

INTRODUCTION



Between about 1916 and about 1940, the area of Manhattan named Harlem by the first Dutch settlers became synonymous with black culture. Up until the turn of the twentieth century, it had been a place of farms, country estates, and areas of recreation for wealthy whites from the more settled areas downtown.

Early in the 1900s, elevated train lines were extended up to Harlem, and real estate speculators envisioned a new suburb of downtown Manhattan. They built beautiful townhouses and apartment buildings on broad, tree-lined avenues. Then the real estate market declined, and rather than pay huge mortgages on empty buildings, the speculators started to rent to blacks for the first time.

The black population of New York was growing fast, fueled by a large northward migration of southerners. It could no longer be contained in the scattered black enclaves downtown. Blacks were desperate for living space and willing to pay the high rents of Harlem. Before long, Harlem had become the largest residential center for blacks in the United States.

Often called the capital of Black America, Harlem gave African American people a new sense of their own beauty and power. Black scholar Alain Locke asserted that it was the era of the “New Negro.” African Americans expressed pride in their history, style, and culture. Black writing, theater, music, and art thrived in a burst of creativity that came to be called the Harlem Renaissance.

Adding to the excitement was the fast and feverish era of American industrial development, coupled with the first *world* war in history. At just about the same time, the U.S. Congress passed the Volstead Act banning the sale and consumption of alcoholic beverages. When white mobsters opened up whites-only nightclubs selling illegal liquor in Harlem, white downtowners flocked to Harlem. But the Harlem Renaissance was primarily a movement led by brilliant black writers, thinkers, musicians, and artists.

African American intellectuals and artists were not solely a Harlem phenomenon. The blues and jazz flowered in cities like New Orleans, Kansas City, and Chicago. Atlanta and Washington, D.C., were important academic centers for blacks. But New York was the publishing and communications capital of the United States, and it followed that its black center would be in the forefront of the movement.

The Stock Market crash of 1929 was the beginning of the end of the Harlem Renaissance. White partiers did not want to see the poverty into which ordinary Harlemites sank during the Great Depression that followed. When Prohibition was repealed and liquor was again readily available, Harlem’s nightclubs ceased to hold much attraction. Increased mob violence and a well-publicized riot in 1935 completed the change in Harlem’s image from jazz-age playground to blighted ghetto. Yet its best scholars, writers, and musicians lived on, building careers and institutions.

The people who are profiled in the following pages are just some of the black stars of the Harlem Renaissance. They all contributed to the making of a legendary era. Some lived most of their lives in places

other than Harlem. Some had forged their careers before the Harlem Renaissance began. Others were just getting started. But their lives came together and flowered during this fabulous era in American history. Their dreams inspire us today.

