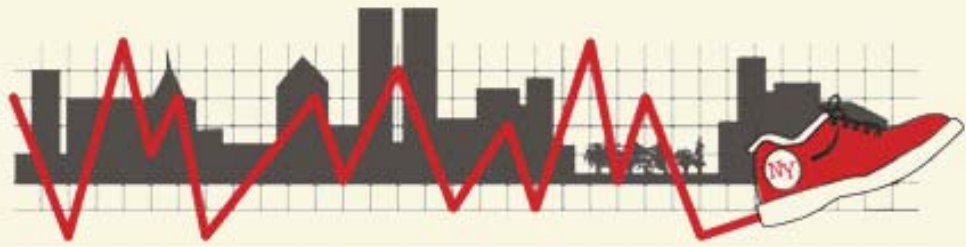


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LIVING IN

Sugar Hill: Reclaiming a Place Where the Music Once Played



Don Hogan Charles/The New York Times

THEY TOOK THE 'A' TRAIN Home buyers have made row houses, like these on St. Nicholas Avenue, some of the hottest properties in Sugar Hill.

WHEN Duke Ellington made "Take the 'A' Train" his theme song in 1942, he established forever in music what everyone already knew. Sugar Hill was the place to go, the place to be, in Harlem. He lived on Sugar Hill and so did his collaborator Billy Strayhorn, who scribbled down the tune when the homesick band was playing in Chicago.

Sugar Hill, a ritzy neighborhood for the black bourgeoisie. Sugar Hill, the mythic center of the Harlem Renaissance between the World Wars. Sugar Hill, the good life.

For decades, African-Americans all over the country dreamed of living on Sugar Hill, but throughout its history, it has drawn people of all hues and nationalities.

"The biggest misconception about Sugar Hill is that at any time it was all black," said Willie Kathryn Suggs, a former ABC television producer who became a realtor after buying a Sugar Hill town house two decades ago. "Of all the Harlem neighborhoods, it has always been the most diverse."

The word "hill," too, is misleading, because the neighborhood, part of Hamilton Heights, perches on a bluff high above the Harlem Plain. When affluent and influential African-Americans began moving in after World War I, the name "Sugar Hill" came into use, probably because "sugar" was said to signify money and the sweet life. David Levering Lewis, describing it in "When Harlem Was in Vogue," wrote that in 1929 "Sugar Hill, a citadel of stately apartment buildings and liveried doormen on a rock, soared above the Polo Grounds and the rest of Harlem like a city of the Incas."

In its broadest geographic definition, Sugar Hill extends westward from Edgecombe Avenue to Amsterdam Avenue. The southern boundary sometimes is placed at 145th Street, or into the West 130's where the topography starts climbing toward Coogan's Bluff. But the heart of Sugar Hill is in the Hamilton Heights-Sugar Hill Historic District between 145th and 155th Streets, from Edgecombe Avenue to a border approaching Amsterdam and squiggling down to Convent Avenue.

In those few blocks lived pioneering civil rights activists like W. E. B. Du Bois, Walter White, Roy Wilkins and the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell Sr.; writers like Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison and Zora Neale Hurston; musicians like Paul Robeson and Cab Calloway; and professionals like Thurgood Marshall, the first African-American to become a United States Supreme Court justice. Even into the late 1950's, Sugar Hill still delivered the good life, older residents recall, but by the 1970's, many of the row houses had been divided into rooming houses and heroin was sold on the streets.

Another renaissance is under way as Sugar Hill addresses regain some of their old cachet, pumped up by the hot real estate market and by the neighborhood's activist tradition. Prospective buyers come from downtown, Europe and Asia to bid on 19th-century town houses, some priced at considerably more than \$2 million. African-American professionals have rediscovered the neighborhood. Actors by the dozens rent in historic apartment buildings.

The Hamilton Grange Public Library, which closed all but the first floor in the 1970's, recently completed a \$1.2 million renovation. Jazz headliners downtown head uptown to jam at St. Nick's Pub. The Dance Theater of Harlem has its headquarters on West 152nd Street. When the 16th annual Hamilton Heights House and Garden Tour takes place today, half of the properties being shown will be in the heart of Sugar Hill.

The neighborhood has not fully returned to its old glory, however. The stately apartment buildings do not have the liveried doormen of days past, for instance. "It is the extremes right now," said Nora Cole, an actor, who on a Saturday morning was weeding one of two pocket parks maintained by volunteers on Edgecombe Avenue above Jackie Robinson Park, the old Colonial Park.

A SOLID core of well-to-do African-American families passes properties from generation to generation, yet other residents still toss disposable diapers into the Edgecombe pocket park, Ms. Cole said. Overall crime rates have dropped more than 60 percent in the last decade, according to statistics from the 30th Precinct, but drugs are still sold on some street corners

Paula Hill, with three children under 8, says the attraction is space, which sometimes includes a backyard, and the parks in every direction. But most of all, it's the sense of community, she said. "In seven years in Greenwich Village nobody knew us, but here we have a parents' network to help each other out and address issues like schools," she said. Through it, more than 90 families keep in touch online.

While many children attend private schools in the city, a group of parents has established the Hamilton Heights Academy, an alternative school with a diverse socioeconomic mix and a progressive curriculum, within Public School 125. Ultimately to have kindergarten through eighth grade, the academy will enroll about 100 students next fall in kindergarten through second grade. Also in the neighborhood is Mott Hall (Intermediate School 223), with an academically rigorous program in math, science and technology for the fourth through eighth grades.

Until the Eighth Avenue elevated railroad reached 145th Street in 1879, the area was mostly rural, a country-home favorite because of its cool breezes. Alexander Hamilton's last home, the Grange, originally stood at what is now

143rd Street and Convent Avenue. The national memorial was moved to 287 Convent Avenue in Hamilton Heights in 1889.

Residential development took off between the 1880's and World War I, spurred by subway construction in 1904. Many lots are only 16 feet wide, but architects like Henri Fouchaux and Frederick P. Dinkelberg designed block-long compositions for white upper-class clients.

Luxury apartment houses followed in the early 1900's. The Colonial Parkway Apartments at 409 Edgecombe became Sugar Hill's most desirable address with tenants like Jules Bledsoe, who sang "Ol' Man River" in "Show Boat." The six-story Garrison Apartments, originally named Emsworth Hall, built on Convent Avenue in 1910, opened as an African-American co-op in 1929. When an apartment becomes available, it is quickly snatched up, says Nancy Love, an agent with the Corcoran Group. A two-bedroom apartment listed at \$300,000 was on the market less than a week this spring.

More recent construction includes the 1956 Hillview Apartments, which since 1999 has been popular among foreigners seeking pieds-à-terre in Harlem. A prewar building on Convent has just been converted into the 10-unit Sugar Hill Condominiums, which quickly sold out with prices ranging from \$339,000 to \$449,000. The Bradhurst Urban Renewal Area south of 143rd and east of Edgecombe is being developed for middle-income families, adding a chain supermarket and pharmacy within walking distance of Sugar Hill.

The biggest real estate activity is in row houses, many of which haven't been on the market in decades, if ever. More are on the market now because the owners are dying or becoming too infirm to climb the stairs. Some properties are little more than shells. Lawrence Comroe, a vice president at Corcoran, said that a facade without a roof runs around \$575,000 and up.

At the other end of the spectrum is a 114-year-old town house with well-maintained original details like basket-weave lattice, offered for \$2.3 million.

In between are town houses in need of considerable renovation. Lorraine D. Gilbert of ReMax Upscale Properties sees more buyers restoring rooming houses to their original single-family status, but buildings "without issues" — claims from tenants — command higher prices.

But anyone planning to rent or buy in the neighborhood should consider more than real estate values, the people who live on Sugar Hill say. It's not just high ceilings, parquet floors and gracious space. It's involvement, beginning with the early N.A.A.C.P. leaders and continuing today among parents working for better neighborhood schools.

Even in the worst of times, Sugar Hill residents speak up. A small group of female volunteers in 1985 reclaimed an eyesore triangle plot at St. Nicholas and Convent Avenues. Led by Luana Robinson, the women created a Convent Garden, today a jewel of green space with lush grass, flower beds and a gazebo.

ABOUT STEP OUT NYC

On March 24, 2004 the Commission on Women's Issues Health Committee announced its "Step Out New York City" (SO NYC) program. Step Out NYC is designed to encourage New Yorkers to increase their physical activities and keep track of their efforts on line. Step Out NYC's "Track Your Progress" online tool is designed to help you track progress with your individual physical activity goals. www.nyc.gov
The Best Physical Activity is the Kind You Enjoy!

For an average sedentary adult, engaging in at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity on most days of the week is enough to obtain health benefits. This activity can be spread out over the day, for example, in shorter periods of 10 to 15 minutes each.

Physical activity does not need to be strenuous to be beneficial, although increasing the time, intensity, and/or frequency of physical activity will result in even greater health benefits. If you have not been active in a while you should start out slowly and make gradual changes to increase your physical activity level.

Harlem Walk Route and Map

Sunday, June 27, 2004. 2 PM. Step Out Harlem. Sponsored by Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, The Commission on Women's Issues, NYC Department of Health & Mental Hygiene, Lifetime TV, American Cancer Society, Step Out NYC and Take a Walk, New York!, We will Take A Walk in Harlem, thru parks, passing famous landmarks and historical sites and promoting walking for health. There will be 1, 3 and 5 mile segments of this walk. Meet at Marcus Garvey Memorial Park, entrance on 124th St. at Fifth Avenue. The 2, 3, 4, or 5 to 125th St. are closest to the Park; The A or D to 125th are also OK. Walk across 125th St. to 5th Ave. and one block south to 124th St. Bring water and snacks. Wear a hat and use sunscreen.



This walk will start in Marcus Garvey Memorial Park; we will gather in the northwest corner of the Park (near 124th Street and Mt. Morris Park West). Leaving the Park via the Fifth Avenue and 124th St. exit, we will proceed up Fifth Avenue to 125th St. We will walk along 125th Street from Fifth Avenue to Saint Nicholas Avenue. Heading north on St. Nicholas, we will walk along side St. Nicholas Park. 135th St. and St Nicholas will be the end of our 1-mile segment.

Continuing north on St. Nicholas to 162nd St. and turning right (east) onto 162nd St., we will pass Jumel Terrace and the Jumel Mansion. We will turn right onto Edgecombe Avenue and proceed south, past Jackie Robinson Park to 155th St. where our 3-mile segment will end. We continue along Edgecombe, turning left (west) onto West 135th St.. We will cross 135th St. to Fifth Avenue, turn right (south) and return to Marcus Garvey Park where the walk will end.

What is the Take a Walk, New York! Program?

Take a Walk New, York! is a program of free, guided urban adventure walks that take place on weekends in all five boroughs of New York City. The program is a great way for New Yorkers to walk for health while exploring their city. Take a Walk, New York! is designed and implemented by the Neighborhood Open Space Coalition, and is co-sponsored by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. The Take a Walk, New York! program is open to everyone.



Our walks will take you to interesting, exciting, educational open spaces throughout the five boroughs of the City while promoting physical activity for your health. The walks will be planned in stages so that you can do shorter or longer segments. The pace of the walks will be geared to the level of the walkers in the group. All of the walks will start and end at public transportation access points. All walks are free. Visit our website: www.walkyny.org

or telephone 212-228-3126 for further information.