

When Duke Ellington sang Billy Strayhorn's song *Take the "A" Train*, he explained "You must take the A-Train, to go to Sugar Hill way up in Harlem,"¹ and I am glad he did, because I always have a little trouble understanding the subway map. So, that is just what I did, I took the "A" up to 145th and St. Nicholas Avenue and found myself in the legendary neighborhood of Sugar Hill. Getting there was the easy part, defining Sugar Hill's boundaries proved to be much harder. The area known as Sugar Hill has been claimed as part of Harlem, Hamilton Heights and Washington Heights; and Sugar Hill, much like other neighborhoods in New York City, has a hard to define perimeter. A brief look into the past will help define the Sugar Hill boundaries, and how it became famous.

The area surrounding Sugar Hill was "established in 1658 by Dutch Governor Peter Stuyvesant and named Nieuw Haarlem after the Dutch city of Harlem. Throughout the Dutch, British, and colonial periods, rich farms were located in the region's flat, eastern portion."² In the fall of 1776 early battles of the Revolutionary War took place between General George Washington's Colonial Army and the British Army in the area now known to be West 135th street and West 145th street.³ In the early 1800s Alexander Hamilton lived on a 32 acre estate to the south and west of present day Sugar Hill. Today it is hard to imagine that 200 years ago this area was rural. In the late 1830s the rural character began to change with the construction of the Croton Aqueduct along Tenth

¹ Billy Strayhorn, "Take the a-train" Song lyrics, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Take_the_a_train

² <http://www.hometoharlem.com/harlem/hthcult.nsf/harlem/harlemhistory> (15 December 2006)

³ New York City Land Marks Preservation Commission Hamilton Heights/Sugar Hill historic District Designation Report (June 27, 2000) p 5

Avenue (now Amsterdam Avenue), bringing water to the ever growing Manhattan. By the 1840s the area was commonly known as Washington Heights.⁴

Advances in transportation were the next major change to affect Washington Heights. Greater access to the area, first by cable cars then by an elevated train and then the introduction of a subway in 1904, caused the great estates to be sold off into smaller parcels for single dwelling homes. Some of the homes still stand today, including a Romanesque Revival style home at 10 St. Nicholas Place, built for James A Bailey of Barnum and Bailey circus fame.⁵ By the late 1890s, this undefined area of Washington Heights was becoming “one of Manhattan’s finest neighborhoods”⁶

At the turn of the twentieth century, Harlem and Washington Heights were mostly white, but this was the time of “the first wave of the great exodus of Negroes from the South...great numbers of these migrants headed for New York or eventually got there, and naturally the majority went up into Harlem.”⁷ The black population ended up in Harlem because they had been “moved” from previous locations, and it turned out “Harlem had been overbuilt with large, New-law apartment houses, but rapid transportation to that section was very inadequate...and landlords were finding difficulty in keeping houses on the east side of the section filled.” Soon thereafter the Harlem Renaissance began, and some of the more affluent blacks began to set their sights on a part of Washington Heights known as Hamilton Heights, named after its former resident

⁴ NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission, p 7

⁵ See photo appendix page 6

⁶ NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission, p 13

⁷ James Weldon Johnson, “The making of Harlem”n.d. <http://etext.virginia.edu/harlem/JohMakiF.html> (22 January 2007)

Alexander Hamilton. And as “the story goes, the neighborhood formally called Hamilton Heights came to be known as Sugar Hill.”⁸

According to the Encyclopedia of New York City, Sugar Hill was “named by 1919 for the sweet life of its residents.”⁹ By most recent accounts Sugar Hill is bordered to the north by 155th street and to the south by 145th street, and its eastern boundary is Edgecombe Avenue stretching west only a few blocks to Amsterdam Avenue. However, The New York Federal Writers’ Project Guide to 1930s New York extended Sugar Hill down to 138th street, and according to the Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance one of the great addresses of Sugar Hill was 555 Edgecombe Avenue at 160th street, the place jazz pianist Count Basie called home.¹⁰ In When Harlem was in Vogue, David Levering Lewis, refers to 580 St. Nicholas Avenue as “one of Harlem’s swankiest apartment buildings, high on Sugar Hill,”¹¹ at 139th street. The boundaries may be vague, but one thing is for sure, Sugar Hill was the place for blacks to strive for and “making it to ‘the hill’ became a focus of black aspiration, a definition of success.”¹²

Sugar Hill’s brownstones and apartments became home to black celebrities, socialites, intellectuals, politicians, writers and musicians. Between the 1920s and the 1950s Sugar Hill was home to Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, Duke Ellington, Walter White, Joe Lewis, Julius Bledsoe W.E.B. Dubois, Thurgood Marshall, Cab Calloway, Regina Andrews, Ethel Nance, Louella Tucker and many more. It was the place to be for the black elite, a place to come together and exchange ideas, so much so, that the

⁸ Jennifer Kingson Bloom, “Looking to a Name to Revive the Allure of Sugar Hill” New York Times, 5 February 1995. CY6

⁹ Kenneth Jackson, The Encyclopedia of New York City (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 1141

¹⁰ Sandra L West, “Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance” n.d. www.fofweb (22 January 2007)

¹¹ David Levering Lewis, When Harlem Was in Vogue (New York: Penguin Books, 1997) , 127

¹² Michael Henry Adams, “Life Beats Art, Sugar Hill Says” New York Times 24 March 1994 A1

apartment of NAACP executive secretary Walter White's number, 13A at 409 Edgecombe Avenue, was known as the "White House of Harlem."¹³

Sugar Hill was primarily a residential neighborhood, with little commerce or industry. The area was designed as a getaway from the city and the streets were lined with brownstones whose residents commuted to work. There were some small businesses and restaurants, but not much more. During the 1950s Sugar Hill began a decline; many residents began to move to the suburbs and "many of the neighborhood's better known black residents began to move seeking homes on Riverside Drive or in St. Albans, Queens."¹⁴ It was also at this time when the doormen began to vanish and St. Nicholas Avenue began "to fill with bars and saloons, and third-rate diners." And by 1976, according to Dr. Joseph Tait, chairman of the community planning board, "nobody calls it Sugar Hill anymore."¹⁵

When I ventured to Sugar Hill, I got off the subway at 145th Street Station. Back in 1995 a group of Sugar Hill homeowners tried to get the Transit Authority to add Sugar Hill to the station's name and revive the spirit of the Duke Ellington song.¹⁶ Their petition did not change a thing, it is still 145th Street Station. I decided to head east one block to Phat Cribs Realty to see if a realtor could help me discover the boundaries of Sugar Hill. Much to my surprise the realtor informed me Sugar Hill does not exist, and that the area I was referring to was all Hamilton Heights. Upon opening the door to exit I looked across the street and saw two stores side by side, both with names referencing

¹³ Christopher Gray, "Streetscapes/409 Edgecombe Avenue; an Address That Drew the City's Black Elite" New York Times, 24 July 1994

¹⁴ NYC Landmarks Preservation Committee p 21

¹⁵ Ronald Smothers, "Neighborhoods: Sugar Hill in Harlem once a model of sweet life, has soured" New York Times, 14 October 1976 p 40

¹⁶ Bloom CY6

Sugar Hill.¹⁷ Not did they both mention Sugar Hill, but I would say they represent the dichotomy of Sugar Hill of today. On the left is Sugar Hill Java & Tea Lounge, a nice and cute local coffee shop with WiFi internet access, and on the right is the Sugar Hill 99 Cent Store. To me it signifies the clash of cultures in the neighborhood as it tries to redefine itself, through a new renaissance that is under way as Sugar Hill tries to regain its old cachet, fueled by the hot real estate market.¹⁸

Walking the streets of Sugar Hill, everywhere you turn you can see renovation underway, but if you look the other way, boarded up windows. The area is attractive to many because you can find more affordable housing than in lower Manhattan. But, you will need to be prepared to rough it until the full revival of the Sugar Hill takes place—no Starbucks (yet).

Sugar Hill's home to jazz was found at 773 St. Nicholas Avenue, Luckey's Rendezvous, a piano bar owned by Luckey Roberts, a Quaker who did not drink or smoke and the first Harlem pianist to be published in 1913 and recorded in 1916.¹⁹ Famed musicians Art Tatum, Donald Lambert, Sonny Rollins, Billy Stayhorn and singer and actress Claudia Moore would come by for late-night jam sessions. Luckey's is long gone, but its memory lives on at St. Nick's Pub, where jazz can be heard six nights a week (excluding Tuesdays). Don't expect a fancy jazz club; it is just a bare bones bar with great entertainment.

¹⁷ See Photos page 17

¹⁸ "Sugar Hill: Reclaiming the Place where the Music Once Played" New York Times. 6 June 2004

¹⁹ Tom Roberts "Roberts Plays Roberts" n.d.

http://www.jazzbymail.com/viewalbum.aspx?ipid=1184&aid=1094&spc=1094_1184&slc=1345&san=to m%20roberts (07 January 2007)

On my first visit up to Sugar Hill one of my first stops was Nick's Pub.²⁰ It was a cold November afternoon as the streets were beginning to showing the darkness of dusk. As I stood on the corner, looking like a white guy lost in Sugar Hill, debating whether or not to enter a seedy looking bar, I watched as a man standing in the doorway of the Pub sold drugs to a passer by. I thought what the hell, it doesn't mean the inside would be rough, and it wasn't. It was around 4 in the afternoon and there were a few people sitting at the bar and a few people who appeared to be down on their luck eating and drinking in the corner by the door. I was the only white person in the bar, so I ordered and grabbed a seat at the bar. After a few minutes I noticed a back patio and went out to explore.

The patio had a mural immortalizing jazz musicians on the wall, and a man was cleaning off the tables. His name was James, and he was from Columbus, Ohio, but now lives in Sugar Hill. He explained that he left Ohio for Sugar Hill, because it was where the jazz is alive, and people still come to share ideas. He talked of all the famous jazz musicians that played at Luckey's and the newly famous that now play at Nick's. James still believes that Sugar Hill still has the allure it used to, and it is still alive with creativity. I went back into the bar and took my seat, and just listened to what was going on around me. The regulars were enjoying each others conversation, and the person who looked to be the manager finished his meal from a take out container, but before throwing it out he stopped and said out loud "I can't throw this out, there has to be someone outside who hasn't eaten." I was surprised, outside there were "bums" making the neighborhood look bad, but he was concerned for them, his neighbors—the hungry. This, I thought, is Sugar Hill, a community where people look out for each other.

²⁰ See photos p 4

As I left the bar and headed to the subway entrance at 147th street²¹, I stopped to take a picture of the station sign when a man in his 60s began talking to me. I don't think he particularly cared who he was talking to, but he felt like talking and I would do. I asked him how long he had lived in the area, and he responded that he had moved in 1981 and soon would be leaving. He explained that the neighborhood was changing and rents were going up; he wasn't sure when he was leaving but knew it wouldn't be long before he would have to go because his apartment building was up for sale. He said that the neighborhood was being fixed up and soon he and others would be priced out of their homes. He didn't seem sad about the move; he just knew it was time to go.

I asked him how he felt about the rejuvenation of Sugar Hill, and he seem pleased that the buildings were being "made nice again." He said the neighborhood was never really that bad, and that there was a nice sense of community. This appeared to be true as he spoke to many of the passer byes, quick hellos and goodbyes. I was getting a little hungry, so I popped into a little fish place on St. Nicholas between the subway and the pub. It was a tiny little place with just a few stools and a little window in which to order through. The two people in front of me ordered the fish n' chips, and even though it is not on my diet I figured "when in Rome." As I waited for my food to be ready I was able to look around, and on the walls were a series of three black and white photos.²² These photos depict a past where black men and women were still fighting for their civil rights. It seemed interesting to me that a little hole in the wall would be interested in reminding people of the hard past the black community needed to over come. My food order came up, and I decided to eat and continue my walking tour of Sugar Hill.

²¹ See photo p 8

²² see photo p 7

By this point the sun had set and the street light were on, and I decided to explore Edgecombe Avenue. I began walking north on Edgecombe at 145th Street. The west side of the street is lined with apartment buildings and to the east a long fence separates the hill from Jackie Robinson Park. The fence and the park both run from 145th street to 155th street. The fence was put up in 1974 when “the residents of 409 Edgecombe Avenue got together to buy fencing along the entrances to the littered and overgrown park.”²³ I have to admit I was a little apprehensive walking along this long and dark city street, but it turned out to be a good idea because I realized there were many people out side on the wide sidewalk hanging out talking, laughing and listening to music. This entire street, from 145th to 155th, is residential, so the only reason to be there is because you live there and it allows you to get to know your neighbors. It was getting late and there was a little voice in my head telling me I should probably explore this neighborhood during the day, so I took the fastest way out of Sugar Hill, the A train.

My next visit to Sugar Hill started by walking through the City College Campus and then through Hamilton Heights on Convent Avenue. On this stretch of Convent Avenue I passed the Hamilton Grange National Memorial, the former home of Alexander Hamilton. There appeared to be many more buildings that had gone through the rejuvenation process, as it turns out the New York City Landmark Preservation Commission designated much of this neighborhood as a Historic District in 1974. By comparison Sugar Hill Historic District was not created until June of 2000.²⁴ I am not sure, but perhaps this is why Sugar Hill is going through its rejuvenation now, because it is obvious, as you cross West 145th you can see the difference between Hamilton Heights

²³ Smothers, 40

²⁴ Jane Cowan, “Neighborhood History,” n.d. www.hamiltonheights.org/history.htm (28 November 2006)

and Sugar Hill. There are many more for sale signs on buildings in Sugar Hill, and right behind the building for sale, boarded up windows.

I went back to Edgecombe Avenue to see what I missed by seeing it only at night. As I walked along I realized I had missed a couple of Green Thumb²⁵ public gardens.²⁶ The gardens didn't look like they had been cared for in a while, but the Sugar Hill Garden had a chess table. Both gardens were fenced off and locked, and to me they looked more like cages in a zoo without the animals than a garden. Walking further up the street where many of the buildings were three or four floors high, there was a beautiful old single family house, the Benziger House, built in 1891 when Harlem still resembled a country village. The house is now permanent housing for homeless adults.²⁷ The house seems very out of place now surrounded by tall rectangular buildings. Still heading north I was in search of 409 Edgecombe Avenue, the former home of Sugar Hill's elite.

Upon arrival at 409, I realized there was scaffolding covering the entrance, making my discovery slightly disappointing. I passed a service entrance that did not appear to be in use. At the front door, I went in and knocked at the glass getting the doorman's attention, and he buzzed me in. I asked to take some pictures of the lobby, but the management company had a strict policy against photos. The doorman was very nice when I asked him about the former residents and its history, but he didn't have a lot to say, except that the in old days this was the place to be. And that was it. I continued north about half a block on Edgecombe to West 155th Street and walked east on a bridge

²⁵ A City of New York Parks and Recreation volunteer program making vacant lots gardens

²⁶ See Photos p 13-14

²⁷ New York City Landmarks Preservation Foundation plaque see photos p 14

where I was able to get a picture of 409 Edgecombe Avenue as it over looks Jackie Robinson Park.²⁸

Heading back to Saint Nicholas Avenue I started seeing signs for Yankee Stadium Parking, and I was quite confused. After all I was in Manhattan and the Yankees play in the Bronx, but as I turned back east I realized I could see the stadium. This parking garage claimed two great reasons to park there: beat the traffic and the lowest parking prices around. I am not sure I would have thought to park in Sugar Hill to go to a Yankee game, but...one more reason to go to Sugar Hill. I randomly walked east and west up and down the streets from Amsterdam to St. Nicholas Avenue exploring the buildings. It was impossible to walk very far without seeing construction, although the buildings closer to 145th and Saint Nicholas seemed to be in the best state of repair.

On my journey I came upon the Dance Theatre of Harlem at 466 West 152nd Street. The Dance Theatre was opened in 1968, by Arthur Mitchell and Karel Shook and found its permanent home in 1971. On August 12, 2006 the Dance Theatre of Harlem held its Annual Street Festival. The highlight of the Street Festival was the renaming of West 152nd Street in Harlem to "Dance Theatre of Harlem Way".²⁹ In Sugar Hill, only a few short blocks separate jazz from ballet.

Up on Amsterdam Avenue, the western border of Sugar Hill is a completely different feel from Edgecombe and Saint Nicholas Avenues. Amsterdam Avenue has lots of shops, casual restaurants and several places to get your hair cut. One of the barber shops even offered a five dollar hair cut, and through the window there was an African-American barber who looked to be in his sixties doing the cutting. I was tempted to go

²⁸ See Photos p 11, 16

²⁹ "Events" <http://www.dancetheatreofharlem.org/events.html> n.d. (15 January 2007)

in, but I was not quite due for a hair cut. For the experience of a five dollar hair cut in Manhattan, however, I do plan on going back and I hope the barber will have a few good tales to tell. I headed east back to Saint Nicholas Avenue.

Back on St. Nicholas Avenue, after exploring the area all day, I felt this was the heart of the neighborhood. Looking south from 146th Street you can see the Empire State Building, reminding you that a few short miles away was the hustle and bustle of the big city. Even though this part of Manhattan is no longer the genteel country of Hamilton's day, Sugar Hill seems a little slower and a little more relaxed. Sugar Hill was once the promised land to a generation of black leaders, and even though that Sugar Hill is gone, people still are clinging to the idea of Sugar Hill. Sugar Hill was a place where "they didn't just care about themselves, they were community minded people,"³⁰ is, to some, as much of an ideal as an idea.

In Florida, "a modern Sugar Hill requires neither [a] journey, back in time nor a train ride to New York." A group of "professional African Americans of influence" has formed a networking group called "a Taste of Sugar Hill."³¹ That exemplifies just how far the idea of the sweet life has transcended the hill in Manhattan. For me, having had an opportunity to walk Sugar Hill and read about Sugar Hill, I know that Sugar Hill's geographic borders are hard to define and its influences are immeasurable. I believe that some day the buildings will be filled with all of the beauty and splendor of yesterday. The real Sugar Hill lives on in the minds and hearts of those who know that Sugar Hill is not just a neighborhood in New York, but also a desire to live the sweet life.

³⁰ Sharon Tubbs "Sweet Success" St. Petersburg Times. 30 August 2003 www.sptimes.com (8 January 2007)

³¹ Tubbs, online

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