



Silent protest, 1917.
The Schomburg Collection.

Harlem: The American Dream and Activism

The American Dream was in its infancy in 1658 when Harlem was established. The frontier village would one day boast historic claim to an array of Dreamers, including George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, Scott Joplin, Madame C. J. Walker, Groucho Marx, Harry Houdini, Marcus Garvey, Thurgood Marshall, Malcolm X, Maya Angelou, Tupac Shakur and P. Diddy.

"Build a new road and a new village!" came the likely loud and bossy command from 17th century Governor Peter Stuyvesant to his slave labor force. The laborers had already done remarkable and memorable work "downtown" in New Amsterdam, including widening a Native American trail into Broadway and building the Wall across Manhattan Island. Not only did enslaved Africans create the new village; they also built a nine-mile long road to make it accessible from the settlement at the tip of Manhattan downtown.

Harlem provided pioneer immigrants from The Netherlands, England, Portugal, Spain, France and Scandinavia with new opportunities. Its name came from Haarlem, a Dutch town which was nearly destroyed during Spain's war against Holland in the late 16th century. Haarlem and its citizens were renowned for their valiant strength, perseverance and ability to survive through difficult and painful times. One in five of the first Harlem residents were black and enslaved.

Slavery ended in Harlem in 1827 and concluded nationally with the Civil War's end in 1865. However, nationwide blacks soon faced new barriers in racially-based policies known as Jim Crow, which legally prohibited opportunities for African Americans in employment, housing and

most every interracial social activity. The popular and achievable American Dream, which beckoned millions of immigrants, seemed to be forever impossible for black immigrants or citizens.

One hundred years ago, African Americans and black immigrants turned increasingly to activism, mounting strategies to battle bigotry and discrimination. Millions of blacks from the South and the Caribbean moved to cities like New York, Chicago and Detroit. Many of the migrants ended up in Harlem. By 1912, Harlem had become a haven for immigrants who sought the promise of the American Dream—and an oasis for people of the African diaspora who had long sought the promise too.

New technologies expanded elements of African American culture far beyond Jim Crow restrictions and even the American border. Phonographs and radio spread Harlem rhythms throughout the world. Leaders such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey helped shape Harlem's vibrant community of Dream-seekers into The Harlem Renaissance.

Harlem became the Mecca of black America and the epicenter of African American culture. Culturally, the Harlem Renaissance philosophy of black awareness and black pride expanded nationally and globally, as did the political fervor for Civil Rights and Human Rights. Jazz, swing, bebop and rhythm and blues became rock and roll, soul, rap and hip hop.

Improvements in education, employment, health care and opportunity remain the clarion call of Harlem and its many residents. The history of Harlem is the history of the American Dream—and activism.

By noted African American historian **Christopher Paul Moore**