounter, Hamilton may have first been introduced to the area. Hamilton later often docked his little boat nearby when on fishing expeditions as he traveled up the Hudson. Yellow Fever epidemics flared each fall in New York City and, those with the ability to do so, moved to summer residences elsewhere. With that in mind, in the fall of 1799 the Hamilton and his in-laws, the Church's, rented a country home in the Harlem Heights area. Then in 1800, Hamilton purchased a fifteen acre parcel from the pharmacist Jacob Schieffelin, and an additional twenty acres from Samuel Bradhurst, a physician. Once combined Hamilton's property had striking streams that led to a duck pond, and views of the Hudson River, East River and Harlem River. The property was bisected by Bloomingdale Road, a local segment of which is known today as Hamilton Place.

Contemporary Harlem The village of Harlem remained rural in the early 1800s, with country estates on the heights overlooking the Hudson River. The Schieffelin home was to the West of the property and the Bradhursts to the East (Bradhurst Avenue in Harlem is named for Samuel Bradhurst). In central Harlem lay the Hamilton's property, which stretched from approximately West 140th St north to West 145th St, and from St. Nicholas Avenue west to Broadway. Alexander Hamilton's home, when completed in 1802, was located in the vicinity of present-day West 143rd St and Convent Avenue.

As the City's development spread, the character of the area would soon change. The Commissioner's Plan of 1811 set forth a grid plan on Manhattan Island from 1st Street north to 155th Street. It would be nearly 60 years before the grid arrived at 155th Street; however land speculators in the 1850s through 1870s began to recognize the changes to come and began to parcel out land among the many large estates. In the early 1900s, African Americans began to migrate to the North to escape the Jim Crow South. As the subway system extended uptown

many settled in Harlem, changing the neighborhood demographics quickly. By 1930, Harlem was approximately 70% African American, up from approximately 10% in 1910. The period between the World Wars came to be known as the Harlem Renaissance for the notable figures and their works that arose from the neighborhood. Notables such as Langston Hughes, W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Arthur Schomburg, Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, and Duke Ellington flourished in the serenity of Harlem.

Hit hard by job losses during the Great Depression, Harlem entered into a decline that lasted decades. This decline was exacerbated by inequality in civil rights and population declines of nearly a third of the community's residents.

Harlem entered an era of revitalization in the 1990s that continues into the present. With extensive new construction and rehabilitation of older buildings, Harlem continues to be an exciting and changing place that honors its past and looks forward to its future.

