



## **A brief history of Harlem and its real estate from the 1637 Dutch settlement through today**

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Harlem. The name conjures different images depending on who mentions the name. The first European settlement in what is now Harlem was by Dutch settlers in 1637. The settlement was formalized in the 1600s as Nieuw Haarlem (New Haarlem), after the Dutch city of Haarlem, under leadership of Peter Stuyvesant. The English took control of the new Netherland colony and anglicized the name of the town to Harlem. Harlem was "a synonym for elegant living through a good part of the nineteenth century." Wealthy farmers, called 'patroons,' maintained country estates largely on the heights overlooking the Hudson River. In the years between about 1850 and 1870, the village of Harlem declined. Many large estates, including the Hamilton Grange of Alexander Hamilton, were auctioned off as the soil was depleted and crop yields fell. The impoverished village was taken over by the city of New York in 1873. Recovery came when elevated railroads were extended to Harlem in 1880. With the construction of the els, urbanized development occurred very rapidly, with townhouses, apartments, and tenements springing up practically overnight. Early entrepreneurs had grandiose schemes for Harlem: polo was actually played at the original Polo Grounds, later to become home of the New York Giants baseball team, and Oscar Hammerstein I opened the Harlem Opera House on East 125th St. in 1889. In 1893, Harlem Monthly Magazine wrote that, "it is evident to the most superficial observer that the centre of fashion, wealth, culture, and intelligence, must, in the near future, be found in the ancient and honorable village of Harlem." Small groups of black people lived in Harlem as early as 1880, especially in the area around 125th St. and "Negro tenements" on West 130th St. The mass migration of blacks into the area began in 1904, thanks to another real estate crash, the worsening of conditions for blacks elsewhere in the city, and the leadership of a black real estate entrepreneur named Phillip Payton, Jr. Harlem experienced another real estate bust in 1904-1905; landlords could not find white renters for their properties, so Philip Payton stepped in to bring blacks. His company, the Afro-American Realty Co., was almost single-handedly responsible for migration of blacks from their previous neighborhoods, the Tenderloin, San Juan Hill (now the site of Lincoln Center), and Hell's Kitchen in the west 40s and 50s. As the building stock decayed, landlords converted many buildings into "single room occupancies," or SROs, essentially private homeless shelters. In many cases, the income from these buildings could not support the fines and city taxes charged to their owners, or the houses suffered damage that would have been expensive to fix, and the buildings were abandoned. In the 1970s, this process accelerated to the point that Harlem, for the first time since before WWI, had a lower population density than the rest of Manhattan. Between 1970 and 1980, for example, Frederick Douglass Blvd. between 110th St. and 125th St. in central Harlem lost 42% of its population and 23% of its remaining housing stock. By 1987, 65% of the buildings in Harlem were owned by the city of New York, and many had become empty shells, convenient centers for drug

dealing and other antisocial activity. After years of false starts, Harlem began to see rapid gentrification in the late 1990s. This was driven by changing federal and city policies, including fierce crime-fighting and a concerted effort to develop the retail corridor on 125th St. Starting in 1994, the Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone funneled money into new developments. Finally, wealthier New Yorkers, having gentrified every other part of Manhattan and much of Brooklyn, had nowhere else to go. The number of housing units in Harlem increased 14% between 1990 and 2000 and the rate of increase has been much more rapid in recent years. Property values in Central Harlem increased nearly 300% during the 1990s, while the rest of the city saw only a 12% increase. Even empty shells of buildings in the neighborhood were, as of 2007, routinely selling for nearly \$1 million each. Former U.S. President Bill Clinton has rented office space at 55 West 125th St. since completing his second term in the White House in 2001. In the 1920s, Harlem was the center of a flowering of black culture that became known as the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance was a time of amazing artistic production, but ironically, blacks were sometimes excluded from viewing what their peers were creating. Some jazz venues, including most famously the Cotton Club, where Duke Ellington played, and Connie's Inn were restricted to whites only. Others, including the Renaissance Ballroom and the Savoy Ballroom, were integrated.

The Apollo Theater opened on 125th St. on January 26, 1934, in a former burlesque house. The Savoy Ballroom, on Lenox Ave., was a renowned venue for swing dancing, and was immortalized in a popular song of the era, *Stompin' At The Savoy*. In the 1920s and 1930s, between Lenox and Seventh Aves. in Central Harlem, over 125 entertainment places operated, including speakeasies, cellars, lounges, cafes, taverns, supper clubs, rib joints, theaters, dance halls, and bars and grills.

Though Harlem musicians and writers are particularly well remembered, the community has also hosted numerous actors and theater companies, including the New Heritage Repertory Theater, National Black Theater, Lafayette Players, Harlem Suitcase Theater, The Negro Playwrights, American Negro Theater, and the Rose McClendon Players. In 1936, Orson Welles produced his famous black *Macbeth* at the Lafayette Theater in Harlem. Grand theaters from the late 19th and early 20th centuries were torn down or converted to churches, and Harlem lacked any permanent performance space until the creation of the Gatehouse Theater in an old pumping station on 135th St. in 2006. F. Scott Fitzgerald lived at 200 Claremont Ave. while working in advertising and writing *This Side of Paradise*, Langston Hughes went to Columbia. Zora Neale Hurston went to Barnard. Dustin Hoffman used to live on 109th St. between Amsterdam and Broadway, north side of the street, and his landlady used to take care of him when he was broke. Art Garfunkel and Paul Simon went to Columbia. Joan Rivers went to Barnard College. Singer Lauryn Hill attended Columbia and international opera star Leontyne Price lived in the international building on Columbia's campus. From 1987 through 1990, the city laid new water mains and sewers installed sidewalks, curbs, traffic lights, street lights, and planted trees. Two years later, national chains opened branches on 125th St. for the first time-The Body Shop opened a store at 125th St. and 5th Ave. (still extant as of 2007), and a Ben & Jerry's ice cream franchise employing formerly homeless people opened across the street. The development of the region would leap forward with the introduction of the Upper Manhattan Empowerment Zone, which brought \$300 million in development funds and \$250 million in tax breaks. A few years later plans were laid for shopping malls, movie theaters, and museums. Five years later, the revitalization of 125th St. resumed, with the construction of a Starbucks outlet backed in part by Magic Johnson, the first supermarket in Harlem in 30 years, the Harlem USA retail complex, which included one of the first first-run movie theaters in many years and a new home for

the Studio Museum in Harlem. In the same year, former President Clinton took office space in Harlem. Harlem's history continues to be one of recreating itself. It is currently recreating itself to be a "synonym for elegant living" and "evident to the most superficial observer that the centre of fashion, wealth, culture, and intelligence, must, in the near future, be found in the ancient and honorable village of Harlem."

Virgil Blackstone is a commercial sales associate at GMAC Metropolitan Properties, New York, N.Y.

New York Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540