

## **555 EDGECOMBE AVENUE APARTMENTS**

**(Roger Morris Apartments),**

555 Edgecombe Avenue, Borough of Manhattan.

Built 1914-16; architect Schwartz & Gross.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 2109, Lot 34.

On July 15, 1991, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Roger Morris Apartments and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 29). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Two speakers testified in favor of designation. Eight additional speakers were in favor of the designation of this and the other items on the calendar at the hearing but urged the Commission to continue its work in Harlem. Numerous letters have been received expressing the same sentiments.

### **DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS**

#### Summary

The apartment building at 555 Edgecombe Avenue, built as the Roger Morris Apartments but known simply as "555," has achieved significance as the home of many of New York's successful African-Americans. Located on an elevated site immediately south of the eighteenth-century house of Roger Morris (known as the Morris-Jumel Mansion), on land that was once part of the Morris' Mount Morris Estate, the apartment house at 555 Edgecombe Avenue was erected in 1914-16 during a period of major residential development in lower Washington Heights. By the mid-1940s, 555 had become such a well-known residence for black New Yorkers that it was considered a part of Sugar Hill, despite the fact that it is north of 155th Street. The building is among the most impressive apartment houses in the neighborhood and is among the few tall residential buildings erected in this section of the city. Designed by Schwartz & Gross, one of the architectural firms most actively involved in the design of apartment houses in New York during the first decades of the twentieth century, the Roger Morris initially housed white tenants of various ethnic backgrounds. By the 1930s the racial character of the neighborhood was changing, and in 1939-40 the tenant population of 555 Edgecombe Avenue shifted exclusively to African-American. Since 555 Edgecombe Avenue is one of the finest buildings in the neighborhood, with sizable apartments and spectacular views, it attracted a number of America's most famous black citizens including, however briefly, such people as Paul Robeson, Count Basie, Canada Lee, and Kenneth Clark. It also has housed a significant number of white-collar workers and professionals.

### History of the Neighborhood<sup>1</sup>

The 555 Edgecombe Avenue Apartments (Roger Morris Apartments) is located on the southwest corner of Edgecombe Avenue (once known as Edgecomb or Edgecombe Road and for a time referred to as Colonial Parkway) and West 160th Street across the street from Highbridge Park near the edge of a cliff that rises from the Harlem River and Harlem Plain.<sup>2</sup> The building is located near the southeast corner of Washington Heights and at the north end of the neighborhood that is often referred to as Sugar Hill. In 1636 the site became a part of the tobacco plantation of Hendrick de Forest. The property passed through several hands before 1765 when the 130-acre farm, including the site of 555 Edgecombe Avenue, was purchased by British Lieutenant Colonel Roger Morris and his American-born wife Mary Philipse Morris who erected a grand mansion in the Georgian style (a designated New York City Landmark familiarly known as the Morris-Jumel Mansion) just north of present-day West 160th Street. Naming the estate "Mount Morris," the Morrises apparently used the house as their summer villa. At the outbreak of the Revolutionary War in 1775, Morris, a Loyalist, left for England while his wife and children moved to the Philipse family's estate in Yonkers. Morris returned to New York in 1777 during the British occupation, but the entire family returned to England at the conclusion of the war.

Mount Morris gained its greatest fame between September 14 and October 18, 1776, when the house was occupied by General George Washington who used it as a temporary headquarters during the retreat north on Manhattan Island of the American troops following their defeats in the battles of Long Island and Kip's Bay. Following the war, the entire estate was confiscated by the Commission of Forfeiture and it was sold on July 9, 1784.

The property changed hands several times between 1784 and 1810 when the estate was purchased by Stephen Jumel, a wealthy importer of wine and brandy who had arrived in New York from France in 1795. Jumel moved into the Mount Morris house with his wife and former mistress, Eliza Bowen, and her niece Mary Bowen. Stephen Jumel died in the house in 1832. Following Eliza

Jumel's death in 1865, title to the property became embroiled in a series of lawsuits involving her heirs (including Mary Bowen and her husband) and those of Stephen Jumel. These suits were finally settled in 1881 and the following year the property was sold at auction in small lots.<sup>3</sup>

In the early 1880s the Washington Heights area contained old farm houses and summer villas as well as scattered frame houses and a number of institutions.<sup>4</sup> The first major development to occur was on Sylvan Terrace (within the boundaries of what is now the Jumel Terrace Historic District), formerly the carriage drive leading from Kingsbridge Road to the Morris house. This property was purchased by developer John D. Crimmins in May, 1882 and construction of the twenty small wooden houses, designed by architect/builder G. Robinson, Jr., began several months later.

More substantial masonry rowhouses were erected in the neighborhood during the 1890s, including those on West 160th and 161st streets and on Jumel Terrace, now within the Jumel Terrace Historic District. While much of the community of Harlem, located to the southeast, was already developed with rowhouses, tenements, and apartment buildings by 1900, major real estate investment and development came late to Washington Heights. No major mass transit lines linked the community to the commercial and business centers located in the bustling city to the south. The closest elevated station was at Eighth Avenue and 155th Street, inconveniently located at the bottom of the cliff. It was not until 1904, when the Interborough Rapid Transit Company inaugurated subway service beneath Broadway, as far north as 157th Street (service was extended further north in 1906) that major building began in the community. By this time rowhouse construction had virtually ceased in Manhattan, as rising land values and the growing acceptance of apartment house living on the part of affluent New Yorkers led to the demise of the single-family home and the general construction of multiple dwellings. In lower Washington Heights most of the new construction entailed the erection of six-story elevator apartments intended for middle-class households and five-story

walk-up buildings for the households of less affluent working people.

During the first years of widespread development in lower Washington Heights very few apartment buildings of more than six stories were erected. New York City building regulations only allowed tall, ten- to twelve-story apartment buildings on wide streets such as Broadway, on major crosstown streets, and opposite parks (in these locations such buildings could rise to a height of one-and-a-half times the width of the street). Even on such streets, tall apartment houses were erected only if a builder felt that the cost of construction would be offset by rents high enough to permit an adequate return on a large investment. In Manhattan during the first years of the twentieth century, the construction of ten- to twelve-story apartment houses was concentrated in areas such as the Upper West Side, the Upper East Side, and Morningside Heights.

According to the *Real Estate Record and Builders Guide*, the first twelve-story apartment house in Washington Heights was planned in 1909 for the northeast corner of Amsterdam Avenue and West 181st Street, overlooking Highbridge Park.<sup>5</sup> Although not built, the plan and the attention devoted to it in the *Record and Guide* attest to a new attitude towards building in Washington Heights once the area had become an established neighborhood for middle-class people. Within a year of this initial plan, several tall apartment buildings with impressive exterior designs and spacious apartments appeared in the neighborhood. Among these were the Riviera (Rouse & Goldstone) on Riverside Drive between West 156th and 157th streets and the Vauxhall (George & Edward Blum) on Riverside Drive and West 155th Street. These were soon joined by other tall buildings in the Riverside Drive area and along Broadway, and two twelve-story buildings on Edgecombe Avenue, along the ridge above Colonial (now Jackie Robinson) and Highbridge parks -- the Colonial Parkway Apartments at 409 Edgecombe Avenue (Schwartz & Gross, 1916-17), just south of West 155th Street, and the Roger Morris at No. 555.

### Sugar Hill and the Black Community<sup>6</sup>

In the late nineteenth century and first years of the twentieth century, most black New Yorkers lived in the tenements on the West Side, especially in the areas known as the Tenderloin in the West 30s, Hell's Kitchen in the West 40s and 50s, and San Juan Hill in the West 60s. Several factors led to a migration of New York's African-American community from the West Side to Harlem beginning in the first years of the twentieth century. The city's black population was increasing rapidly. Gilbert Osofsky notes in his history of Harlem that "by 1910 there were 91,709 Negroes in the metropolis, the majority southern-born"; this was an increase of over 30,000 people from 1900.<sup>7</sup> These new migrants from the South, as well as other new arrivals from the West Indies, found housing to be a major problem since the West Side was already grossly overpopulated. The problem of finding housing was exacerbated by the demolition of tenements in the West 30s, occasioned by the construction of Pennsylvania Station beginning in 1902, which had displaced hundreds of black residents. Meanwhile, there was an overabundance of vacant apartments available in the predominantly white community of Harlem. In about 1904, the white owners of these buildings, anxious to make a profit, began to rent to black tenants. African-Americans who first moved to Harlem in the early years of the twentieth century generally settled on the streets in the West 130s between Fifth and Seventh avenues where many of these new buildings were located.<sup>8</sup>

By the 1920s, the areas of black settlement in Harlem were expanding rapidly as the migration from the West Side continued and as more and more African-Americans moved to New York from the South in search of jobs. By 1930 most of the Harlem Plain north of 125th Street and west of Park Avenue was inhabited by African-Americans, and the black population was expanding south towards 110th Street and west onto the heights above Colonial and Highbridge parks. The high elevations overlooking Central Harlem developed into one of the city's most prosperous African-American communities -- Sugar Hill.

In 1946, *Ebony* explained that "some 'shanty' Irish looked across 130th Street to the brick-topped

ledge where wealthy, 'lace curtain' Irish lived years ago, [and] dubbed it Sugar Hill. Years later Negroes nudged the title 20 blocks uptown, where Negroes with 'sugar' settled."<sup>9</sup> The boundaries of Sugar Hill have been delineated in various ways. *Ebony* noted that "Sugar Hill, [is] the green bluff rolling from New York's City College [West 140th Street] to the Polo Grounds [at about 155th Street]," while Jervis Anderson, in his study of Harlem, places the boundaries in the area that "sloped north from 145th Street to 155th Street, and lay roughly between Amsterdam Avenue, to the west, and Edgecombe Avenue, to the east."<sup>10</sup> By 1930, the population of this entire area south of 155th Street was over fifty percent black, with certain areas having a population that was between seventy-five and eighty-nine percent black.<sup>11</sup>

North of 155th Street, just outside the generally accepted northern boundary of Sugar Hill, the black population remained fairly small in 1930 (less than twenty-five percent). However, during the 1930s, more and more African-Americans moved north of 155th Street. This migration of relatively well-to-do African-Americans is reflected in the two most prominent apartment buildings on Edgecombe Avenue. Black tenants first began to move into 409 Edgecombe Avenue (the Colonial Parkway Apartments), located south of 155th Street, in the late 1920s, while African-Americans were not welcomed into 555 Edgecombe Avenue (the Roger Morris Apartments), located at West 160th Street, until 1939. By the mid-1940s, 555 had become such a well-known residence for black New Yorkers that it was considered a part of Sugar Hill, despite the fact that it is north of 155th Street. *Ebony* wrote "the glittering names cluster most thickly in two Edgecombe Avenue apartments which are so well-known that they are simply referred to by their house numbers, 409 and 555."<sup>12</sup>

Although celebrated as the home of many of New York's most famous African-Americans, Sugar Hill attracted many other people: "Celebrities," wrote *Ebony*, "are a minority on Sugar Hill. Many people who are known only in Harlem, some of whom are known only to the landlord, dwell in 555 and 409."<sup>13</sup>

### The History of 555 Edgecombe Avenue (Roger Morris Apartments)

*Albert J. Schwarzler and Schwartz & Gross*

The Roger Morris was erected by Albert J. Schwarzler (c.1872-1941) who purchased the entire blockfront on Edgecombe Avenue between West 159th and 160th streets in 1908. According to a brief obituary, Schwarzler was a well-known Bronx contractor.<sup>14</sup> In 1910 Schwarzler is known to have built the six-story building at 461 West 159th Street/545 Edgecombe Avenue at the northwest corner of West 159th Street, and in 1912 he began construction on the Roger Morris, named after the original owner of the mansion immediately to the north.

For both 555 Edgecombe Avenue and 461 West 159th Street/545 Edgecombe Avenue, Schwarzler commissioned designs from the architectural firm of Schwartz & Gross, one of the most prolific designers of apartment houses in New York during the first two decades of the twentieth century.<sup>15</sup> Simon I. Schwartz (1877?-1956) and Arthur Gross (1877-1950) established their successful partnership in 1902. Both architects were graduates of the Hebrew Technical Institute. Although Schwartz & Gross designed rowhouses, commercial buildings, and other types of structures, the firm specialized in the design of apartment buildings from the inception of the partnership. This was a lucrative field in the early twentieth century, a period when hundreds of new apartment buildings were erected each year, both in undeveloped areas such as Washington Heights and in older neighborhoods where earlier, smaller buildings were replaced by the new multiple dwellings.

Schwartz & Gross designed many modest six-story dwellings, but they are best known for their tall apartment buildings, including many on West End and Park avenues and on Central Park West. Most are the rectilinear, block-like, flat-roofed structures with central light courts that typify the form of the early twentieth-century New York City apartment house. Almost all have facades with stone bases, upper stories clad with brick, projecting cornices, and terra-cotta detail. On many of Schwartz & Gross's pre-World War I apartment

buildings the facades are highlighted with traditional ornament, often reflecting the influence of French Beaux-Arts or Italian Renaissance design. A few of Schwartz & Gross's apartment buildings have details that are less historically derived. For example, the Chautauqua (1911) at 574 West End Avenue, in the Riverside-West End Historic District, contains detail with an Arts and Crafts character, including beltcourses that appear to reflect the influence of the ornamental vocabulary invented by architect Louis Sullivan. At 555 Edgecombe Avenue while such features as the stone base, rusticated entrance arch, and projecting balconies have an Italian Renaissance character, the stylized brackets are not derived from traditional design precedents.

### *Construction*

On May 7, 1914, Schwartz & Gross filed a permit for the construction of the Roger Morris Apartments with the Department of Buildings.<sup>16</sup> The permit called for a twelve-story steel-frame building, with a basement and penthouse, that was to rise 135 feet 2 inches. The Superintendent of Buildings disapproved the application, claiming that the building exceeded the legal height of 150 feet and was more than twelve stories tall. The Department of Buildings took the position that the building was fifteen stories tall with a height of 156 feet 6 inches. For a structure of more than twelve stories, all floors were required to be of stone, tile, or other non-combustible material and no window frames and sash, door trim, or other interior finishes could be of wood as Schwartz & Gross had proposed. Schwartz & Gross filed an appeal with the Board of Examiners.<sup>17</sup> The architects argued that the building was actually only twelve stories, while the steep natural grade of the site produced a basement level that was above ground, thus creating the impression of a taller building. The architects cited three examples of buildings by the Schwarz & Gross firm with this same type of design (all on Morningside Heights) that had been permitted: the Strathmore (1908) at 404 Riverside Drive, the Colosseum (1910) at 435 Riverside Drive, and the Paterno (1909) at 440 Riverside Drive. On May 21, 1914, the appeal was granted; construction began shortly thereafter.

The Roger Morris was planned with 105 apartments -- eight on each of the major residential floors. The apartments had a total of 479 rooms, including a single bathroom in each unit.<sup>18</sup> There were no servants' rooms in the apartments; rather there were twenty-one tiny penthouse rooms that were available for live-in servants. Although this was one of the largest and most impressive apartment buildings in Washington Heights and the individual apartments were spacious in comparison to those in the more modest apartment buildings and tenements nearby, they are not as large as those in contemporary buildings erected in more fashionable neighborhoods to the south, nor do they have the same level of amenity. Many of the tall buildings on the Upper West Side and Morningside Heights had larger apartments with more than one bathroom, and a servants' bedroom adjacent to the kitchen. During the 1930s, additional units were created at 555 Edgecombe Avenue: between 1932 and 1934 a line of five-room apartments was subdivided, and in 1936 nineteen of the original servants' rooms were eliminated and five new penthouse apartments created.

### *The Residents of 555 Edgecombe Avenue*<sup>19</sup>

All of the early residents of 555 Edgecombe Avenue and almost all of the early residents of the other new buildings erected in Washington Heights during the early years of the twentieth century were white. The population was multi-ethnic, with many native-born residents, as well as immigrants to this country. The 1915 New York State census shows that the vast majority of the residents of 555 Edgecombe Avenue were American born, although their names seem to indicate that there were people of German, Irish, English, and Jewish backgrounds living in the building. The foreign-born residents were from England, Poland, Switzerland, Ireland, Scotland, Italy, Holland, Austria, Canada, and Germany.

In 1939, Albert Schwarzler, who still owned the building, appears to have refused to renew the leases of the building's white tenants, many of whom had lived in the building for many years. Apparently, with the changing character of the surrounding neighborhood, Schwarzler saw that his economic future lay with renting to black tenants. The 1938 Manhattan telephone directory arranged



by address lists eighty-three separate names for the Roger Morris.<sup>20</sup> In the following year, only twenty-three names appear; of these, seventeen had appeared in the 1938 directory and six were new names.<sup>21</sup> In 1940, all seventeen of the remaining old tenants were gone, while the six new tenants were joined by sixty-one new residents, all of whom seem to have been black.<sup>22</sup>

Although often discussed along with 409 Edgecombe Avenue, 555 Edgecombe never had as illustrious a tenant roster as its neighbor to the south.<sup>23</sup> Among the prominent people to live at 555 were actor and singer Paul Robeson and his wife Eslanda Cardozo Goode Robeson, an anthropologist, author, and well-known Pan-Africanist, who also served as Paul Robeson's manager (they were residents in 1940-42); jazz musician Count Basie (1941-42); social psychologist Kenneth B. Clark (who moved to 555 in 1942); and actor/producer Canada Lee who rented a penthouse apartment in 1943.<sup>24</sup>

In fact, most residents of 555 were not celebrities, but represent a cross-section of successful African-Americans. Those residents for whom mode of employment can be established worked in the relatively few fields that were open to blacks, including doctors, teachers, and nurses.<sup>25</sup> Today, 555 Edgecombe Avenue continues to house a cross-section of New York City's middle-class African-American community. Still in private ownership, the building is well maintained on the exterior and is a source of pride to its residents.

### Building Description

The apartment building at 555 Edgecombe Avenue is a rectilinear, block-like, flat-roofed structure with a central light court, located on a corner site with two major street facades. Officially the building is twelve stories tall, but because of the sloping nature of the site, the apartment house has a basement that is a full story tall as well as a cellar that adds an additional full story on Edgecombe Avenue and includes the main entrance to the building. Thus, from Edgecombe Avenue the building appears to be fourteen stories tall (the complex issue of stories makes describing the building somewhat confusing). There is a one-and-one-half-story granite base (incorporating the cellar

and basement) on Edgecombe Avenue and a one-story base on 160th Street (the basement). The main street elevations are clad in beige brick laid in a modified Flemish bond with deeply recessed mortar joints and are trimmed with white terra-cotta bandcourses and terra-cotta window lintels and sills. On Edgecombe Avenue the building is seven bays wide, while on West 160th Street, the street elevation is thirteen bays wide.

The building is entered through a tall arched entry with raised granite voussoirs, set in the center of the Edgecombe Avenue front. The pair of iron and glass doors is separated from a large fanlight with an iron grille by an iron transom bar ornamented with a Vitruvian scroll. The keystone of the entrance arch and a pair of elongated console brackets set to either side of the arch, support a balustraded stone balcony. The base of the Edgecombe elevation is articulated by three sets of window openings flanking the entrance. At the cellar level, the windows are protected by iron grilles.

A granite beltcourse separates the basement and first stories. On the first story (visually this appears to be the third story on Edgecombe Avenue), the brick is laid in a manner that resembles rustication, and the window openings have raised brick surrounds. The window pattern is the same on all of the stories: tripartite double-hung windows alternate with pairs of individual double-hung windows.

A terra-cotta beltcourse carried on unusual stylized geometric brackets, surmounted by bands of foliate terra cotta with small central rondels, sets off the upper stories. From the second story to the tenth story, the window openings within each vertical window bay are separated by slightly recessed spandrel panels, composed of courses of header bricks. There are terra-cotta rosettes at the upper corners of each window (some have been removed).

Wrought-iron railings protect the second-story windows. Rounded terra-cotta balconies at the fifth and tenth stories are supported by central brackets. Each balcony has a curving iron railing (one railing has been removed on the fifth story). Rectangular balconies supported by ornate brackets are located

at the eighth and eleventh stories; these balconies also have iron railings.

Vertical bands of raised brick separate the window bays at the tenth story. The tenth story is separated from the two-story building crown by a terra-cotta beltcourse set above terra-cotta panels with foliate decoration. On the top two stories, the window spandrels and the piers between the window bays are highlighted with ornate brick patterns created by the use of contrasting light and dark-colored brick. Above each diaperwork pier are terra-cotta brackets that once supported a cornice. Four of the brackets have an unusual decorative motif consisting of a circle divided by a cross into four segments.

The design of the West 160th Street elevation is similar to that on Edgecombe Avenue. Since this elevation is set on a sloping street, the base becomes shorter toward the west, until the basement level which is a full story above street level on Edgecombe Avenue, virtually disappears. The basement windows on 160th Street have iron window guards. A basement service entrance is located in the eighth bay.

This elevation has rectangular balconies at the eighth and eleventh stories and rounded balconies at the tenth story. The unusual cornice brackets with

rondels do not appear on this elevation; rather, all of the brackets are in the form of consoles. Otherwise, the design of the 160th Street elevation follows the pattern described for the front facade. At the west end of the 160th Street elevation is a pair of ornate iron service gates.

The section of the side, or southern, elevation that is immediately adjacent to the front elevation is clad in pale yellow brick and is articulated by a single vertical bay of windows on the upper six stories. To the rear, recessed within a light court, is the main mass of the south elevation (only partially visible) which is fully articulated by windows with no ornamental embellishment. The rear, or western, elevation is also clad in pale yellow brick and has rectangular window openings.

Major alterations to the facade are limited to the removal of the cornice and the replacement of all of the original wooden window sash with aluminum windows. Although not subject to this designation, the spacious lobby of 555 Edgecombe Avenue is embellished with rich marble and plaster detail and Classical relief panels.

Report prepared by

Andrew S. Dolkart  
*Landmarks Consultant*

#### NOTES

1. This section of the report is based on information in Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Jumel Terrace Historic District Designation Report* (LP-0638) (New York: City of New York, 1970); Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Sylvan Terrace Historic Structures Report*, report written by Joan R. Olshansky (New York: City of New York, 1977); "The Morris-Jumel Mansion," brochure published by the Washington Headquarters Association.
2. According to Henry Moscow, *The Street Book: An Encyclopedia of Manhattan's Street Names and Their Origins* (New York: Hagstrom, 1978), p. 47, "combe" is the Saxon word for the crest of a hill. A portion of Edgecombe Avenue overlooks Colonial (now Jackie Robinson) Park.
3. The Jumel auction began on May 31, 1882, and was continued on November 15-18, 1882. A complete list of sales from the Jumel auction is printed in *A History of Real Estate, Building and Architecture in New York City During the Last Quarter of a Century* (New York: Real Estate Record Association, 1898), 134-141. The blockfront on Edgecombe Avenue between 159th and 160th streets was purchased by V.K. Stevenson.

4. Institutions in the area included the New-York Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, the New York Institution for the Blind, the Colored Orphan Asylum, and the New York Juvenile Asylum.
5. "New Departure for Washington Heights," *Real Estate Record and Builders Guide* 83 (Jan. 23, 1909), 143.
6. Major sources on the history of Harlem as an African-American community are Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto, Negro New York 1890-1930*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971) and Jervis Anderson, *This Was Harlem 1900-1950* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1981). For the development of Sugar Hill see "Sugar Hill: All Harlem Looks Up to 'Folks on the Hill," *Ebony* 2 (Nov. 1946), 5-11.
7. Osofsky, 17 and 3.
8. The history of the African-American migration to Harlem is discussed in detail in Osofsky, 81-123.
9. "Sugar Hill," 8.
10. *Ibid.*, 5, and Anderson, 340.
11. "Principal Negro Area of Manhattan, 1930," chart based on the 1930 New York City census, in Osofsky, plate 3.
12. "Sugar Hill," 6.
13. *Ibid.*, 10.
14. "Albert J. Schwarzler," obituary, *New York Times*, Nov. 10, 1941, p. 17.
15. Information on Schwartz & Gross based on entries in "Architects' Appendix," sections of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic District Designation Report* (LP-1647), vol. 1 (New York: City of New York, 1990), A133-A134 and *Upper East Side Historic District Designation Report* (LP-1051), vol. 2 (New York: City of New York, 1981), 1341.
16. New York City, Department of Buildings, New Building Application No. 160-1914.
17. Board of Examiners Appeal No. 56, May 14, 1914. The position of the Department of Buildings is clearly spelled out in a letter from the Chief Inspector and Acting Superintendent of Buildings to the Board of Examiners dated May 18, 1914, located in the Department of Buildings block and lot file for 555 Edgecombe Avenue.
18. Information on number of apartments and rooms per floor from Tenement House Department Application No. 107-1914.
19. The Commission would like to thank genealogist Marsha Denis for her advice in undertaking research for this section.
20. New York Telephone Company, *Manhattan Address Directory* (Sept., 1938), 258 and 653. Residents for the Roger Morris are listed at 555 Edgecombe Avenue and 400 East 160th Street. Since the number of telephone listings does not correlate with the number of apartments it is probable that a number of residents did not have telephones. For unlisted numbers, the telephone company either listed a name with no number or, in some cases, especially in the 1940s, a single initial and no number.



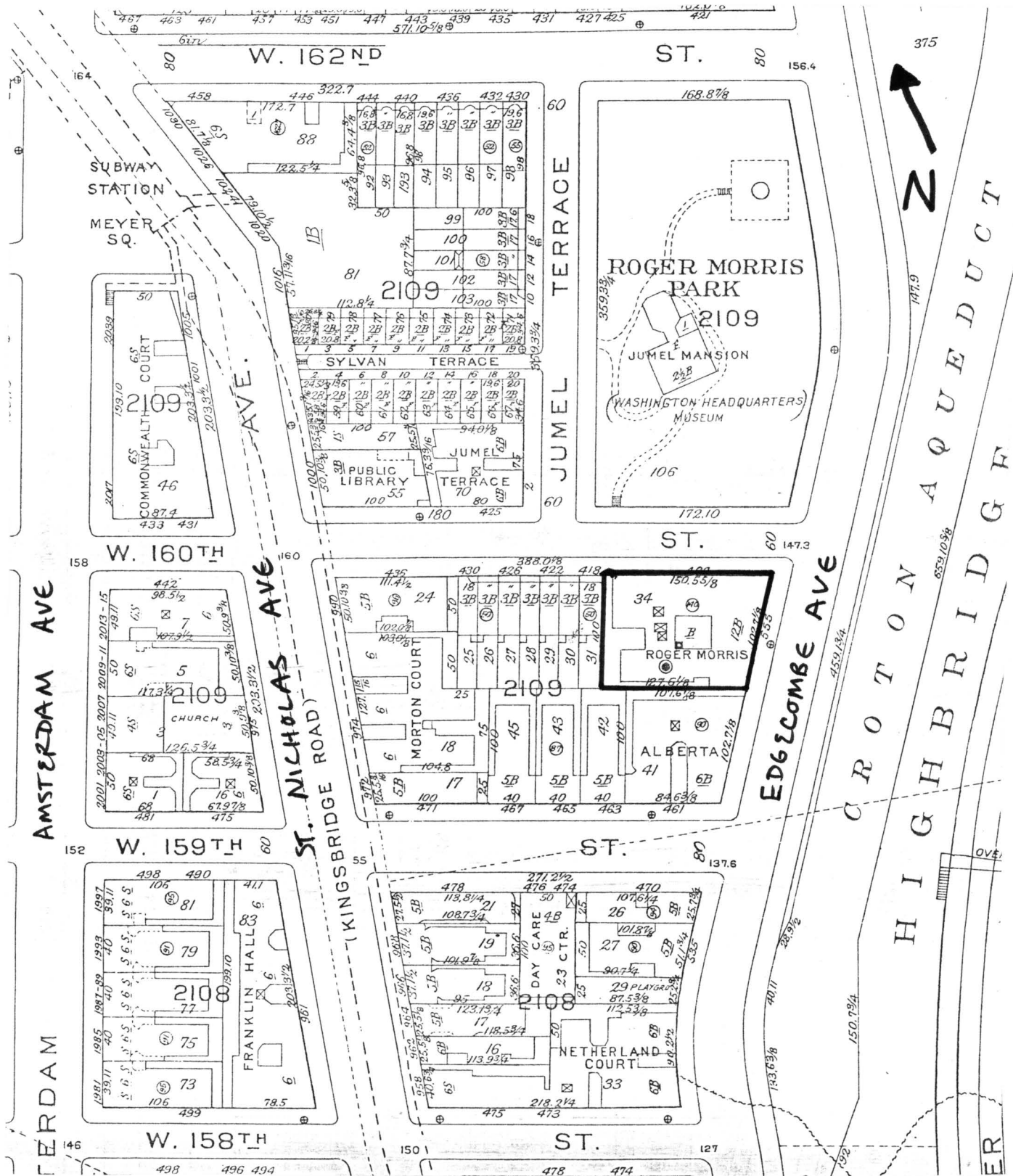
21. Ibid., (Sept., 1939), 266 and 670.
22. Ibid., (Sept., 1940), 266 and 670.
23. Names of residents were found in the address directories and in published lists of registered voters.
24. Biographical information on these "555" residents may be found in: *Dictionary of American Negro Biography*, Rayford W. Logan and Michael R. Winston, eds. (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1982), and *Who's Who in Colored America: A Biographical Dictionary of Notable Living Persons of African Descent in America*, 6th ed. (Brooklyn: Thomas Yenser, 1945).
25. Establishing mode of employment for residents in 1940 was difficult. The last city directory that lists names and jobs is dated 1932-33. Names from the 1940 and 1941 address telephone directories were checked in this earlier city directory. Unusual names could be directly correlated, especially when the person lived in a predominantly black area of New York in the 1930s. Only a small percentage of names could be correlated with any certainty. These included four postal workers, four teachers, three nurses, two restaurant workers, as well as two actors, two doctors (one listed as a chiropodist), two elevator operators, a musician, a cook, a porter, and several laborers and clerks. (It is possible that some those working at these jobs in 1932-33 had changed professions by 1940.)

## FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the 555 Edgecombe Avenue Apartments (Roger Morris Apartments), has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the 555 Edgecombe Avenue Apartments, built as the Roger Morris Apartments but known simply as "555," has achieved significance as the home of many of New York's successful African-Americans who were attracted by the building's sizable apartments and spectacular views; that the apartment house at 555 Edgecombe Avenue was erected in 1914-16 during a period of major residential development in lower Washington Heights; that by the mid-1940s, 555 had become such a well-known residence for black New Yorkers that it was considered a part of Sugar Hill, despite the fact that it is north of 155th Street; that the building is among the most impressive apartment houses in the neighborhood and is among the few tall residential buildings erected in this section of the city; that it was designed by Schwartz & Gross, one of the architectural firms most actively involved in the design of apartment houses in New York during the first decades of the twentieth century; that although the Roger Morris initially housed white tenants of various ethnic backgrounds, in 1939-40 the tenant population of 555 Edgecombe Avenue shifted exclusively to African-American; that it attracted a number of America's most famous black citizens including, however briefly, such people as Paul Robeson, Count Basie, Canada Lee, and Kenneth Clark; and that it also has housed a significant number of white-collar workers and professionals.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the 555 Edgecombe Avenue Apartments (Roger Morris Apartments), 555 Edgecombe Avenue, Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 2109, Lot 34, as its Landmark Site.



555 Edgcombe Avenue Apartments (Roger Morris Apartments)  
555 Edgcombe Avenue, Manhattan

Landmark Site: Manhattan Tax Map Block 2109, Lot 34

Graphic Source: Sanborn Manhattan Land Book, 1992-93.



555 Edgecombe Avenue Apartments (Roger Morris Apartments)  
(Photo: LPC)



555 Edgecombe Avenue Apartments (Roger Morris Apartments)  
160th Street facade, view from Roger Morris Park

(Photo: EU)





555 Edgecombe Avenue Apartments (Roger Morris Apartments)  
Detail of entrance

(Photo: EU)



555 Edgecombe Avenue Apartments (Roger Morris Apartments)  
Detail of upper stories

(Photo: EU)