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San Juan Hill

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The Encyclopedia of New York City

San Juan Hill. Former neighborhood on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, bounded to the north by 64th Street, to the east by Amsterdam Avenue, to the south by 57th Street, and to the west by the Hudson River. Dutch settlers named the area Bloemendael or Bloemendal, which was changed to Bloomingdale by the English after 1664. Shantytowns built by Irish immigrants covered some parts by the middle of the nineteenth century. The name San Juan Hill may refer to the black veterans who moved to the area after the Spanish-American War, or to the street brawls that often erupted there, many of them interracial. In the early twentieth century the neighborhood became the center of black life in New York City, and its theaters and clubs played an important role in the development of ragtime and early jazz. Several musicians lived there, including the bandleader Benny Carter and the pianist Thelonious Monk, after whom the intersection of 63rd Street and West End Avenue is named. The neighborhood was also the setting for Leonard Bernstein's musical *West Side Story* (1957). In 1956 it was designated the site of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. Construction of the complex displaced more than fifteen hundred families, most of them black and Puerto Rican, and other tenements were demolished to make way for a branch of Fordham University, expensive new housing near Broadway, and new housing for the elderly farther west. The area attracted a number of immigrants from the Dominican Republic, the United Kingdom, China, Israel, and France in the 1980s, by which time the southern reaches were considered part of Clinton and the name San Juan Hill was disused.

Peter Salwen: *Upper West Side Story: A History and Guide* (New York: Abbeville, 1989)

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