



A GUIDE TO HISTORIC NEW YORK CITY NEIGHBORHOODS

THE GARIFUNA DIASPORA

THE BRONX





The Historic Districts Council is New York's citywide advocate for historic buildings and neighborhoods. The Six to Celebrate program annually identifies six neighborhoods that merit preservation as priorities for HDC's advocacy and consultation over a yearlong period.

The six, chosen from applications submitted by community organizations, are selected on the basis of the architectural and historic merit of the area, the level of threat to the neighborhood, the strength and willingness of the local advocates, and the potential for HDC's preservation support to be meaningful. HDC works with these neighborhood partners to set and reach preservation goals through strategic planning, advocacy, outreach, programs and publicity.

The core belief of the Historic Districts Council is that preservation and enhancement of New York City's historic resources—its neighborhoods, buildings, parks and public spaces—are central to the continued success of the city. The Historic Districts Council works to ensure the preservation of these resources and uphold the New York City Landmarks Law and to further the preservation ethic. This mission is accomplished through ongoing programs of assistance to more than 500 community and neighborhood groups and through public-policy initiatives, publications, educational outreach and sponsorship of community events.



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THE GARIFUNA DIASPORA

The Garifuna, or Garinagu, are an ethnic group of mixed African, Carib, and Arawak ancestry with roots in the Caribbean. Their origin is commonly traced to a 1635 shipwreck, when two slave ships carrying Africans to the Americas sank near the island of Saint Vincent. The survivors were initially captured by Island Caribs but eventually integrated through intermarriage, forming a distinct cultural group known as the Black Caribs. French forces invaded the Antillean islands that same year and held control until Britain claimed the territory in 1763 after the Seven Years' War. Tensions between the Caribs and Europeans led to conflicts in 1769 and 1795. After these uprisings, the British deported the Black Caribs of St. Vincent—first to Jamaica, then to Roatán, Honduras—where many perished during the journey. The survivors eventually settled along the Caribbean coast of Central America, from Belize to Nicaragua, establishing what is now known as the Garifuna Diaspora.

In the 1930s, Garifuna men began to access long-distance transnational migration by working on U.S. and British merchant marine ships and other commercial vessels. Many entered the United States through major ports such as New Orleans and New York, where they established initial residences and were later joined by their families. Over time, significant Garifuna communities emerged in major urban centers including Los Angeles, Houston, New Orleans, and New York City.

Estimating the population of the Garifuna is challenging, particularly due to the exclusion of transnational ethnic groups from standardized surveys. However, it is estimated that over 200,000 Garifuna currently live in New York City—the largest Garifuna community in the United States—with half of them residing in the South Bronx. They remained largely under the radar until March of 1990, when the Happy Land fire brought national attention to the Garifuna community.

The tragedy occurred at the Happy Land Social Club (**Site 3**), where 87 lives were lost. In the aftermath, the previously dispersed Garifuna community quickly came together to help survivors and the families of the victims, resorting to local landmarks such as Saint Thomas Aquinas Church (**Site 6**) and P.S. 67 (**Site 2**) to provide guidance and support. To honor the memory of those who perished, the community erected a memorial (**Site 4**) and successfully advocated for the co-naming of the corner of Southern Boulevard and Tremont Avenue (**Site 5**).

The tragedy also served as a catalyst for the founding of the Garifuna Coalition USA, a non-profit organization committed to advocating for the rights and visibility of Garifuna immigrants. In partnership with HDC, the Coalition has created educational and cultural programs that celebrate the Garifuna community's rich heritage, while also shedding light on the ongoing challenges they face, including gentrification and displacement.

This brochure was developed by the Historic Districts Council in partnership with the Garifuna Coalition USA. The featured sites offer a glimpse into this community's rich history, inviting you to explore further and support efforts to protect, preserve, and celebrate its unique legacy.



HISPANOS UNIDOS CASITA

2061 Honeywell Ave

(2002)



Throughout the 1970s and 80s, a network of small frame structures was constructed on empty lots throughout The Bronx. These communal spaces, called Casitas, were built by local residents as a way to reclaim a landscape blighted by disinvestment and crime and were designed to resemble houses in the Puerto Rican countryside. One of the city’s oldest and largest is Casita Rincón Criollo (STC 2020), where members gather, garden, hold community events, and pass down musical and cultural traditions. Most of these

community spaces operate under the umbrella of the NY Parks GreenThumb program.

Casita Hispanos Unidos was established in 2002 at the Daly Avenue Garden. Its main focus is gardening, with a rainwater harvesting system installed in 2012 by GrowNYC. A new children’s area was designed and implemented in 2020 by the Gear Up program of the New York Botanical Garden.

LEGEND OF DESIGNATIONS

National Historic Landmark	NH L
National Register of Historic Places - District	NR D
National Register of Historic Places - Property	NR P
New York City Historic District	NYC HD
New York City Individual Landmark	NYC IL
New York City Interior Landmark	NYC INL

This five-story brick structure was part of an extensive program of school construction undertaken by New York City in the mid-1920s to alleviate the serious overcrowding caused by immigration after World War I. From 1923 to 1927, William H. Gompert led the efforts as the Architect and Superintendent of School Buildings for the New York City Board of Education, overseeing the design and construction of some 170 new schools and additions.

During the immediate aftermath of the Happy Land tragedy, a temporary morgue was set up in Public School 67, as well as a Command Center Post in the gymnasium of the lower level, where different agencies and family members gathered to identify the victims, make funeral arrangements, and access a wide range of support services. *Photo courtesy of the NYC Municipal Archive.*

2

P.S. 67, MOHEGAN SCHOOL

2024 Mohegan Ave
(1925, William H. Gompert)



FORMER HAPPY LAND SOCIAL CLUB

3

1955-1959 Southern Blvd
(Ca. 1920)



The Happy Land Social Club was an unlicensed social club that operated from this two-story commercial building at Southern Boulevard. It was established in 1987 when owner Elias Colon leased the space. Since it lacked fire exits, alarms or a sprinkler system, Colon was ordered to close by the end of 1988, but the order was never put into effect.

On March 25th, 1990, after a fight with his former partner who worked at the club, Julio González set fire to the only access to the club, trapping all those in attendance. Eighty-seven people died largely due to asphyxiation or trampling. Most of them were young Hondurans of Garifuna descent.

The tragedy had a significant impact on New York City and the country. It prompted changes in fire safety regulations and building codes, and strict supervision of social clubs. It also led to a renewed interest in the Garifuna community to organize and highlight their many contributions to the social and economic fabric of New York, which had remained almost invisible since their migration to the US in the 1930s.

4

HAPPY LAND MEMORIAL

1976 Crotona Pkwy
(1995)

After the tragedy of the Happy Land fire, the community set out to honor those who had died by building a memorial on the parkland across the street from where the social club was located. The project was funded by the city through the NYC Parks Department, in collaboration with the office of the Bronx Borough President and the Federation of Honduran Organizations of New York.

The monument was designed by Honduran immigrant José Antonio Velásquez, and consists of a fenced memorial plaza with a central rose-colored granite obelisk, inscribed with the names of those who perished in the fire. It was dedicated on June 17, 1995, and is visited annually by a procession and vigil after the memorial mass at St. Thomas of Aquinas Church.

5

OCHENTA Y SIETE BOULEVARD

Southern Blvd at E. Tremont Ave
(1996)

In 1996, this corner of Southern Boulevard and Tremont Avenue was co-named *Ochenta y Siete Boulevard* (Eighty-Seven Boulevard), in memory of the 87 men and women who lost their lives in the Happy Land Social Club Fire.

The junction also serves as the meeting point for the formation of the Annual Central American Independence Parade, which continues down Southern Boulevard and ends at Charlotte Street and Crotona Park East. The festival, which takes place on September 15th, celebrates the independence of the Central American countries of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. It is also the Kick-Off Day of National Hispanic Heritage Month, established in 1968.

6

ST. THOMAS AQUINAS CHURCH

1900 Crotona Pkwy

(Ca. 1935)

Resource Center for Community Development. The organization provided a convenient location for outreach activities, as well as mental health services and legal and financial counsel for families and survivors.

The Crotona Parkway Malls were designed to follow Crotona Parkway for nine blocks between Crotona Park and Bronx Park. The parkway opened in 1910, replacing an earlier unpaved road known as Penfold Street.

By the end of the 1990s, Garifuna organizations in New York City experienced substantial growth due to a third wave of migration. People began to congregate at gathering places in the Bronx such as Bill Rainey Park, known as Waporu (“ship” in Garifuna), and Crotona Park. This section between 175th Street, 176th Street and Fairmount Place was the meeting place of the first Garifuna Merchant Marine men, who were mostly from the city of Trujillo, Colon, Honduras. As a result, in Garifuna folklore that section became known as “El Parque de los Trujillanos” (Trujillanos Park).

Until 2003, the area served as the last section of the Central American Independence Parade, and the site of the Central American Independence Festival. The Garifuna were prohibited from congregating there after a new housing development was built, and relocated to the Starlight Park near the Sheridan Expressway.

7

PARQUE TRUJILLANO

Southern Blvd at Fairmount Pl

(1990)

8

FORMER SANTOS BATIS SOCIAL CLUB

1753 Boston Rd
(Ca. 1915)



language. He had a band in New York and owned two social clubs in the Bronx, one of them located on the second floor of this building at Boston Rd.

This four-story steel-framed brick and limestone building is an outstanding example of the Art Deco style. It was the first thoroughly “modernistic” public school to depart from a standard elementary school plan design, creating facilities specifically for junior high programs. Designed by Walter G. Martin, Architect, Superintendent of School Buildings for the NYC Board of Education, the building features a curved entrance tower modeled as a set-back skyscraper, continuous piers and banding emphasizing verticality, and a roofline with cresting and pedimented parapets. The facades have decorative brick and cut stone panels, with extensive iconographic academic symbols and exceptional modernistic sculptural figures on the tower. It was named for the prominent publisher and philanthropist Herman Ridder, and currently hosts the Bronx Envision Academy. It was designated as a NYC Landmark in 1990.

P.S. 98, HERMAN RIDDER JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

1619 Boston Road
(1929-31, *Walter G. Martin*)
NYC IL

9



It was named for the prominent publisher and philanthropist Herman Ridder, and currently hosts the Bronx Envision Academy. It was designated as a NYC Landmark in 1990.

Since their initial migration in the 1930s, the Garifuna community has actively used open spaces for social interaction and cultural manifestations. Crotona Park functions as the main gathering place for the Bronx Garifuna, hosting family celebrations, cultural events and sport activities organized by the Garifuna soccer league.

Starting in 1996, the park served as the culmination of the Central America Independence Parade and the location of the Annual Central America Independence

Festival. Every September, dozens of food vendors, artisans, artists and performers gather to promote Garifuna and Central American culture, highlighting their contributions to New York City. Garifuna organizations citywide participate by marching and/or performing. Folkloric dance groups and music bands headline the event, which is attended by a wide range of audiences, including non-Garifuna. *Photo: Vendors at The Central America Independence Festival, 2019. Courtesy of Being Garifuna.*

10

CROTONA PARK

Crotona Park N, Crotona Park S, Fulton Av,
Southern Blvd & Crotona Park E

(1888)



BRONX MUSIC HERITAGE CENTER

II

438 E 163rd St

(2017)



Founded by the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation (WHEDco), the Bronx Music Heritage Center (BMHC) is a performing arts and community center that fosters local artists, bringing together audiences to celebrate Bronx music. Through their programming, BMHC works towards the preservation and promotion of the Bronx's musical heritage, spurring neighborhood revival, and providing free cultural activities for the community. Their headquarters are located on the first floor of this affordable housing development, built in 2017 by WHEDco.

Among the artists that perform at BMHC are the legendary Aurelio Martínez, whose unwavering commitment to preserving and promoting Garifuna culture transcended borders, sharing the rich Garifuna heritage with the world; and the Wabafu Garifuna Dance Theater, a New York City-based, multi-generational dance company.

The first Garifuna organization was established in New York in 1946 to promote friendship among its members through voluntary aid and advancement in areas such as business and social welfare. Most members were Carib, meaning they belonged “to the Carib Indian Tribe of Central America,” therefore it was named the Carib American Association. New organizations would soon follow, most of them focused on social activities. By the 1990s, a series of new organizations and committees were established to provide community services, with several attempts at building a multipurpose community center.

Casa Yurumein was established in 2009 as a Community Center that provides services and helps make visible the social, political, economic and cultural contributions of the Garifuna and Afro-Central American communities living in the United States. Their headquarters are located at this two-story commercial structure, which also hosts El Maestro Inc. (STC 2020).

I2

CASA YURUMEIN

1300 Southern Blvd

(Ca. 1920)



I3

STARLIGHT PARK

1490 Sheridan Blvd

(1963)



Once the property of businessman and philanthropist William Waldorf Astor, this site was in 1918 the location of the Bronx International Exposition of Science, Arts and Industries. The fair focused on new technology and foreign trade following World War I, but failed to attract both local and international crowds and closed the following year. In 1920, it was repurposed as an amusement park named Starlight Park, with rollercoasters, pools and other concessions. It remained active until the 1940s, when the property was bought by ConEd and used as a standby plant for gas storage. It was sold again in 1945 to the City of New York for the construction of the Sheridan Expressway and a park.

The new Expressway was completed in 1962, and the park opened to the public in 1963 as Sheridan Fields. It was renamed in 1996 in homage to the former amusement park, and features a pair of grass baseball fields, playgrounds, and basketball courts. It was linked to the Bronx River Greenway in 2023, with a series of new features and infrastructure. For the last 20 years, it has served as a meeting place for the Bronx Garifuna Community during the Summer. *Photo courtesy of Friends of Starlight Park.*

ST. ANTHONY OF PADUA ROMAN
CATHOLIC CHURCH

I4

822 East 166th Street
(1904-05)



The Parish of St. Anthony of Padua was established in 1903 to serve German Catholics in the Bronx, and was one of the last German national parishes to be created in New York. Construction of this three-story brick structure began in 1904, providing space for a church, school and convent. In 1927 another large Italianate church was built at the corner of Prospect Avenue.

In the 1970s, St. Anthony of Padua became the home parish to a large Garifuna community. Among their

most important contributions was the establishment of voluntary associations known as *Pastorales*, which were led mostly by women and played a significant role in sustaining Garifuna spiritual traditions. *Pastorales* also existed in Central America, proliferating in New York during the Garifuna's second wave of immigration. The San Antonio de Padua group was one of the first in the Bronx; it organized masses and other religious services in the Garifuna language, used traditional instruments in songs, wore traditional attire and offered traditional food. *Photo courtesy of Bronx Catholic.*

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