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# NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*  
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

## 1 NAME

HISTORIC

Paul Robeson Residence

AND/OR COMMON

Paul Robeson Residence

## 2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

555 Edgecombe Avenue

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

New York

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

VICINITY OF

STATE

New York

CODE

36

COUNTY

New York

CODE

061

## 3 CLASSIFICATION

### CATEGORY

- DISTRICT
- BUILDING(S)
- STRUCTURE
- SITE
- OBJECT

### OWNERSHIP

- PUBLIC
- PRIVATE
- BOTH

### PUBLIC ACQUISITION

- IN PROCESS
- BEING CONSIDERED

### STATUS

- OCCUPIED
- UNOCCUPIED
- WORK IN PROGRESS

### ACCESSIBLE

- YES: RESTRICTED
- YES: UNRESTRICTED
- NO

### PRESENT USE

- AGRICULTURE
- COMMERCIAL
- EDUCATIONAL
- ENTERTAINMENT
- GOVERNMENT
- INDUSTRIAL
- MILITARY
- MUSEUM
- PARK
- PRIVATE RESIDENCE
- RELIGIOUS
- SCIENTIFIC
- TRANSPORTATION
- OTHER: Apartment Building

## 4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME Burton A. Goldberg

STREET & NUMBER

24 Griffin Avenue

CITY, TOWN

Scarsdale

VICINITY OF

STATE

New York

## 5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE,  
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Registry of Deeds, New York County Courthouse

STREET & NUMBER

City Hall, 31 Chambers Street

CITY, TOWN

New York

STATE

New York

## 6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

None Known

DATE

\_\_FEDERAL \_\_STATE \_\_COUNTY \_\_LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR  
SURVEY RECORDS

CITY, TOWN

STATE

# 7 DESCRIPTION

## CONDITION

EXCELLENT

GOOD

FAIR

DETERIORATED

RUINS

UNEXPOSED

## CHECK ONE

UNALTERED

ALTERED

## CHECK ONE

ORIGINAL SITE

MOVED

DATE \_\_\_\_\_

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### DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Paul Robeson Residence is an apartment building on the corner of 160th Street and Edgecombe Avenue in New York City. It is on an escarpment facing Highbridge Park. Completed in January, 1916 the builder was Roger Morris Incorporated and the architects were Schwartz and Gross of that city. It was the residence of Paul Robeson and his family from 1939-1941, upon his return from living and performing in Europe.

The building is thirteen stories with a penthouse. A nondescript beaux arts classically styled structure, its facade is brick and stone. The basement and first floors are stone and the remainder are brick. The central doorway is the height of two stories, the basement and the first floor. A small stone balustrade tops the entranceway. Arched in shape it has ironwork in the upper portion.

A simple string course separates the stone facade of the first floor and the brick facade of the second. A more elaborate one separates the second and the third floors. Iron work at the bottom of the windows of this floor also helps to accentuate and differentiate this floor from the others. The windows of the structure have wooden sashes. Many are divided into three parts with the narrower ones on the sides of the larger central one. Intricate terra cotta masonry adorns the buildings exterior.

While the building has been generally well-maintained, it is beginning to show the initial signs of seediness. While there have been no major exterior alterations since the buildings construction, there has been a slight change in the interior lay out of the apartments which occurred in 1943.



# 8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW			
<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGION
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> THEATER
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION		

Afro-American History

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SPECIFIC DATES	Paul Robeson (1898-1976) Residency (1939-1941)	BUILDER/ARCHITECT	Builder - Roger Morris, Inc. Architect - Schwartz & Gross
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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Paul Robeson was one of the most outstanding individuals of the twentieth century. Excelling in numerous talents and skills, Robeson graced stages throughout the world for more than twenty years. In 1926 he was selected actor of the year for his memorable and classic title role in Othello. His deep baritone voice immortalized such songs as "Ole Man River" from the Broadway musical Show Boat. He was a member of the famous Provincetown Players in Massachusetts becoming a close friend and admirer of the famous playwright Eugene O'Neill.

Brought up by a father who demanded excellence, Robeson achieved a distinguished college career. A brilliant Phi Beta Kappa student at Rutgers University in New Jersey, he was also chosen All-American in 1917 and 1918 for his football skill, was student commencement speaker and was one of four seniors selected for the distinguished Cap and Skull Society. Robeson's increasing refusal to remain silent about American racism and his ardent desire for full human justice resulted in his ostracism from American society during the forties and fifties and also led to a slow but persistent destruction of his career in this country. His death in 1976 marked the loss of one of the world's greatest concert artists, stage and screen actors, athletes and scholars. It also meant the loss of a valuable humanitarian whose courage and determination to speak the truth and to stand up for what he believed in remains a lasting legacy for all free men.

BIOGRAPHY

Born in Princeton, New Jersey in 1898 Robeson was the youngest of eight children of William Drew Robeson, a fugitive ex-slave who put himself through school to become a Methodist minister, and a schoolteacher mother Maria Louisa Bustill Robeson who came from a distinguished Philadelphia family. After his mother's death in 1904, Paul and his father moved to Somerville and Westfield, small towns in New Jersey near Princeton, where he won an academic scholarship to Rutgers University, entering in 1915, as the schools third black student.

Robeson's career at Rutger's was quite distinguished. Athletically, he was a twelve letter man having won varsity letters in four sports for three seasons. He had also twice been named All-American End in football in 1917 and 1918 and was recognized as one of the best collegiate athletes in the country. He also won honors in oratory, debating,

# 9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Du Bois, Shirley. Paul Robeson, Citizen of the World. New York: Harper and Rowe, 1971.

Freedomways. Paul Robeson; the Great Forerunner. New York: Freedomways Association, 1971.

(PARTIAL LISTING)

# 10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY Less than ten acres

UTM REFERENCES

A	118	5819	4610	45	20	710	B			
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING				
C				D						

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

Beginning at a point on the southerly side of 160th Street, where it would be intersected by a line drawn northerly at right angles to 159th Street from a point in the northerly side of 159th Street, distant 200 feet easterly from the corner formed by the intersection of the northerly side of 159th Street with the easterly side of St. Nicholas Avenue; running thence southerly along said line drawn at right angles to 159th and 160th Street; thence easterly along said center line of the block, 127.51 feet to the westerly side of Edgecomb Avenue; thence northerly

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

# 11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE

Lynne Gomez-Graves, Historical Projects Director

ORGANIZATION

Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation

DATE

STREET & NUMBER

1420 N Street, Northwest

TELEPHONE

(202) 462-2519

CITY OR TOWN

Washington

STATE

D. C.

# 12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL

STATE

LOCAL

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER SIGNATURE

TITLE

DATE

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I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

ATTEST:

DATE

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER



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and extemporaneous speaking. Academically, he was a member of the prestigious Phi Beta Kappa Honor Society, and as the highest ranking student in his class was selected as the commencement speaker in June, 1919. He was also one of four seniors selected for the Cap and Skull Society.

Robeson's father was not to attend his son's long awaited graduation for he died several weeks before the event. Yet Robeson continued his road toward distinction. He moved to Harlem and in the fall of 1919 began classes at the Columbia University Law School. While a law student he began to play professional football on weekends to earn money and in 1921 married Eslanda Cardoza Goode, a young woman who was to become the first black analytical chemist at the Columbia Medical Center.

Robeson finished law school in 1922, passed the bar, and attempted to begin a career as a lawyer in the firm of a prominent New York solicitor who had also attended Rutgers. However, racial stigmatization by people within the company and company restrictions against his appearance in court resulted in Robeson's leaving the firm to move into his own office in Harlem. During this time, his wife arranged an appearance for him in the Harlem YWCA's production of Ridgely Torrence's Simon Cyrenian. She persuaded the Provincetown Players to come and watch Paul perform and soon he was incorporated into the famous group's company, appearing at their Greenwich Village theater.

Robeson's first appearance with the Players was in O'Neill's controversial play, All God's Chillum. The play itself created theatrical history by having as its subject matter a story about an interracial marriage. Robeson appeared in one of the starring roles and George Jean Nathan reviewed his performance in American Mercury: "Robeson, . . . is one of the most thoroughly eloquent, impressive, and convincing actors that I have looked at and listened to in almost twenty years of professional theater-going."<sup>1</sup> Another critic stated, "After seeing Robeson in All God's Chillum, one can imagine that Shakespeare must have thought of Robeson." Robeson followed this theatrical effort by an appearance in the title role of another O'Neill play, the Emperor Jones. This is the play and the role that brought Charles Gilpin fame in 1920. Robeson and O'Neill became close friends through their mutual alliance with the drama group. Robeson's success on the stage made him decide to give up the practice of law and to concentrate on his acting.

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His wife Eslanda helped him discover yet another dimension of his talent. She had always known that he could sing but was unaware of the extent of that talent. However, hearing her husband sing along with their composer-accompanist friend Lawrence Brown, who had played with Roland Hayes, she began to realize the enormous talent which he possessed. Once again, Mrs. Robeson alerted the Provincetown Players and they listened to him and were equally impressed by his ability. The Players rented the Greenwich Village Theater for an April concert in which Robeson and Brown performed. It was an enormous success and Robeson created musical history because this was the first concert ever given comprised solely of Negro spirituals and folk songs. He brought the Negro spiritual as art form to its foremost position on the concert stage. As one reviewer stated:

All of those who listened last night to the first concert in this country made entirely of Negro music may have been present at a turning point, one of those thin points of time in which a star is born and not yet visible -- the first appearance of this folk wealth to be made without deference or apology. Paul Robeson's voice is difficult to describe. It is a voice in which deep bells ring . . .<sup>2</sup>

For most of the thirties and forties Robeson's singing was to earn him worldwide fame as one of the world's leading concert singers.

Robeson continued his acting and starred in eleven major plays, in this country and England. Among them was the London production of Show Boat in 1927. The composer and co-producer of the musical, Jerome Kern, wanted Robeson for the seemingly insignificant role of the black riverboat man, Joe, so that Robeson could sing the song "Ole Man Joe." As one reviewer of the production said of Robeson's performance in an article titled "A Great Negro Genius," "He is more than a great actor and a great singer. He is a great man, who creates the soul of a people in bondage and shows you its true kinship with the fettered soul of man."<sup>3</sup> As he was spending an increasing amount of time in England, Robeson bought a home in the Hampton suburb of London where he moved his family which included a young son, Paul, Jr.

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Robeson's travels as an international artist during the rise of facism developed in him a deep empathy for oppressed people and a sincere respect for different cultures and societies. He was also becoming increasingly conscious of his cultural ties with Africa and believed that black people throughout the world should redeem their African heritage.

In 1934, Robeson took his first trip to the Soviet Union. As he himself described the trip:

I came here because the Soviet Union is the only place where ethnology is seriously considered and applied . . . . The Negro cannot develop his culture until he is free . . . . All the people of this portion of the globe must be proud when Stalin speaks of the cultures of different nationalities of the Soviet Union as 'socialist in context and nationalist in form.'<sup>4</sup>

In the Soviet Union Robeson saw people occupying one sixth of the globe who had begun to build a society based upon a philosophy of cultural unification and who had undergone a long history of enslavement. At the conclusion of the trip Robeson succinctly and movingly described his impressions, " All I can say is that the moment I came there I realized that I had found what I had been seeking all my life. "<sup>5</sup>

When Robeson returned to London from the Soviet Union he began rehearsals for what he thought was a very promising drama about an African tribe, Sanders of the River. Initially believing that this was an accurate and sensitive portrayal of African tribal life, Robeson anxiously awaited the play's opening night. However, when that moment arrived Robeson realized that he had been used and that the play did not present the dignified and courageous portrayal of the African life that he had thought. Rather, it pictured the African as grotesque, painted natives and when called to the stage, in protest, he refused to perform.

Robeson made a short trip to Africa in 1936. Upon his return to London, he decided that he wanted to reach a greater number of people and that he could best do this by appearing in films and on the stages of concert music halls. Unfortunately, Robeson disliked many of the film roles that he was forced to play in because he felt that these roles created and perpetuated too many negative and offensive stereotypes about blacks. Robeson was becoming acutely sensitive to the insults that he was receiving as an acclaimed

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artist who happened to be black. Returning to the United States in 1939, because he felt that he was evading his full responsibility by living in England, Robeson denounced Hollywood:

I thought that I could do something for the Negro race in films -- show the truth about them and about other people, too . . . . The industry is not prepared to permit me to portray the life or express the living interests, hopes and aspirations of the struggling people from which I come . . . . You bet they will never let me play a part in a film in which a Negro is on top.<sup>6</sup>

Robeson's increasing vocalization and estrangement from American society continued. He sang only in engagements where blacks were not excluded. He participated in peace marches, wrote articles, and condemned groups that practiced segregation and attempted to visit Congress to protest the killings and lynchings of blacks in the South. He also began to attend peace meetings held by the Communists, an association that was to create increasing ostracism and harrassment of Robeson during the McCarthy era.

Yet, amid all of this growing dissatisfaction Robeson was still to achieve his greatest triumph which came in October, 1943 when Othello opened on Broadway. It was a production of the Theater Guild, the foremost producing organization in the United States. Its renown and acclaimed director was Margaret Webster and besides the distinguished Robeson starred Uta Hagen as Desdemona and Jose Ferrer as Lago. Opening at the Shubert Theater in New York the production was described by Burton Roscoe as "one of the most memorable events in the history of the theater."<sup>7</sup> Of Robeson's acting in the title role another reviewer stated that "Robeson has restored dignity and power to the shabby commercial stage."<sup>8</sup> The play was so successful that it ran well into 1944 for a record-breaking 296 performances, setting all records for the length of performance of a Shakespearean drama.

Robeson's political activity escalated during the forties and he began to increasingly speak out against American racism. In 1948 he appeared before the Senate Judiciary Committee and was asked about his association with the Communist party. He refused to answer because he considered the question an invasion of his right to a secret ballot. During the late forties he publicly and frequently voiced the opinion that he doubted



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whether black Americans should fight for a racist government against what he perceived as a nondiscriminatory Soviet Union. In 1949 he told the World Peace Congress in Paris, "It is unthinkable that American Negroes could go to war on behalf of those who have oppressed them for generations against the Soviet Union, which in one generation has raised its people to full human dignity."<sup>9</sup>

In 1950 the American Legion of an upstate New York town led a demonstration in Peekskill, New York against one of Robeson's concerts that resulted in a riot. The disturbance led to the cancellation of concert appearances and the closure of the concert halls to him all across the country. Also in 1950 the State Department took away his passport on the grounds that his trips abroad "would not be in the interest of the United States . . ."<sup>10</sup> Still determined to perform and please those people who wanted to hear this great talent, Robeson devised alternative means of performances. On one occasion he stood on the United States side of the United States-Canadian border while his audience of Canadians sat on theirs. On another occasion he gave a performance to an English audience over a trans-Atlantic telephone. The last song that he sang at this time was "Old Man River," and changing the words "tired of living and scared of dying" to "I must keep fighting until I'm dying."<sup>11</sup> Most major bookstores and libraries failed to include mention of Robeson in their indexes while many books dropped all mention of his name. Newsreels and film footage of his major roles vanished from theaters and film shelves.

Finally in 1958, a worldwide campaign and a long legal battle that resulted in a Supreme Court decision, restored Robeson's passport to him. His first Carnegie Hall recital in eleven years followed in May of that year when he received a long standing ovation. He went abroad to do concert, theater, and television engagements. However, in 1973 he was forced to return home in poor health and went into retirement. On his seventy-fifth birthday in 1973 a near capacity crowd that included a galaxy of stars flocked to Carnegie Hall for a three-hour celebration that included numerous greetings from the heads of states from several foreign countries. Jubilantly, Robeson's son proclaimed that the day tore to shreds "the curtain that has surrounded my Father."<sup>11</sup> The cultural celebration's program carried a statement that Robeson had prophetically made in 1937. "The artist must elect to fight for freedom or for slavery. I have made my choice. I have no alternative."<sup>12</sup>

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Paul Robeson died in January, 1976. He had been the recipient of numerous awards and honors from all over the world from the NAACP's Spingarn Medal to the Stalin Peace Prize. He had also been awarded the coveted Diction Award of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences which had only given the award nine times in its twenty year existence. He had published numerous articles and an autobiography, Here I Stand, in 1957. He had graced the world's stages for most of the twentieth century, creating theatrical history in his portrayals of Othello and the Emperor Jones. His singing had immortalized such songs as "Ole Man River" and given new dimension to the Negro spiritual.

Yet Robeson's greatest gift to the world was his ability to stand up for his own convictions despite the harrassment and political innuendo made against him by many sectors of American society. All of his ideas stemmed from one basic concept: the respect and belief in the humanity of man and the horror and inhumanity of all forms of human oppression. Robeson was ahead of his time throughout all of his life and he was the artist he had prophesized about in 1937. Robeson had elected to fight for human dignity and against all forms of human slavery. He had made his choice and for him there were no other conceivable alternatives.

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CONTINUATION SHEET Paul Robeson RESIDENCE ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE One (Reference Notes)

1. Shirley DuBois, Paul Robeson, Citizen of the World (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1971), p. 143.
2. Obituary tribute by Dorothy Gilliam, Washington Post, January 24, 1976.
3. Shirley DuBois, Paul Robeson, Citizen of the World (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1971), p. 194.
4. Ibid, p. 227.
5. Ibid, p. 228.
6. Obituary tribute by Dorothy Gilliam, Washington Post, January 24, 1976.
7. Edwin Palmer Hoyt, Paul Robeson, the American Othello (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1967) p. 219.
8. Shirley DuBois, Paul Robeson, Citizen of the World (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1971), p. 256.
9. Obituary tribute by Dorothy Gilliam, Washington Post, January 24, 1976.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.

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Residence

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PAGE Two

Hoyt, Edwin Palmer. Paul Robeson the American Othello. Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1967.

Obituary Tribute by Dorothy Gilliam. Washington Post. January 24, 1976.

Robeson, Eslanda (Goode). Paul Robeson, Negro. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1930.

Robeson, Paul. Here I Stand. Boston: Bacon Press, 1971.

Robeson, Paul. The Negro & the Soviet Union. New York: New Century Publishers, 1950.

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along the westerly side of Edgecomb Avenue with the southerly side of 160th Street, 150.48 and thence westerly along the southerly line of 160th Street, 150.48 feet to the point or place of beginning.