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# GREAT EXPECTATIONS FOR HARLEM REAL ESTATE

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Harlem is humming with revitalization. Dumpsters in the streets and work permits in the windows proclaim that renovations are in progress. Boarded up buildings are being rehabilitated, and dilapidated shells are getting full makeovers and facelifts. Private investors are rushing in on the heels of earlier developers who were given economic incentives by the city to renovate abandoned properties. Existing structures are being converted to luxury housing, and brand new construction is being built for mixed use.

This August, Warburg Realty Partnership will open a 2,400 square foot storefront on Frederick Douglass Boulevard between 120th and 121st Streets. On the ground floor of a new middle income co-op development, the office will be managed by Chris Halliburton. “In five years,” Chris forecasts, “Harlem will be a thriving bedroom community with a blend of people of all income groups and ethnicities, including New Yorkers, Europeans, Asians and African Americans from around the world.” He points to the volume of current projects in the area, and says that development is greater in Harlem than anywhere else in the city currently—not in total units, he clarifies, but in the number of individual ventures.

### **An abbreviated history**

Named by the Dutch after a town in Holland, colonial Harlem was rural. Early farmhouses had low ceilings, small casement windows, and doors which were divided into upper and lower halves for ventilation and for keeping the children in and the chickens out. By the mid 18th century, Harlem became the place where the

prosperous built grand scale houses with higher ceilings and distinctive mantelpieces on broad gardens on a hill. The Morris Jumel Mansion at West 160-162 Streets is the only surviving colonial residence. Built in 1765 on 130 acres by English colonists, this Georgian mansion with attic slave quarters is now a museum on a 10 acre city park. In 1776, it was used as headquarters by George Washington.

With the opening of the Harlem Railroad in 1837, the area became the place where fashionable and well-to-do white New Yorkers retreated to spend the summer. Two of the best known country villas that still exist are Alexander Hamilton's The Grange (1802), a Federal style house on West 143rd Street between Amsterdam and Convent Avenues, and the Bailey House (1888), an ornate mansion with stained glass windows, extravagant turrets, porches and balconies, at 10 St. Nicholas Place, built for circus showman James Anthony Bailey.

After the mansions, rowhouses were built. Looking much like a Hollywood movie set, The Sylvan Terrace rowhouses, adjacent to the Morris Jumel Mansion, line both sides of the cobblestone street on West 161st Street at St. Nicholas Avenue. Built to accommodate 1st and 2nd generation immigrant laborers without servants, they are modest two-story, wood framed, single family cottages; they have 7 rooms, approximately 1700 square feet, shuttered windows, double doors, high hooded stoops, and service entrances below the stoops. In 1882, each of the 20 Sylvan Terrace rowhouses was offered for sale for \$30,000. A gutted shell is now on the market for \$550,000.

In 1919, Striver's Row—considered Harlem's most prestigious townhouse address—on West 138th and 139th Streets between 7th and 8th Avenues—was opened to “blacks only” after the project was foreclosed following the crash of 1893. Although developed by three different architects, the houses share a similar scale and all lack the stoop of earlier construction. The Striver's Row townhouses attracted doctors, lawyers, musicians and architects—those striving to purchase an elite address.

Denser housing came in the early 1900's as apartment buildings were constructed to house the increasing immigrant population, including German Jews and Irish Catholics. After the depression, most of Harlem's real estate stock was subdivided, neglected, and ultimately abandoned by landlords. Property values plummeted in the 1930's, and those who could left Harlem. Lowery Stokes Sims writes in the foreword to Michael Henry Adams' *Harlem: Lost and Found: An Architectural and Social History*: “...Harlem was a place you were from and where you visited friends and relatives who were not so lucky as to have moved away.”

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