

Comeback

Morrisania hopes to be heading for a future worthy of its past

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PHOTO: LENORE SCHULTZ

Despite undergoing a severe decline in the 1970's, the South Bronx community of Morrisania, once the social and civic center of the borough, now appears to be on the rebound. Few residents, however, seem to know of their neighborhood's rich history.

George L. Rivera, 43, a security guard who has worked in the community for ten years says, "It used to be very scary. I used to be a target here because of the uniform." Rivera says he feels that crime has gone down over the past decade, but adds with a smile, "I really don't care about the history of the neighborhood or how it got its name. All I care about is that it's safe now."

Morrisania is situated in the Southwestern Bronx bounded by the Cross Bronx Expressway to the North, 161st Street to the South, Crotona Park and Prospect Avenue to the East and Claremont Park and Webster Avenue to the West.

The entire area was once farmland owned by Jonas Bronck a Swedish immigrant. In 1660, he sold the land to Colonel Lewis Morris and his brother Richard, who were

wealthy growers of sugar cane and major shippers of sugar products in Barbados. The Morris family migrated to America and set up a family estate on the site, bringing with them the first Black settlers to the area, who were slaves on their sugar plantation.

In 1790, the third and last owner of the estate, Lewis Morris, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, proposed that his land should become the site of the federal capital. The area, however, remained sparsely populated until Gouverneur Morris Jr. - Lewis Morris' grandson as well as the writer of the Preamble to the Constitution - allowed an extension of the New York and Harlem Railroad to be built in 1840. In 1848, he sold a parcel of land adjacent to the railroad, which became Morrisania Village.

The majority of the first inhabitants of the village worked in Manhattan. In 1855, as more settlements were made along the railroad, the town of Morrisania was formed. Later, in 1874, it was annexed by New York City. In 1887, the 3rd Avenue elevated line was extended into the area, offering regular

service to Manhattan. Tenements replaced houses, and by the time the subway was extended to its southeastern corner in 1904, Morrisania was already a well established urban area. By 1905, Russian Jews, Germans, Irish and Italians made up most of the population of almost 60,000.

Morrisania remained the center of the borough until 1920. By that time, its population exploded to almost 140,000 people. The original Bronx County Courthouse was erected at 161st Street and 3rd Avenue between 1905-1915, to serve the needs of the rapidly growing borough. In 1923, Yankee Stadium opened at 161st Street and River Avenue as the home of the New York Yankees. The Bronx County Building, today known as the Bronx County Courthouse, on the Grand Concourse at 161st Street, was completed in 1935. It's now a landmark that includes details such as eight freestanding groups of figures carved in pink marble guarding each of the building's entrances, and each representing themes like achievement, progress and the majesty of law.

During the next few decades, much of Morrisania's inhabitants moved north to new developments in other parts of the borough. A large influx of blacks and Puerto Ricans came to replace the white ethnic groups that left. In 1950, the area's population of 198,000 was 54% white, 34% black, and 10% Puerto Rican. In 1960 its population fell to 168,000, of which 26% were white, 40% were black, and 34% were Puerto Rican.

In the 1950's, about 170,000 people, displaced by slum clearing in Manhattan, moved to Morrisania, as well as Hunts Point, Tremont, Melrose and Highbridge. Social workers at the time reported a rise in poverty in the Southern Bronx. Another problem during the 1960's and 1970's was rampant arson. A number of buildings were set on fire by landlords hoping to collect insurance and at other times by tenants hoping to take advantage of the city's policy that burned out tenants should be given priority for public housing and receive money for new furnishings. This period of destruction ended when policy was changed to limit the amount of insurance payments for repairing burned-out apartment buildings.

Morrisania's population declined during this period because of drugs, crime, abandoned housing and the urban renewal efforts. The local economy was also destabilized by changes in the city's economy and the demolition of the 3rd Avenue elevated line.

By the 80s, however, Morrisania began to attract new immigrant groups. Between 1983 and 1989, the New York City Department of Planning statistics show that 3,889 immigrants settled in this community. That figure rose to 4,065 between 1990 and 1994. As of 1996, records show that 5,861 more people had emigrated to Morrisania. Of these numbers, there were significantly large populations from the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Honduras, Ecuador, Nigeria and Ghana.

One family homes and row houses were built, hundreds of apartment buildings restored and several apartments were converted to co-ops and condos, permitting more residents to own their own homes. Of these, one of the most impressive is the Executive Towers, which is located at 165th Street and the Grand Concourse. According to its sales brochure, it boasts 23 stories renowned for their architectural beauty, excellent construction, unexcelled elegance and luxury.

Police Officer Eric Sanchez and his wife Pamela, both 30 years old and the parents of three daughters, have resided in Morrisania for four years, one block away from Executive Towers. Pamela says that while "life is not a bunch of roses," she "looks for

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