

[RNA House was built on urban renewal land from 1965-1967 in the Upper West Side neighborhood of Manhattan. This neighborhood has a reputation of being diverse and liberal. To celebrate Black History Month, the following article about the UWS is suggested. It appeared in the *West Side Rag* on Feb 10, 2022, and can be seen online at:

<https://www.westsiderag.com/2022/02/10/the-decline-of-the-black-population-on-the-upper-west-side-profiles-of-some-who-remain>

The Decline of the Black Population on the Upper West Side Profiles of Some Who Remain

by Peggy Taylor



Peggy Taylor. Photograph by Becky Hoffmann.

Where have all my Black brothers and sisters gone? I can walk for blocks, dine in a restaurant, visit a nail salon, and browse in a shop and see nary a Black face except for employees. I knew that our numbers had dwindled since I moved to the Upper West Side in 1979, but I am still surprised to see by how much.

According to The NYU Furman Center's New York City [Neighborhood Data Profile](#), the Black population of the Upper West Side declined from 8.5% in 2000 to 4.7% in 2019 vs. Whites declining from 69% to 68.7%, Hispanics from 14.5% to 14.0% with Asians increasing from 5.6% to 10.1%.

This underrepresentation of Blacks on the UWS was not always the case. From 1825 to 1857, between 82nd and 89th Streets and 7th and 8th Avenues, a majority Black community known as Seneca Village could be found, where Black homeowners, Irish and German immigrants, established a school, three churches and a cemetery—a cemetery that archeologists believe is still there and similar to the African Burial Ground unearthed behind City Hall in the 1990s. Seneca Village provided residential stability and an investment in the future. Another incentive to owning property at the time was that it gave Blacks the right to vote. (The descendants of one of the homeowners are highlighted on the [Seneca Village](#) website.)

In the 1950s, in the area around today’s Lincoln Center, there was a large Black population nicknamed “San Juan Hill” after Black veterans who fought in the decisive Battle of San Juan Hill during the Spanish-American War.

Both these Black neighborhoods, however, were obliterated by the City wielding the power of eminent domain — Seneca Village in 1857 making way for Central Park; San Juan Hill in the 1960s making way for Lincoln Center. The City called it slum removal, but Blacks called it Black removal.

In the 1950s and 60s, prominent Black musicians called the Upper West Side home—Thelonious Monk, Miles Davis, Lionel Hampton and Nina Simone. Later on, Black celebs such as Harry Winston, Harry Nicholas, Gloria Foster, Josephine Premise, Nickolas Ashford, Valerie Simpson and Brian Stokes Mitchell also settled here. Harry Belafonte bought the West End Avenue building which once refused him entry. On the whole, if you were Black and not a celebrity, you had to move to Harlem.

When I moved to the Upper West Side in the late 1970s, I was surprised by the many single Black men I saw on the streets and naively thought that that proved how mixed the Upper West Side was. Little did I know that these men were living in SROs (Single Room Occupancy) hotels—in 100 square-foot rooms with communal baths—buildings which in the 1990s were converted into upscale coops and condos, as young white families flocked to the City from the suburbs. The Black men I had seen suddenly disappeared, and their counterparts returned only temporarily during the 2019 pandemic, when the City housed them in hotels to avoid widespread contagion in City shelters. Now that they have returned to the shelters, the neighborhood has become overwhelmingly white again, but there still are, as we used to say, a few “flies in the buttermilk” around. Let me introduce you to some of them.



PAT HOLLEY, singer, songwriter, composer (“Me and Caesar Lee”) came to New York in the early 60s and found a sublet on Riverside Drive thanks to a rare Black doorman. She moved into her second Upper West Side place on 110th and Riverside after marrying a white man who signed the lease then slipped her in, as it were, through the back door. “There were three other Blacks in the building at that time,

all in interracial relationships,” she remembered. “Otherwise, we probably wouldn’t have gotten in.” Divorced, she nabbed the one bedroom where she lives today “because the building was a dump—no doorman, shabby lobby, folks coming and going at will—so they were accepting everybody. Fortunately, the building was renovated in the 1980s, and I’ve lived here happily ever since.” Pat loves nearby Riverside Park, the Hudson, and the fact that the neighborhood is near the theater district. “For many years, I walked the thirty blocks from 72nd Street to Times Square.”



WAYNE SANDERS

Photograph by Peggy Taylor.

Voice teacher and pianist WAYNE SANDERS had to resort to no subterfuges when he and operatic bass Benjamin Matthews went searching for a place in 1970. Their realtor steered them to one of the most palatial apartments in the Beaux-Arts jewel, The Ansonia, where they held operatic auditions and masterclasses and which they adorned with furnishings Marie Antoinette would have envied. “That realtor,” he says, “changed my life.”

In 1973, Ben (now deceased) founded the Black opera company, Opera Ebony, and Wayne became its musical director. They mounted their first production, Verdi’s *Aida*, at the Philadelphia Academy of Music; their second, William Grant Still’s “U.S. Highway One,” at the Upper West Side’s Beacon Theater. “Not bad,” Wayne chuckles, “for a boy who grew up in the Chicago projects and actually had to repeat kindergarten!”



HELEN ANDERSON

Photograph by Peggy Taylor.

HELEN ANDERSON, real estate broker, and former flight attendant, has lived on the Upper West Side since 1972. What does she like about the ‘hood? “Everything—the many restaurants, the convenient subway and bus lines, Lincoln Center, Fordham, and Columbia Universities, and most of all, the fact that the neighborhood feels safe. The streets are lively and doormen guarding the high rises are the eyes and ears of the neighborhood. Parents with children in the universities don’t put them in the dormitories of those institutions. They buy them apartments in

doorman buildings because they know they’ll be protected by the most professional of non-professionals.”

Relations with her neighbors, who come from around the globe, are good, except for the oblique way some try to learn whether she is a tenant or not. “Where do you grocery shop?” they often

ask during elevator small talk. If she answers “Fairway,” they’ve got their answer—she’s a neighbor, not the help.



JUANITA R. HOWARD

JUANITA R. HOWARD, Ph.D., retired Baruch College professor, post-retirement singer, actor, and documentary filmmaker, (“I Remember Harlem”) moved to the Upper West Side in 1983 so she could do her laundry in her pajamas. Well, not exactly, but having a laundry room in the basement of her building led her to leave Harlem’s Riverton Houses where she had to brave the rain or snow to reach the sole building with a laundry room. (The Riverton Houses were built for Blacks by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company in 1944 when it barred us from living in its sister complex, Stuyvesant Town).

In her Upper West Side condo, she and her husband got not only an indoor laundry room, but also a swimming pool, gym, central heating and air conditioning. Add to that a subway stop practically at their doorstep, plus theaters like the Thalia, Symphony Space, and the Loews, which keep them from having to go to Times Square for entertainment. And then, there’s Central Park’s Delacorte Theater where they attend the Shakespeare Festival.

She, like Helen Anderson, appreciates the safety of the area, and the fact that, even when she returns late at night from a film shoot, the 24-hour markets and eateries make her feel safe.



JUNE TERRY

Photograph by Peggy Taylor.

JUNE TERRY, costume designer, sewing instructor, painter, collagist, doll maker, mask maker, bank employee, and descendant of the enslaved rebel leader, Nat Turner.

The 91-year old mother of six, who “loves and can teach any kind of art,” and whose Black father was a Yiddish-speaking master tailor, moved into a high-rise rental near the Hudson in 2005. From her 20th floor window she witnessed the miraculous landing of US Airways Flight 1549 piloted by Captain “Sully” Sullenberger in 2009. Today, she can no longer see the Hudson or the docking Queen Elizabeth, because a new 1,500-unit high-rise blocks her view. A woman of immense energy and caring, she teaches art at the Lincoln Square Senior Center and calls ten seniors every day to check on how they’re doing.

Before moving to the West Side, June lived in an affordable Mitchell-Lama building, but when that program ended and a new buyer raised the rent, she had to move—a wrenching period which

saw some of her desperate neighbors die of heart attacks or by suicide. With help from Councilmember Gale Brewer, she found a place in a luxury rental (Vanessa Williams once lived in its penthouse), where 20% of the apartments are reserved for low- and moderate-income New Yorkers. Fortunately for her, it is not a “poor door” building like the one directly behind hers, where the subsidized tenants have to enter by the back door.

In 2021, she was featured in the “No Stopping New York” campaign , and you could see her in one of her African-inspired creations on kiosks throughout the City.

COMMENTS

[Naomi Serviss](#) says:

Heart-grabbing, eye-opening snapchats of creative, tenacious neighbors who bravely faced years of discrimination and prejudice to shine on the UWS. Terrific writing and photos!

kracktow says:

I loved these profiles and especially loved learning a descendant of Nat Turner lives on the UWS! Wow.

Erica says:

Just beautiful. Beautiful faces, beautiful stories. I’m glad we’re neighbors. Thank you, WSR.

Mady Goldstein says:

Thank you Peggy Taylor for this story. It is time that for African Americans and others to return to the west side and make the neighborhood diverse. I am sorry that people have been forced out due to discrimination and the outrageous cost of real estate. What makes a neighborhood for me is diversity.

I liked reading about the lives of people who stayed and am sad to hear about comments in the elevator like, “where do you shop? Resident or housekeeper? Disgraceful.

Again, thank you for some of this history.

Lily Goldstein

Alice says:

You have well wishes and thank you but really,

Who can afford the west side now when one-bedrooms cost over \$3000 to rent and often over \$1 million to buy?

LL says:

I did not read this article as “forced out” due to discrimination, but not even let in the door. So there is no “returning.”

The problem is the cost to debt or to buy. That is what actually caused the exodus.

And also. The Hispanic population has virtually stayed the same. The Black population decreased while the Asian population increased. So the Upper West Side is less diverse than in the 70s or so. But it is about as diverse as it was on the 1990s, just in a different way.

Anyway. I love the profiles.

Just to add. Straight after college I lived in Washington Heights and came home to the UWS to see my family. I was walking back to the train when I ran into a neighbor and we said hi. The neighbor was Black. After I said bye to her, another woman asked me if my neighbor had been my nanny.

Shame nothing has changed.

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