

Park West Village

History of a diverse community

I. Background: The Old Community and Manhattantown

A group of UWS residents who grew up in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s in the poor and moderate income communities on West 98th and 99th Streets between Columbus Avenue and Central Park West met annually for maybe 50 years. They affectionately called it the "Old Community."

In 1952, however, the community was threatened by something more destructive to it than had been the Great Depression and two world wars. Title I of the US Federal Housing Act of 1949 set in motion the obliteration of the neighborhood. Robert Moses, in his position as chairman of the New York City Slum Clearance Committee, condemned the area, **largely on the basis of median household income but not because of any slum like conditions**. He designated the site from 97th to 100th Streets between Amsterdam Ave and CPW as the first Title I project of the Federal Housing Commission.

Moses wielded his power to condemn six square blocks of this remarkable neighborhood, containing 338 apartment buildings and 3,628 families. The total appraised value of this property was \$15 million, but the "reasonable bid" Moses accepted for its "renewal" was just \$1 million, from a company run by Samuel Caspert, a corrupt Democratic Party operative, who promised to build a wonderful new housing complex, dubbed Manhattantown in five years. Caspert and his partners would build nothing at Manhattantown beyond a parking lot, and they did not even demolish all that much.

The residents of the Old Community received nothing but the slow destruction of their homes and their community. In keeping with the provisions of Title I, evicted tenants were promised comparable living arrangements and "preferential status" if they applied for new apartments. In reality, as in most of Moses' projects, this was just a lie. Little or no effort was made to find the evicted residents a place to go, and none of them could afford the nice new buildings of Manhattantown – provided they ever got built.

In other words, the "slum-dwellers" who urban renewal was supposed to be all about, would get nothing and lose everything.

From 1953 to 1960, the Old Community and surrounding blocks were razed piecemeal with much of it sitting as rubble. By 1957, nothing of the old area remained except for the Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church, built in 1888. Only after a belated series of newspaper exposes, and three more years of negligible progress – after Caspert was exposed as a fake developer at other "slum clearance" sites by Moses – would the leading stockholders allow themselves to be bought out by a real developer and walk away from the rubble with a tidy fortune.

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By the early 1960s, things moved quickly enough. The remaining buildings were knocked down, their residents scattered. Soon, Manhattantown had become **Park West Village**, built by William Zeckendorf for middle-income residents. A fairly charming, well constructed set of seven red-brick buildings. To start, its residents would include many of the same sorts of extraordinary black and Hispanic achievers who had lived in the Old Community – Duke Ellington, Odetta, Coleman Hawkins, Wilt Chamberlain, Cicely Tyson, Tito Puente, Hugh Masakela, Miriam Makeba. Though, in perhaps the ultimate irony, the number of black tenants was initially limited to 20% of all residents.

II. Park West Village: History of a diverse community (a booklet by the Park West Neighborhood History Group, 2007))

PARK WEST VILLAGE: History of a Diverse Community

*From West 97th to 100th Streets,
Central Park West to Columbus Avenue*

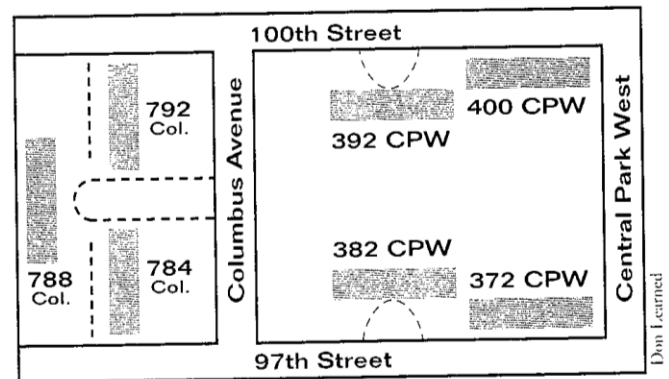


Barbara Earnest

A Park West Village walkway, near the former 98th Street, looking west from Central Park West, 2007.

The Building of Park West Village

Park West Village (PWV) was built on an approximately twenty-acre, six-block site that includes seven apartment buildings as well as commercial properties. The three Columbus Avenue apartment buildings were completed in 1959 and the four Central Park West buildings in 1961. The commercial properties lie on both sides of Columbus Avenue from 97-100th Streets. The architects were S.J. Kessler & Sons and Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. The approximately 2,500 studio and one- and two-bedroom apartments that comprise PWV are home to about 5,000 residents.



Don Learned

Map of PWV's 7 buildings through 2006.

PWV was one of the earlier of planner/developer Robert Moses' often controversial housing projects. Originally named "Manhattantown," then "West Park," PWV was intended to provide an incentive to middle-income residents to return to the Upper West Side and be part of the multi-economic, multi-ethnic neighborhood, which included the new Douglass Public Housing development to the north.

Some planners termed the old neighborhood "blighted" and invoked the urban renewal banner to justify the proposed redevelopment. But to the thousands of Caucasian, African-American, Puerto Rican and Asian inhabitants, the neighborhood was full of life and history, with St. Jude's Episcopal Chapel¹ and Park West Theater on 99th Street, and the former Reconstruction Hospital at 100th Street and CPW. Despite the residents' objections, the

site was cleared for redevelopment. By 1957 hundreds of brownstones and tenements were razed and over 11,000 people displaced, many without compensation².

A new community was created through the use of public monies to support private incentives. The developers obtained the PWV site at one-third of the land valuation on condition that rents be maintained at middle income levels. The intention, under the Title I Section of the post-World War II 1949 Housing Act, which provided the initial mortgage for the buildings, was to use city and federal funds to clear the land, then allow commercial developers to put up the buildings and run them on a limited profit-making basis³. A forty-year covenant prohibited additional construction on the Title I site.

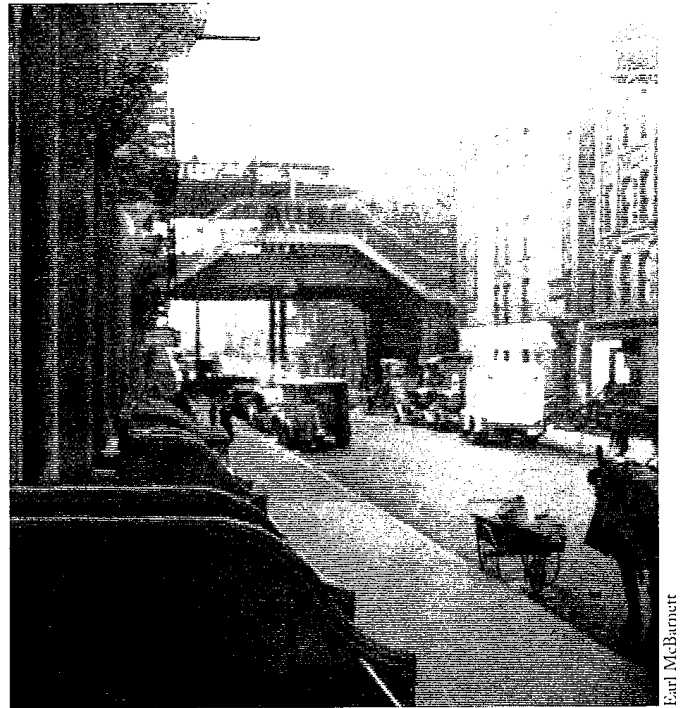
Who Has Owned Park West Village?

The first company to operate PWV was Webb & Knapp, headed by William Zeckendorf. They sold to Alcoa in 1963, which in turn sold the property to the Helmsley organization in 1972.

In 1987, 372 and 382 CPW (now called the Vaux and the Olmsted respectively) were converted to condominiums after long opposition by many tenants who feared an erosion of the community. A case against conversion brought by the PWV Tenants' Association lost in the New York State Supreme Court, but many of the issues raised were recognized in later legal and judicial deliberations and in negotiations around the conversions of 392 and 400 to condo status in 1991.

In 2000, Stellar Management and the Chetrit Group purchased the three Columbus Avenue rental buildings, along with the remaining rent-stabilized apartments in the four CPW now-condo buildings, and the commercial properties.

Each of the four condo buildings now has its own governing board with representatives elected by the individual owners of apartments, plus a representative of the Stellar/Chetrit Group. Through its sub-



99th Street looking west toward Columbus Avenue (9th Ave.) circa 1939, with 9th Avenue El in background.

sidary, PWV Acquisitions LLC, Stellar/Chetrit continues to own the remaining rent-stabilized apartments in these buildings (in 2007, roughly 20% of all apartments). The three Columbus Avenue buildings include both rent-stabilized and market rental apartments and are managed on-site by Park West Management.

Notable Residents

PWV has been home to many creative people. Among them are: Charity Bailey, Wilt Chamberlin, Ray Charles, Gerard Edery, Duke Ellington, Carl A. Fields, Sonny Greer, Coleman Hawkins, Pearl Lang, Brian Lehrer, Abbey Lincoln, Donald MacKayle, Miriam Makeba, Herman Mankiewicz, Hugh Masakela, Claudia McNeil, Butterfly McQueen, Odetta, Sy Oliver, Tito Puente, Max Roach, Elaine Stritch, Bob Teague, Cicely Tyson and Joseph Wiseman.

Early History

In his 1809 *Knickerbocker's History of New York*, Washington Irving described the village of Bloomingdale in the vicinity of what would become 100th Street. Early maps circa 1827 show small farms and residences in the area. By 1860, the Bloomingdale Road (once an Indian trail, now Broadway) was in wide use, including by "summer residents" who came uptown to escape yellow fever. The Croton Aqueduct was built on what is now PWV's Columbus Avenue property; and an underground stream still runs near 99th and 100th Streets.

A new neighborhood was created in the 1880's on what was largely vacant land. By 1890 (and ever since), a Police Station was located on 100th Street, and German immigrants had founded Trinity Lutheran Church. The Ninth Avenue El came up what is now Columbus Avenue, while horse-drawn trolleys traveled along CPW. New York's first cancer hospital with its circular towers was being built at 106th Street and CPW (in a new location, the hospital became Sloan-Kettering after World War II; the original buildings were recently restored as condos). The Pasteur Institute was established on the northwest corner of 97th Street and CPW. The Richard Morris Hunt-designed Residence for Respectable Aged Indigent Females (now the American Youth Hostel) was in use at 104th and Amsterdam. Holy Name Catholic Church and St Michael's Episcopal Church (1807) had both opened their doors.

By the turn of the 20th century, the neighborhood included a remarkable number of pioneering medical and social institutions, as well as brownstone buildings and tenement walk-ups. The 1900's brought construction workers, writers, musicians and professionals from many fields and of many backgrounds—German, Italian, Irish, African-American, Catholic, Protestant and Jewish.

PARK WEST VILLAGE: History of a Diverse Community

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Central Park West to Columbus Avenue*



A Park West Village walkway, near the former 98th Street, looking west from Central Park West, 2007.



Some of the many trees that are a part of PWV's urban forest.

Prepared by the Park West Neighborhood History Group, formed to explore the history of PWV and the surrounding neighborhood through research, interviews, talks, walks and workshops, and to make this information available through materials collected for the New York Public Library and through publications. The Neighborhood History Collection may be used at Bloomingdale Library, 150 West 100th Street.

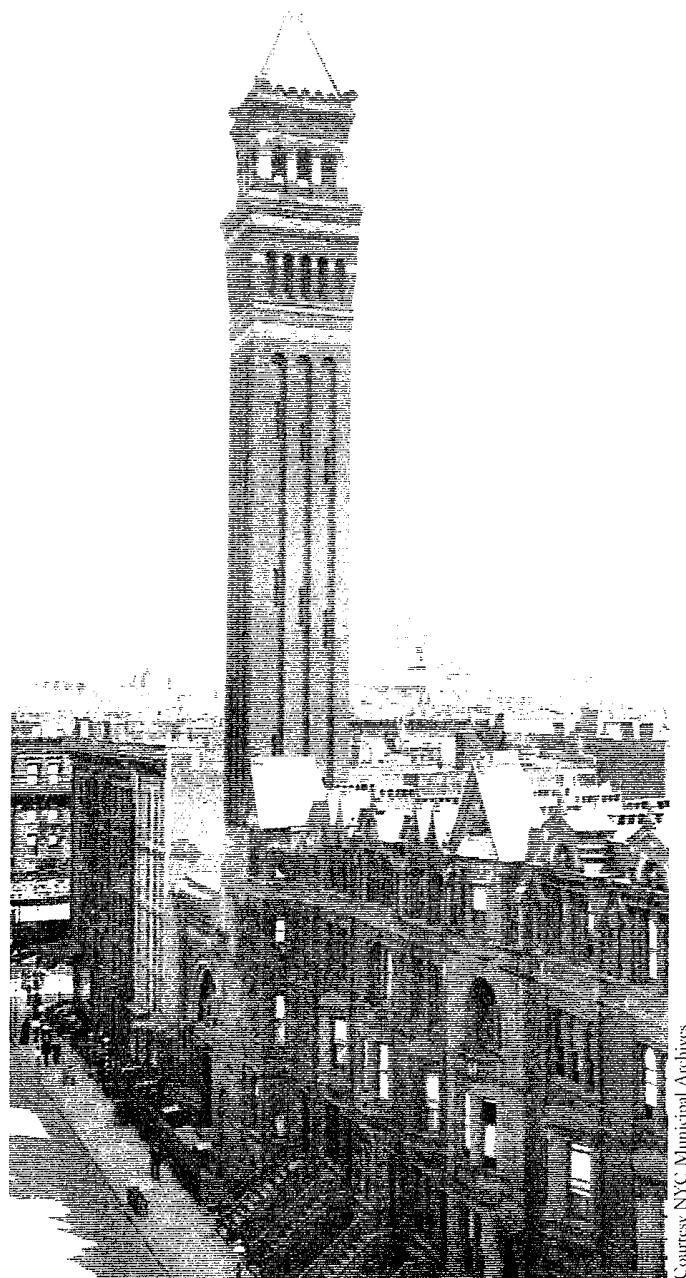
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The 173-foot Victorian-Gothic Water Tower at 104 West 98th Street, 1879-1934, looking southeast with former First Church of Christ Scientist's bell tower in distance. The tower was a part of New York City's water supply system and one of the loftiest structures in Manhattan. Visitors could climb the water tower's iron stairs and see the Statue of Liberty in the distance.

Courtesy NYC Municipal Archives

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