

Want a BETTER home loan? [Bankrate.com](#)

Pick Loan Type: Pick Your State: Pick Loan Amount:

NYTimes.com > Real Estate

Advertisement

Century of Change in a Tranquil Enclave

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY

Published: February 22, 2004

WITH a spectacular vista of the neo-Gothic mass of City College's main building reinforcing its special sense of place, the little enclave of Hamilton Terrace has seen many changes since it was built up at the turn of the last century.

The street of mostly row houses, which runs uninterruptedly for the equivalent of three blocks a block east of Convent Avenue and just north of West 141st Street, started as a bastion of well-off householders and saw its fortunes change with those of Harlem. Now it has become an integrated thoroughfare and some of its onetime rooming houses are gradually returning to their original roles.

In the 1880's, an unnamed street was mapped north of 141st Street, between Convent Avenue and St. Nicholas Avenue, and by the 1890's it had been named to commemorate Alexander Hamilton, whose country home had just been moved to Convent Avenue north of 141st Street. Because 142nd and 143rd Streets do not intervene, Hamilton Terrace runs uphill for three blocks, to 144th Street.

Hamilton, who had served as George Washington's Secretary of the Treasury, built his house in 1802 at what later became the southwest corner of 143rd and Convent. The house was moved to its present site in 1889 and is operated by the National Park Service.

The initial construction on the north-south street — which most New Yorkers have never heard of, let alone seen — was for well-to-do owners. But Hamilton Terrace was transformed during the Depression by the expansion of the black population from central Harlem, and many of the new owners changed their buildings into rooming houses.

[Enlarge This Image](#)



Ruby Washinton/The New York Times
Hamilton Terrace has changed very little in a century, thanks in part to the boundary formed by the City College campus, whose neo-Gothic towers are at the south end of the street.

ARTICLE TOOLS

- [E-Mail This Article](#)
- [Printer-Friendly Format](#)
- [Most E-Mailed Articles](#)
- [Reprints & Permissions](#)

ARTICLE TOOLS SPONSORED BY **DREAMERS** NOW PLAYING IN SELECT CITIES

READERS' OPINIONS

- [Forum: Join a Discussion on Owning and Renting a Home](#)

REAL ESTATE TOOLS

[For Sale](#) | [For Rent](#)

Enter a Zip Code:

10031

Community Profiles
Browse neighborhood and town profiles, review school districts and community links.

- [Recent Sales](#)
- [Mortgage Services](#)

Century of Change in a Tranquil Enclave

Nestled along the hillside below Convent Avenue, the street was built a few years after the row-house boom of neighboring Hamilton Heights, including Convent Avenue and the West 140's, and the Hamilton Terrace houses were more modest. At the turn of the 20th century, the area south of 141st was taken over by City College, its Gothic-style campus forming a permanent boundary, and to the east development became more mixed, with small apartment buildings. The isolation of Hamilton Terrace gives it a character distinctive from its surroundings. Its 50 or so houses were almost all built in a single burst of activity, from 1895 to 1902. William Strom designed the longest row, two groups at Nos. 21-49, in 1897 and 1898 in the Renaissance style, with yellowy-orange brick and delicate leaf and shell details. These were advertised in The New York Times in 1898 as having "three styles," with 10 rooms and two bathrooms, and a "rear view unsurpassed"— the backyards had sweeping views to the Harlem River and beyond — and the houses were "guaranteed for five years."

Those at 18 to 30 Hamilton Terrace, designed by Neville & Bagge with an interesting variety of window and roof treatments, were also advertised in The Times in 1898 as appealing "strongly to people of cultivated tastes and artistic perceptions."

At the far end of the block, Neville & Bagge designed the corner house at 72 Hamilton Terrace (really part of a row facing 144th Street), also completed in 1898. It has rich Renaissance-style detailing in gray Roman brick and crisp terra cotta, and its corner site gives it more the character of a mansion than a simple row house.

The rest of the row houses were finished within a few years and show few signs of changes. Those at Nos. 40 to 60, designed by Henri Fouchaux, have astonishingly rich oak double doors. The one at No. 48 is especially striking, with highlights on the left panel rippling horizontally, like a sandy bottom washed by tides, and those on the right panel rising vertically, like vines running up a wall.

In 1901, Louis C. Hahn, a Wall Street businessman, had the architect Edgar Bourne build a strikingly severe limestone town house at No. 62, its rounded bay playing nicely against the plain, rounded bands of the facade, otherwise practically unornamented.

The First Tenants

A Peaceful Oasis for the Prosperous

The initial tenants of the houses were typically prosperous, like the German-born Charles Miebling, 55, secretary of the Dry Dock Savings Bank, who lived at No. 36. These residents must have found Hamilton Terrace a peaceful

• [Create a Search Alert](#)

Advertisement

What's the best rate? See current rates for lenders in your area. Tips trends & more

Bankrate.com

TIMES NEWS TRACKER

Topics	Alerts
Manhattan (NYC)	Create
Housing	Create
Buildings (Structures)	Create
Real Estate	Create
▶ Create Your Own	▶ Manage
▶ Most Popular Alerts	▶ Take a Tour
CLICK HERE TO SUBSCRIBE	

[Enlarge This Image](#)



Ruby Washington/The New York Times

Looking north on Hamilton Terrace, from 141st Street. Most houses on the street were built in 1895 to 1902.



Ruby Washington/The New York Times

Robert Arthur King at his home.

*corcoran*group
real estate

palm beach

play

where you want to

work

live

corcoran.com

Owned and operated by NRT Incorporated.

respite from the rest of the city.

Many neighborhood children played there, but at times not all was idyllic. In December 1903, *The Times* reported on "the first coasting accident of the season" — Joseph Siebert, 14, who lived on Eighth Avenue, was sledding down Hamilton Terrace, lost control and died when he hit a lamppost.

The street's proximity to City College and other educational institutions made it attractive to teachers and professors, including Dr. Israel Friedlander, a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary, who lived at No. 29. In 1920, he was on a mission to distribute aid money in Ukraine when he was murdered by three men "wearing Bolshevist uniforms," according to *The Times*.

The census taken in 1930 showed that many of the homes had been converted to rooming houses, including 25 Hamilton Terrace, where six tenants paid \$20 to \$60 each a month. The tenants included Sol Solomon, 41, a construction supervisor born in Poland who came to the United States in 1890, and Herayuni Yasuyiki, 32, a bank clerk born in Tokyo who arrived in 1929. Other houses remained intact, including the Miehlung home, where Isabelle Price, a widow, lived with her family. Her house was valued at \$13,000.

African-Americans began moving up from central Harlem in the 1930's. In 1937, *The Times* reported that when Roy Parker moved into the house at 20 Hamilton Terrace, a group of whites gathered outside and threw stones, breaking the windows. The area, *The Times* noted, was "formerly an exclusive residential section." Perhaps the newspaper was referring to inhabitants like Lillian Langford, 64, who died of a heart attack that same year in her house at 46 Hamilton Terrace — with 200 diamonds in 50 pieces of jewelry wrapped in a chamois bag kept around her neck for safekeeping.

Racial change continued after World War II. In 1948, Dr. Walter Ivey Delph and his wife, Minnette, who lived at No. 21, filed plans for the Ivey Delph apartments at No. 19, a simple modern building designed by the African-American architect Vertner Tandy. The first black architect to be registered in New York State, Tandy also designed (with George W. Foster) St. Philip's Church at 214 West 134th Street, built in 1911. The Delphs used the Federal Housing Administration to insure the \$425,000 mortgage for the 66-apartment building; when it was completed in 1951, the two-to-four-room apartments were fully rented for \$78 to \$135 a month.

In 1967, *The Times* reported that residents were disturbed by parties given by predominantly white City College fraternities in the area, specifically Zeta Beta Tau at 16 Hamilton Terrace. In response, the Zetas held an open house for its neighbors, but one visitor, Bessie Ware, called them "invaders" and complained that students had ridden through the area on the tops of cars.

Most of the street was included in the Hamilton Heights Historic District, designated in 1974, and its fortunes have changed as the real estate market has risen in upper Manhattan.

Elinor King lived on West 196th Street until 1980, when she moved with her husband, Robert Arthur King, an architect, into his family's house at 36 Hamilton Terrace. She sees more trees, rooming houses converted to private dwellings and new racial changes. "When I moved here, I was the only white person on the block," she said. "Now there are perhaps 25 or so."

There can be few better guides to the block than Mr. King, who was born in 1945 and studied at City College, Columbia University and the Architectural Association in London.

"My father bought the house for \$7,000 in cash, in 1939," Mr. King said. "He was Barbadian, and saved every penny. He fixed everything in the house, even changed the sheets for the roomers we took in."

Mr. King said he does not recall any racial tension on the block and added that as he was growing up, almost everyone took in roomers, although now less than half the owners do. As children, "we couldn't do anything wrong on this block," Mr. King said. "Somebody would see us and tell our parents." He said the block was a close-knit community where no one was a stranger.

Mr. King is still in touch with old friends who no longer live on Hamilton Terrace, including Dr. Walter Delph, whose father built the apartment building at No. 19. Dr. Delph, a urologist who was born in 1944, long ago moved away from Hamilton Terrace, but he remembers "incredible stickball games, although none of us can play any more; we tried doing that several times with our children."

Golden Memories

A Close-Knit Street, Thinking Positively

For him, the golden memory is the large yard behind his house at 21 Hamilton Terrace, extending out to a retaining wall and thrown together with the neighboring yard at No. 23. He does not recall any racial tensions in the Hamilton Terrace of the 1940's and 1950's. "It was great, there were a lot of other African-American families moving in, there was a lot of positive thinking about the future in New York," he said.

Things change incrementally on Hamilton Terrace: up the street, Mr. King and his friends would play in a courtyard, but "the old lady there would always kick us out," he said. "She died back in the 60's, but the kids still call it Mrs. Sharper's Court."

Mr. King likes to smoke his pipe on the front stairs in warm weather and has become a connoisseur of the stoops of the other buildings. The traditional straight high stoops are inconvenient to climb; those with just two or three steps do not offer a feeling of protection. But those like the one at his house, right-angled and of middle height, offer a relaxed ascent, he said, as well as a comfortable sort of terrace. "The action takes place on the ground level," he observed.

His office is on the basement floor — the room he shared with his brother when they were children — and he can see directly out to the sidewalk. "It's the ideal environment," he said. "When my grandchildren come to visit, I open the curtains in my office and can watch them on the street. And they call me to walk them across."

Mr. King's building was built in 1897, part of the row of 32-38 Hamilton Terrace, designed by Henry Anderson with gray and light yellow iron-spot brick. The row has a pair of nasty settlement cracks, one of which goes right through Mr. King's front doorway. It was a result, he said, of an underground stream — the same one, Dr. Delph recalls, that caused problems for his father when the Ivey Delph Apartments were being constructed. But Mr. King said the settling had stabilized.

Inside, the Kings have the usual accouterments of an 1890's row house, including some nice cabinetwork in paired dressing rooms, with beveled glass in some of the cabinets. But he has also preserved some of the elements of the rooming house it once was, like the telephone on the first floor and a sign on one of the bathrooms that reads "please keep this bathroom clean."

Prices for houses on the block in good condition are approaching \$1 million, according to Mr. King and brokers in the neighborhood. Some properties have cracked glass and newspaper for curtains, others have precise detailing.

At 72 Hamilton Terrace, fire has gutted the near-mansion owned by the Nazareth Deliverance Spiritual Church. The windows are out, the roof is almost gone and the front yard is littered with debris. The masonry at one end of the house looks crisp and fresh, but at the other end the fragile terra cotta has spalled, and the flames bursting out left waves of smoke running up the brick in the same pattern left by water as it washes down a wall. The building is just a shell, but Mr. King said it would bring \$500,000 as is, if it went on the market.

He has twice begun the necessary paperwork to officially convert the house that he and his wife occupy from single-room occupancy to a private residence. Each time he has let other things take precedence. "But this time I'm really going to take care of my house, for my children and grandchildren," he said.

Mr. King has done design work on at least a half dozen houses on the block, sometimes for new single-family owners, sometimes for developers converting the buildings, sometimes just for apartment dwellers. "I have to do a good job," he said. "I still think somebody's going to tell my father."

Get home delivery of The Times from \$2.90/week

RELATED ARTICLES

- [Inquiries Begin in 2 Carbon Monoxide Deaths](#) (February 18, 2004)
 - [Despite a Sluggish City Economy, Apartment Prices Up in Manhattan](#) (July 16, 2003) \$
 - [Real Estate Firms Agree to Share Listings of Brooklyn Properties](#) (June 27, 2003) \$
 - [Residential Real Estate: For Apartment Prices, It Wasn't That Bad a Year](#) (January 24, 2003) \$
- Find more results for [Manhattan \(NYC\)](#) and [Housing](#)

TOP REAL ESTATE ARTICLES

- [Century of Change in a Tranquil Enclave](#)
- [Habitats | 100th Street and West End Avenue: A One-Bedroom Bursting With Life and Still Lives](#)
- [If You're Thinking of Living In | Garden City: A Model Village With a Rare Squabble](#)
- [Commercial Property | New Jersey: Stores That Look Like \(and Once Were\) Homes](#)
Go to [Real Estate](#)