

PROPOSED SOUTH VILLAGE HISTORIC DISTRICT BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN

The proposed South Village Historic District consists of approximately 250 buildings, including row houses, tenements, commercial structures, and institutions that illustrate the growth of the neighborhood from its origins as an affluent residential area in the early 19th century to a vibrant community of artists and working-class immigrants in the early 20th century.

Development in this area began in earnest during the 1820s and 1830s when unprecedented growth pushed the limits of the city northward and—for at least a brief period—made the blocks of the proposed historic district one of New York’s most prestigious residential neighborhoods. Many blockfronts were developed with architecturally harmonious rows of houses, which were often given their own address schemes with distinguished-sounding names. Cottage Place was located on a portion of what is now Sixth Avenue, St. Clements Place on Mac Dougal Street, Varick Place on Sullivan Street, and DePau and Amity Places on Thompson Street. Bleecker Street in particular was known for its stately terraces of row houses; Carroll Place was developed by noted real estate agent Thomas E. Davis while DePau Row once occupied the site of what is now the Mills Hotel.

Several early houses remain from this period and recall the South Village’s history as a fashionable residential district. The tall late-Federal-style buildings on the north side of Bleecker Street were originally part of the Carroll Place terrace that occupied both sides of that street between Thompson Street and La Guardia Place. The unusual Gothic Revival-style houses on Mac Dougal Street were built as part of St. Clement’s Place. They once featured triple-height iron porches and retain their distinctive pointed-arched window and door openings on the first story. Other smaller rows and individual houses from this period can be found throughout the proposed district. The Federal and late Federal style are well represented by a pair of houses on Bleecker Street, now part of the Little Red Schoolhouse, as well as a small group on Mac Dougal that have already received individual landmark designation. The Greek Revival style distinguishes houses on West 4th and Mac Dougal Streets, and a survivor of the Varick Place terrace on what is now Sullivan Street.

By the 1850s immigrants began to settle in the area as wealthier residents moved farther uptown. Many of the row houses were converted for multiple-family dwellings and boarding houses, and eventually new purpose-built tenements began to slowly replace the older building stock. The tenements within the proposed district represent a range of styles and were designed according to an evolving set of building codes, including examples of pre-law Italianate- and Neo-Grec-style buildings from the 1860s and 1870s. It was also during this period that the blocks around Minetta Street and Minetta Lane developed into “Little Africa,” which at that time was the largest African-American community in New York.

The Tenement House Act of 1879 led to the adoption of the dumbbell plan typical of most so-called “old-law” tenements. Stylistically, the neo-Grec remained popular throughout the 1880s, while architects also began using elements of the Queen Anne. By the 1890s tenement design had reached its pinnacle of flamboyance. Facades typically featured richly molded terra-cotta detailing, textured brickwork, densely layered beltcourses, projecting piers, and boldly massed cornices. The exuberant Queen Anne style remained widely used, while the organic Romanesque Revival and the Classically-inspired Renaissance Revival also gained favor. The area also contains a few Beaux-Arts tenements built under the so-called “new law” passed in 1901. It was during this period of the late 19th and early 20th century that the neighborhood became predominantly Italian as newly arrived immigrants settled in the area.

The proposed historic district also contains a number of architecturally distinctive commercial and industrial buildings—particularly along the larger thoroughfares of West Houston Street and La Guardia Place. Notable institutions in the area include the Mills House No. 1 on Bleecker Street that was conceived as a model residential hotel for single workingmen. It opened in 1897 and was designed by Ernest Flagg, an architect noted for his work with the reform housing movement.

The proposed historic district contains some notably intact historic buildings; nevertheless, the stylistic and commercial alterations from the early 20th century are also a defining characteristic of the neighborhood. The north-facing studio windows installed on these houses on West 4th Street and Bleecker Street, for example, are typical of the renovations undertaken during the bohemian rediscovery of the Village.

Throughout the 20th century the blocks of the proposed historic district have served as one of the most important centers of social and cultural foment in the city and country. The area was the center of early gay and lesbian life in New York, while its music clubs nourished generations of artists from jazz to folk to rock. Bohemians and Beatniks congregated in its famous cafes and a flourishing off-Broadway scene developed in its small theaters. The buildings and streetscapes of the proposed South Village Historic District tell the story of both its early development in the 19th century and of the artistic and social movements that made the Village famous throughout the 20th century.