

Dawn Peterson
COM 376
Historical Research- Spanish Harlem

Spanish Harlem: A History

The first settlers of the “Town of New Harlem” broke ground near the foot of 125th Street and the Harlem River on the fourteenth of August, 1658. Harlem is a neighborhood in the New York City borough of Manhattan, long known as a major African American residential, cultural, and business center. Originally it was a Dutch village, formally organized in 1658 and remained independent of the city of New York until 1873. It is named after the city of Haarlem in the Netherlands.

Spanish Harlem, also known as El Barrio and Little Spain, is an area of East Harlem in the borough of Manhattan. It is bound to the north by 120th Street, to the east by 3rd Avenue, to the south by 96th Street, and to the west by 5th Avenue. The population of the neighborhood was predominately Italian until Puerto Ricans began moving there in the 1920’s. Their numbers increased after the Second World War, as did that of Latin Americans from other countries. There are many churches, bodegas, substandard tenements, and large public housing projects.

The Puerto Rican Migration

Today East Harlem is predominately Latino but it was initially inhabited by a large Italian American population. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a huge wave of immigrants came from Southern Italy to East Harlem. The neighborhoods were one of New York’s many crowded, and impoverished immigrant-settling places

in Manhattan at that time. Italian Harlem reached its peak in the 1930's, with over 1000,000 Italian Americans living in its crowded, run-down apartment buildings. Each street was home to Italians from different regions of Italy. Italian Harlem was home to numerous crime syndicates including the early Black Hand, a type of extortion racket that mostly targeted successful immigrants, spread to many other major cities as well. The bigger and more organized Italian gangs formed the Italian-American Mafia still known today. Italian Harlem is also home to the Italian American actor, Al Pacino.

The Puerto Rican Migration

In the 1940's, a mass movement of Puerto Ricans began to crowd Italian Harlem. As Italians moved out to places like the Bronx and Brooklyn, Italian Harlem quickly transformed into Spanish Harlem. The mass migration was tied to Puerto Rico's economic plight at the time. According to the Puerto Rican Government Information Bureau in New York City, about 85% of the island's 400,000 families had an income of only a few hundred dollars a year.

By 1947, Puerto Ricans seeking work in the United States were arriving by plane and ship at the rate of more than 2,000 a month to augment the estimated 600,000 people already in New York. Some Puerto Ricans made the trip to New York for as little as \$20 for the one-way trip. This influx of migrants caused New York City authorities increasing concern because of the housing, health, and other problems involved. The vast majority of migrants moved in with other Puerto Ricans who already lived in small, unlit, airless rooms. To combat the overcrowding, a number

of Puerto Ricans were sent to New Jersey to serve as farm hands upon arrival in the U.S. Many returned to Puerto Rico if they could not find work. A small number only came to the United States for a short time to visit relatives from which they were estranged but the majority of Puerto Ricans who migrated to the U.S. stayed in New York City.

Puerto Ricans Learn to Survive in New York City

Most Puerto Rican migrants were not prepared for America. Because Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens, their migration to the US was completely legal. But most found the adjustment difficult. The inability of the majority to understand the English language forced them to cling to the already heavily populated Puerto Rican settlements in Manhattan. In a New York Times article from 1923 titled, "City Puerto Ricans: Complex Problem," the author deemed Puerto Ricans had more trouble adjusting to this city's life than do the survivor's of Europe's concentration camps.

Most of the Puerto Ricans who came to New York seeking a better life found their job opportunities limited to dishwashing, day labor, unskilled factory work and other tasks on a low economic level. Women often filled the majority of factories. Despite the small earnings in such jobs, 90% of the Puerto Rican families in the city were self-supporting. In the eyes of many, they were considered a menace, threatening to furnish a source of cheap labor, steal jobs, or take up space. In reality, the 35,000 Puerto Ricans on relief rolls were only 10% of the city's estimated Puerto Rican population of 350,000. Nine out of every ten Puerto Ricans in the city were

getting by without public assistance. Still, the ratio of Puerto Ricans on relief was more than double that for the city's entire population.

Hundreds of small grocery and other shops owned and operated by Puerto Ricans were located along Madison and Lexington Avenues in Spanish Harlem. Puerto Ricans also conducted many of the shops and business enterprises in the African American part of Harlem. Some of the storefront, independent Puerto Rican manufacturers produced blouses, scarves, accessories and other light items.

The Puerto Rican - African American Divide in Harlem

The plight of the African American in New York City was similar to that of the Puerto Rican. Problems of everyday survival for both groups were identical. Though they shared hardships, Puerto Ricans did not want to be classed with African Americans and their inferior social status. African Americans often blamed Puerto Ricans for the shortage of available jobs.

The two groups created unnecessary sub-divisions of Harlem, such as East, West, or Negro and Spanish Harlem. In a survey conducted in 1950 by *New York Amsterdam News*, African Americans living in close proximity to Puerto Ricans had little or no knowledge of them. Just as most American born citizens, African Americans were guilty of viewing the habits and customs of the newly arrived people as being "strange" and "foreign."

Puerto Ricans Become Part of City Life

By the early sixties, Americans in New York realized the Puerto Ricans of East Harlem were here to stay. The city began to make more accommodations for Puerto Ricans. It also began to accept their differences in culture and language. English-Spanish phrase lists were plentiful in the city. Many found knowing Spanish a shortcut to success in work.

In a drive for greater influence and recognition, the city's Puerto Rican and Spanish-speaking population began to realize their strength in voting. Puerto Ricans in New York played a crucial role in the 1960 election of President John F. Kennedy. John F. Kennedy visited Spanish Harlem as well as the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico. East Harlem's 14th Assembly District gave 78% of its votes to John F. Kennedy. Leaders in the Puerto Rican community agreed the personal magnetism of the Democratic challenger reinforced the traditionally Democratic voting habits of their people. At the time, the Puerto Ricans were the poorest ethnic group in the city. Most Puerto Ricans were in favor of the Democratic Party because they associated Republicans with wealth.

Youth Violence

The 1970's and 80's saw a revival of gang activity in New York City. Adolescent peer groups formed within crowded city schools created competition outside of school with other hostile ethnic groups for recreational space along neighborhood borderlines. Youth gangs carried on the customary battles over turf and organized against the drug trade, creating ways to drive heroin dealers and junkies out of the neighborhoods. Gangs blamed the increase in heroin use for eroding their ability to

preserve their members. By the later half of the 1980's, deadly gun violence reached epidemic proportions among New York City youth.

New York's leading urban anthropologist, Mercer Sullivan, closely examined the nature of youth violence in New York during the last decade of the 20th century, when "supergangs" from Los Angeles and Chicago were reported to be proliferating across the nation. Sullivan pinpointed 1997 as the year when nationally famous gangs finally came to New York City. These gangs include the Bloods, Crips, Latin Kings, and Netas. Local Puerto Rican youth began choosing to identify as either Bloods or Crips, mostly Bloods.

Spanish Harlem Today

Today, Spanish Harlem has a population of nearly 120,000. It is one of the largest predominately Latino communities in New York City. The crime rate has dropped significantly—about 68% over the past 15 years. Though crime is higher in Spanish Harlem than in other neighborhoods in the city, the Spanish Harlem rate of decline in crime is roughly equal to the decline in crime seen in the more affluent neighborhoods.

A lack of access to healthy food causes serious hardships to citizens of Spanish Harlem, often considered a 'food desert.' According to an April 2008 report prepared by the New York City Department of City Planning, Spanish Harlem has the highest levels of diet-related diseases due to limited opportunities for fresh food purchase. Residents are largely limited to fast food restaurants and small bodegas

as food sources. This problem contributes to high rates of obesity and diabetes in the area.

For some years now, Harlem has been undergoing rigorous gentrification and revitalization. Property values in Spanish Harlem have climbed along with those in the rest of Manhattan and the metro area. Many people priced out of more affluent sections of New York City have begun to look at Spanish Harlem as an up and coming area due to the neighborhood's proximity to Manhattan's core and subway accessibility. There has been a severe decline in affordable housing in the community. The southern tier of Spanish Harlem has experienced so much gentrification, it has earned several nicknames including "SpaHa," "Upper Upper East Side," and "Upper Yorkville."

Works Cited

- Burnham, Daniel M. "On the Move :Puerto Ricans, Lured By Job Opportunities, Flock to U.S. Cities Slim Paychecks, Big Welfare Load." *Wall Street Journal (1923 - Current file)* 10 Jul 1956,ProQuest Historical Newspapers The Wall Street Journal (1889 - 1992), ProQuest. Web. 16 Jun. 2010.
- Dempsey,David. "The New Barrio. " *New York Times (1923-Current file)* 27 Nov. 1966,ProQuest Historical Newspapers New York Times (1851-2006) w/ Index (1851-1993), ProQuest. Web. 16 Jun. 2010.
- Field, Rose C. "'Fiesta in Manhattan" and Other Recent Works of Fiction." *New York Times (1923-Current file)* 12 Mar. 1939,ProQuest Historical Newspapers New York Times (1851-2006) w/ Index (1851-1993), ProQuest. Web. 16 Jun. 2010.
- Green, Judith, and Kevin Pranis. *Gangs In New York City*. Justice Policy Institute, 2007. Web.
<http://www.justicepolicy.org/images/upload/07-07_Ch1_GangWars_GC-PS-AC-JJ.pdf>.
- Grutzner, Charles. "CITY PUERTO RICANS FOUND ILL-HOUSED: Crowded Conditions, Race Bias Are Seen as Reasons for the Social Problem" *New York Times (1923-Current file)* 4 Oct. 1949,ProQuest Historical Newspapers New York Times (1851-2006) w/ Index (1851-1993), ProQuest. Web. 16 Jun. 2010.
- Grutzner, Charles. "WORK IS LIMITED FOR PUERTO RICANS: But 90% Are Self-Supporting and They Meet Standards of Wages and Hours. " *New York Times (1923-Current file)* 6 Oct. 1949,ProQuest Historical Newspapers New York Times (1851-2006) w/ Index (1851-1993), ProQuest. Web. 16 Jun. 2010.
- Jackosn, Kenneth T., *The Encyclopedia of New York City*, Yale University Press, 1995, p. 605.
- Kihss, Peter. "Flow of Puerto Ricans Here Fills Jobs, Poses Problems :ONE OUT OF 20 HERE NOW PUERTO RICAN" *New York Times (1923-Current file)* 23 Feb. 1953,ProQuest Historical Newspapers New York Times (1851-2006) w/ Index (1851-1993), ProQuest. Web. 16 Jun. 2010.
- Lelyveld, Joseph. "Se Habla Espanol: New Yorkers who deal with the local Puerto Ricans are learning to answer 'Si.' " *New York Times (1923-Current file)* 14 Jun 1964,ProQuest Historical Newspapers New York Times (1851-2006) w/ Index (1851-1993), ProQuest. Web. 16 Jun. 2010.

Pierce, Carl Horton., William Pennington. Toler, and Harmon De Pau. Nutting. *New Harlem past and Present; the Story of an Amazing Civic Wrong, Now at Last to Be Righted*. New York: New Harlem Pub., 1903. Print.

Rodriguez, Clara E., and Joseph Monserrat. *Puerto Rican Immigrants and Migrants: A Historical Perspective*. *Americansall.com*. Americans All- A National Education Program, 2009. Web. <<http://www.americansall.com/PDFs/02-americans-all/9.9.pdf>>.

Schanberg, Sydney H. "KENNEDY FAVORED BY PUERTO RICANS: Big Vote for Him Expected in Spanish-Speaking Areas." *New York Times (1923-Current file)* 18 Oct. 1964, ProQuest Historical Newspapers New York Times (1851-2006) w/ Index (1851-1993), ProQuest. Web. 16 Jun. 2010.