

Proposed Audubon Park Historic District
BOROUGH OF MANATTAN

The proposed Audubon Park Historic District, located in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan, is a cohesive landscape of 19 large apartment houses and one free-standing duplex house indicative of the area's transformation in the early 20th century into a densely developed residential neighborhood. The boundaries of the proposed historic district encompass all or part of five square blocks extending from West 155th Street to West 158th Street, from Broadway and Edward M. Morgan Place to Riverside Drive. The proposed district complements the existing Audubon Terrace Historic District that adjoins it to the southeast.

Audubon Park is named for John James Audubon (1785-1851), the famous naturalist and illustrator of birds, who purchased the picturesque estate overlooking the Hudson River in 1840, shortly after publishing what would be his most famous work, *Birds in America*. Washington Heights and neighboring Hamilton Heights were still largely secluded at the time, comprised primarily of farms and woodlands, and the location of country estates for a succession of wealthy families starting in the late 18th century. The roughly 20-acre area beginning at West 155th Street, which today represents the southwesterly portion of Washington Heights, was the terminus of the 1811 Commissioner's Plan for New York and became known as Audubon Park as early as the 1860s when Audubon's widow began selling off parcels of the estate for the development of free-standing single family homes. The opening of the Hudson River Railroad's Peekskill line in 1849 and the construction of a station at the foot of 152nd Street had paved the way for a commuter population seeking suburban homes removed from downtown.

Following the arrival of the IRT Broadway-Seventh Avenue line in 1904, Washington Heights rapidly developed with apartment buildings and accompanying commercial structures. The apartment houses within the proposed historic district were constructed between 1905 and 1932 and were marketed as modern and elegant addresses in the tradition of the grand apartment houses lining the graceful curves of Riverside Drive in the neighborhoods of the Upper West Side and Morningside Heights to the south. They were generally given names intended to recall the area's history and impart a sense of stature – such as the Grinnell, named for an early local estate owner, or Hispania Hall, a reference to the nearby Hispanic Society of America – or names evoking romantic and exotic associations – such as the Cragmoor, the Rhinecleff, or the Cortez. Among the architects who designed buildings in the proposed historic district are several local firms well-known for their work on apartment houses, including George F. Pelham, Schwartz & Gross, the Blum Brothers, Denby & Nute, and Neville & Bagge.

The apartment houses range in height from five to 12 stories, with several of the structures, such as the Sutherland at 611 West 158th Street designed by Emory Roth, and the Riviera at 790 Riverside Drive, exuberantly executed in the Beaux-Arts and Renaissance Revival styles and featuring light-colored materials including white, gray, and beige brick, terra cotta, and limestone. Elaborate cornices are generally of pressed metal and sometimes incorporate green Spanish tile, such as the Mission Revival style Grinnell at 800 Riverside Drive and the Spanish Revival style apartment house at 807 Riverside Drive. Other styles seen within the proposed historic district include the Gothic Revival style Kannawah at 614 West 157th Street, which features elaborate molded terra-cotta window surrounds, stylized pinnacles, and keystones, and the Arts and Crafts style Vauxhall at 780 Riverside Drive, which features creative use of faience tile friezes and decorative brickwork. Along the west side of Riverside Drive sit

several fortress-like beige-brick apartment buildings designed in a simplified Medieval Revival style, featuring castellated parapet walls and basket-handle-arched entryways.

Another distinctive feature of the large apartment houses of the proposed historic district are the complex floor plans, often either U- or H-shaped, or incorporating multiple wings allowing for courtyards and maximum light and ventilation. In contrast to the larger structures of the proposed historic district sits the duplex house designed in a vaguely Spanish Revival style with a red-brick facade, gabled roof of green Spanish tile, and one-story solarium, built in 1922 to the designs of Moore & Landsiedel. Intended as a model residence to showcase the development strategy of wholesaler Nathan Berler, the duplex, which retains all of its historic fabric, was apparently the only example built.

The vast majority of the buildings within the proposed historic district are highly intact, retaining the vibrant architectural details and character that attracted residents to the area a century ago. The curving streets and dramatic vistas that result from the hilly topography of the area continue to help define the neighborhood as a distinctive enclave of apartment buildings, adding to its powerful sense of place.