

Enter the New Negro

African Americans have had a presence in Harlem since it was settled in 1658. By the first census 115 slaves were identified as living in Harlem. In the 1880s and 1890s small enclaves of African Americans were developing inside Harlem's exclusive affluent European immigrant neighborhoods. But in the first decade of the twentieth century large numbers of African Americans stormed uptown looking to improve their living conditions and to escape the overcrowded Tenderloin and San Juan Hill districts and found Harlem.

Prior to settling in Harlem, African Americans lived in homogeneous identifiable neighborhoods within a few block areas. In *Black Manhattan* James Weldon Johnson traces the flight of African Americans within New York City beginning in the seventeenth century at Wall Street to Chambers Street then on to Lispenard, Broome and Spring streets. By the early eighteenth century they settled around Greenwich Village, Bleecker, Thompson, Carmine and Grove streets. Continuing their trek uptown, African Americans dwelled in the upper Twenties and lower Thirties west of Sixth Avenue before finally shifting to West Fifty-third Street and West Sixty-six Street known as San Juan Hill. A small enclave of African Americans settled on the outskirts of Central Park (Seneca Village) where they lived until the park was constructed. At each location African Americans were replaced by European immigrants or displaced through eminent domain. Following the First World War the living patterns of African Americans changed. Harlem became the destination for thousands of African Americans after the bottom fell out of the Harlem real estate market in 1904. Speculators, attempting to cash in on the building frenzy erected too many buildings too fast. Unable to find buyers and renters, landlords began turning directly and indirectly to African Americans.

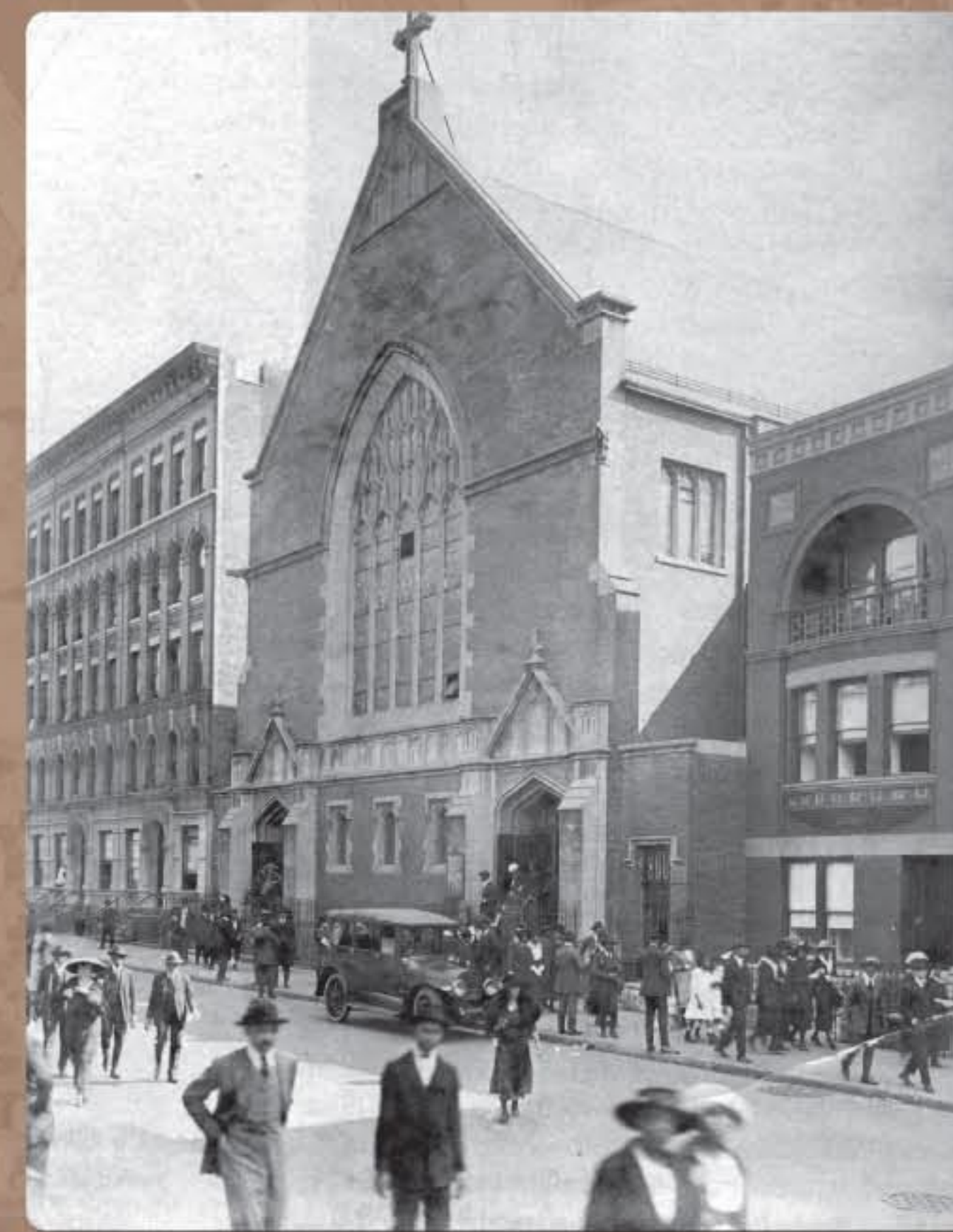
Enter real estate agent and entrepreneur Phillip A. Payton, who seized the opportunity to take advantage of the depressed real estate market. He convinced landlords to rent to respectable middle-class African Americans with the proposition that he could fill their empty or partially occupied properties. The landlords bought the idea and Payton began moving African American families into comfortable, well-maintained rows of single-family homes and tenements and also into some never-before-rented elevator apartment buildings in the 130s and eventually moving south below 125th Street. As they arrived in Harlem, Germans and Jews began moving out. White opposition to landlords renting to African Americans could not muster a united front, and blacks began to move in, occupying some of the choicest real estate in Manhattan. Block after block the surge spread until African Americans had established a stronghold where for the first time decent housing within the city was available to them.

By the mid 1920s Harlem was a predominately identifiable African American community with established black churches and newly formed social clubs. From lower Manhattan, the American South, and the Caribbean, African Americans continued to pour into Harlem causing James Weldon Johnson to ask the question:

Will Negroes of Harlem be able to hold it? Will they not be driven still farther northward? Will they be driven out as they lay in the path of business and greatly increased land values? Harlem lies in the direction that path must take.

During this same period African Americans in Harlem flourished culturally and artistically such that the expression "New Negro Movement" was born. In what was commonly known as the Harlem Renaissance figures such as Langston Hughes, Aaron Douglas, Alain Locke and others felt that they would use their artistic creativity as a means to show America and the world that African Americans are intellectual, artistic and humane and should be treated accordingly. Enter the New Negro who has no fear.

The African American was in vogue and Harlem's speakeasies took on a new dimension as jazz spawned cabarets and nightclubs. Black theater showcased musical shows like "Shuffle Along" and international stars such as Florence Mills. But as quickly as Harlem developed into the cultural capital of Black America and the excitement of Harlem's Renaissance hit its peak, the New Negro Movement came to an abrupt end with the Great Depression and the place once considered the "hottest" in New York began to show the makings of a ghetto.



St. Philip's Episcopal Church, 210-216 West 134th Street, officially organized in 1818, is the oldest African American Episcopal congregation in New York City and the richest African American congregation in America with property holdings throughout Harlem. (Dolkart, *Touring Historic Harlem*)



Exterior view of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture complex, which incorporates the original 135th Street Branch Library, also the original home of the Arthur A. Schomburg Collection. Today over five million items documenting people of African descent is housed among the two buildings. (Photo by Professor William Gibbons)



Madam C. J. Walker's home on 136th Street. The home's ground floor was a beauty salon while the top floor was known as the "Dark Tower," a hang out spot during the Renaissance years for Harlem's socialites, made famous by A'Lelia Walker. Currently, the mansion is the site of the Countee Cullen Branch Library of the NYPL system. (Adams, *Harlem Lost and Found*)



The Marquee of the Cotton Club advertising performances by Cab Calloway and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson. The Prohibition-era's most famous night club maintained a "whites only" policy throughout the Harlem Renaissance. (Homburger, *The Historical Atlas of New York City*; Image courtesy of Hulton Archives)



Marcus Garvey (1887-1940) was founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, Black Star Line, and the Back-to-Africa movement of the 1920s. Garvey built and organized the largest mass movement of people of African descent in the 1920s. (Image courtesy of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, NYPL)



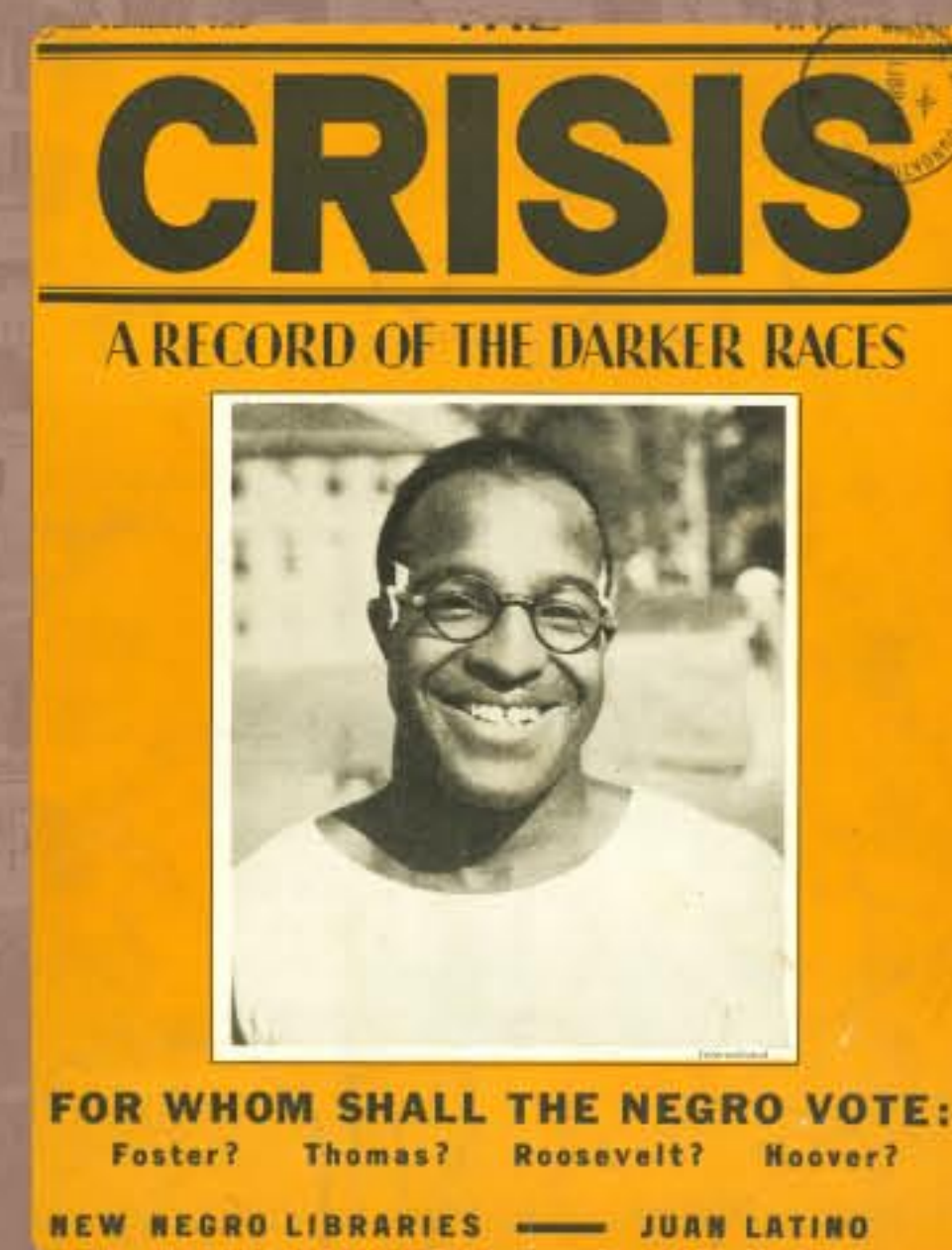
Langston Hughes typing at home, 20 East 127th Street. Hughes was the most widely published African American writer of the 1920s. (Image courtesy of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, NYPL)



Marquee of the Lafayette Theater, opening night of Macbeth, 1936. (Image courtesy of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, NYPL)



Entrepreneur and realtor, Phillip P. Payton, Jr., founder of the Afro-American Realty Company, persuaded landlords to rent to African Americans in Harlem in the early 1900s. (Image courtesy of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture)



Issue of *Crisis Magazine*. A symbol of the New Negro Movement, *Crisis Magazine*, a record of the darker races, was the official publication of the NAACP. Edited by W.E.B. DuBois, the magazine promoted the young Harlem writers of the 1920s and issues of the day. (City College Archives)



The New York Harlem Renaissance basketball team, the "Rens," is the first professional basketball team composed of African American players. Founded by Robert Douglas, the team debuted on November 30, 1923. Named after the Renaissance Ballroom where they played their home games, the "Rens" compiled an impressive record of 2,318 wins and 381 losses, earning recognition as the world's greatest basketball team before they disbanded in the 1940s. (Image courtesy of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, NYPL)