

LANGSTON HUGHES HOUSE, 20 East 127th Street, Borough of Manhattan. Built 1869, architect Alexander Wilson.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 1751, Lot 64.

On May 13, 1980, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Langston Hughes House and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (No. 7). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Four witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

This modest brownstone rowhouse, built in 1869, was designed in the Italianate style by architect Alexander Wilson. Built by two real estate developers, James Meagher and Thomas Hanson, it is typical of rowhouses built in Harlem during the period after the Civil War. The house achieves its significance, however, as the home for 20 years of Langston Hughes, author and poet and one of the foremost figures of the Harlem Renaissance, a literary movement of the 1920s-30s that focused on the question of Negro Identity.

Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri, on February 1, 1902, son of James Nathaniel Hughes and Carrie Mercer Langston Hughes. The family moved frequently during his youth; he graduated from grammar school in Lincoln, Illinois, in 1915, and from high school in Cleveland where he lived with his mother. At that time his father was manager for an electric company in Toluca, Mexico. Hughes came to New York to attend Columbia College during the academic year 1921-22; he transferred to Lincoln University in Philadelphia the following year, finally graduating in 1929. While at Columbia, Hughes established friendships with young Harlem writers who participated in the Harlem Renaissance movement and began to write himself. His book about the blues and jazz scene, The Weary Blues, was published in 1926, while Fine Clothes to The Jew was published in 1927. The 1930s were a productive time as Hughes published four books, wrote the play "Mulatto" which was produced at the Vanderbilt Theater in New York in 1935, and established the Harlem Suitcase Theater as a showcase for plays by black writers with black actors, directors, and scene designers.

Hughes continued to travel, working as a seaman on voyages to Europe and Africa, spending a year in the Soviet Union in 1932-33, and serving as the Madrid correspondent for the Baltimore Afro-American in 1937. He always returned to Harlem from which came the greatest source of his literary imagination. Even as a youth Harlem had fascinated him: "More than Paris, or the Shakespeare country, or Berlin, or the Alps, I wanted to see Harlem." 1

Sometime during the 1930s Hughes met Emerson and Ethel (Toy) Harper whom he came to regard as his adopted uncle and aunt. In 1940 he dedicated his autobiography, The Big Sea, to them. In 1942 when he was finally able to afford a studio apartment on 141st Street, he took his meals with them at their residence at 634 St. Nicholas Avenue. The Harpers purchased the house at 20 East 127th Street in 1947, and Hughes moved in with them occupying the top floor as a workroom.

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Hughes' years with the Harpers were most productive. He continued to publish poetry, most notably Shakespeare in Harlem (1942) and Montage of a Dream Deferred (1951). He documented the common man of Harlem through the character of Jess B. Semple (Just Be Simple), in a series of humorous books beginning with Simple Speaks His Mind (1950) through Simple Uncle Sam (1965). Hughes also explored various aspects of black culture in such books as The First Book of Negroes (1952), Famous American Negroes (1954), First Book of Rhythms (1954), First Book of Jazz (1954), First Book of the West Indies (1955), Book of Negro Folklore (1958), and First Book of Africa (1960). He also enjoyed a career as a librettist and lyricist for the opera "The Barrier" and the musicals "Just Around the Corner," "Trouble Island," and "Street Scene."

Langston Hughes died on May 22, 1967. The residence on 127th Street where Hughes spent the last 20 years of his life was the only one he occupied for any length of time and is the tangible symbol of his association with the Harlem which so continuously inspired his literary career.

The house is three stories high above a basement and is faced with brownstone. A brownstone stoop with cast-iron railings leads to the entrance at parlor floor level. A small areaway by the stoop is enclosed by a similar cast-iron railing. The entranceway and the windows at all three floors have arched brownstone enframements. The parlor floor windows are full length, and all windows have double-hung sash. The facade is crowned by a bracketed and modillioned sheet metal roof cornice. A grape ivy vine planted in the areaway garden extends over the facade, and during four to five months of the year the leaves hide the decorative architectural features.

The house is still owned by the Harpers' son who lives in Washington, D.C. It is now rented out to tenants.

Footnote

1. Quoted in Nathan Irvin Huggins, Harlem Renaissance (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 24.

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FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Langston Hughes House has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Langston Hughes House was the home for twenty years of Langston Hughes, author and poet and one of the foremost figures of the Harlem Renaissance; that as an Italianate brownstone rowhouse it is typical of the residences built in Harlem during the period after the Civil War; that this house where Hughes spent the last twenty years of his life, is the only one he occupied for any length of time; that the house retains its architectural characteristics from the period of Hughes' residence; and that the house is the most tangible symbol of Hughes' association with the Harlem that so continuously inspired his literary career.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Langston Hughes House, 20 East 127th Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1751, Lot 64, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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