

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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DATE ENTERED

**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

Claude McKay Residence

AND/OR COMMON

Claude McKay Residence

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

180 West 135th Street

___ NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

New York

___ VICINITY OF

STATE

CODE

COUNTY

CODE

New York

36

New York

061

3 CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY

OWNERSHIP

STATUS

PRESENT USE

___ DISTRICT

___ PUBLIC

OCCUPIED

___ AGRICULTURE

___ MUSEUM

BUILDING(S)

PRIVATE

___ UNOCCUPIED

___ COMMERCIAL

___ PARK

___ STRUCTURE

___ BOTH

___ WORK IN PROGRESS

EDUCATIONAL

___ PRIVATE RESIDENCE

___ SITE

PUBLIC ACQUISITION

ACCESSIBLE

ENTERTAINMENT

RELIGIOUS

___ OBJECT

___ IN PROCESS

YES: RESTRICTED

___ GOVERNMENT

___ SCIENTIFIC

___ BEING CONSIDERED

___ YES UNRESTRICTED

___ INDUSTRIAL

___ TRANSPORTATION

___ NO

___ MILITARY

OTHER **YMCA**

4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME

Young Men's Christian Association of the City of New York

STREET & NUMBER

420 Lexington Avenue

CITY, TOWN

New York

___ 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 _____

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

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 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

SPECIFIC DATES **Claude McKay (1890-1948)**
Residency (1942-1946) BUILDER/ARCHITECT **Not Known**

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Poet, novelist, and lecturer, Claude McKay was one of the most outstanding figures of American literature and history during the twentieth century. Generally credited with the initiation of the Harlem Renaissance in 1919, McKay is know for such works as the poem, "If We Must Die," and the novels, Along Way From Home, his autobiography, and Home to Harlem, the first book by an Afro-American to reach the best-seller lists. Known for his honesty and freedom of expression in his writings, McKay was one of the most outstanding figures of one of the most important literary periods in the history of the United States and the most important one in the history of the Afro-American.

BIOGRAPHY

Born in the Caribbean Island of Jamaica in September, 1890, Claude McKay lived with his parents until age six. At that time he went to live with his brother, a school teacher and lay preacher of the Anglican Church. McKay's brother had a great influence upon the younger boys professional and personal career and he encouraged McKay to read and expand his knowledge.

At sixteen McKay became acquainted with Mr. Walter Jekyll, whose influence also greatly shaped McKay's later literary career. Jekyll, an English gentleman, and specialist in the folklore of Jamaica, took a special interest in McKay's poetic talents. Jekyll taught McKay how to use native dialect and he encouraged the author to write verses in that form. In addition, he introduced McKay to Childe Harold, The Duncad, "Essay on Man," Paradise Lost, Leaves of Grass, Shelly, Keats, Shakespeare, Herbert Spenser and George Eliot.

At the age of seventeen McKay received a government trade scholarship and apprenticed himself as a cabinet-maker. Two years later, however, he joined the island constabulary. While on the police force, McKay, eager to compose poetic verses wrote, "Constab Ballad" in dialect. In 1912, with the assistance of both Jekyll and Sir Sidney Oliver, then Governor of Jamaica, McKay was sent to the United States where he began studying agriculture at Kansas State College. However, wanting desperately to continue with his writing, McKay decided that he could no longer stay at the college:

I desired to achieve something new, something in the spirit and accent of America. Against its mighty throbbing force, its grand energy and power and bigness, its bitterness burning my black body, I would raise my voice to make a canticle of my reaction.

9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

McKay, Claude. A Long Way From Home. New York: Harcourt & Brace & World, Inc., 1970.

_____. Selected Poems of Claude McKay. New York: Bookman Associates, 1958.

10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY Less than ten acres

UTM REFERENCES

A

1	8
ZONE	

5	8	8	9	00
EASTING				

4	5	8	6	4	0
NORTHING					

B

ZONE					

EASTING					

NORTHING					

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

Beginning at apoint on the southerly side of 135th Street distant 250 feet easterly from the corner formed by the intersection of the southerly side of 135th Street with the easterly side of Seventh Avenue; and running thence southerly parallel with the easterly side of Seventh Avenue and part of the distance through a party wall 99 Feet and 11inches to the westerly side of 135th Street. It continues westerly along the same 25feet to the point of beginning.

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.

FEDERAL REPRESENTATIVE SIGNATURE

TITLE

DATE

FOR NPS USE ONLY

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

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
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Claude McKay

CONTINUATION SHEET Residence ITEM NUMBER 7 PAGE one

The Claude McKay Residence located at 180 West 135th Street, Harlem, New York, New York was constructed in 1931-32. The land was purchased by the New York Chapter of the Young Men's Christian Association for the express purpose of constructing the present facility. At the time of construction provisions were made for residential space on the upper levels of the building. Between 1941 and 1946 Claude McKay resided here. The Harlem Branch, as the building is commonly known, has been the home of numerous personalities. During the 1940s and 50s, this building was used as a hotel, though maintaining itself as a Y.M.C.A., by artists, show people and other visitors to Harlem. This basis function remains today, and throughout its forty-five year history, the Harlem Branch has been a vital force in that community.

The structure is an impressive 14 storey dark red brick building. The north facade of the building has a tiered effect produced by recesses above the fourth, ninth and eleventh floors. The building is constructed asymmetrically with a tower and smoke stack topping the east side of the building. The north tower remains plain. Around the east tower appear the letters of the Association.

There are two entrances with double doors, on the first floor of the building. The present doors are fashioned of glass and constitute the only visible alteration of the exterior. These entranceways are capped with ornate pediments. Offices of the Harlem Branch are located on the first floor as are conference rooms and the Board of Directors Chambers. In the lower level of the building is located the kitchen. Once in full operation this facility provided food for the residents of the YMCA. On this lower level is also located the dining room and the Little Theatre. Other public facilities include the YMCA Chapel, located in the southeast corner of the building. This Chapel has beautiful decor composed of matching draperies, chair covers and table cloths.

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CONTINUATION SHEET Claude McKay
Residence ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE One (Reference Notes)

1. Claude McKay, A Long Way From Home (New York: Harcourt & Brace & World, Inc., 1970) p. 4.
2. Claude McKay, Selected Poems of Claude McKay (New York: Bookman Associates, 1958), p. 36.
3. Claude McKay, A Long Way From Home (New York: Harcourt & Brace & World, Inc., 1970) p. 28.
4. Ibid, p. 68.
5. Ibid, p. 153.
6. Ibid, p. 229.
7. Ibid, p. 343.

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CONTINUATION SHEET Claude McKay
 Residence ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE Two

McKay decided then that if he could not graduate as a bachelor of arts or science, he would graduate as a poet.

Although McKay worked for five years as a porter, fireman, bar-boy, houseman and waiter, he always continued writing, hoping for an opportunity to share his verses with an audience. In 1918 the opportunity finally came. Frank Harris, editor of Pearson's, a magazine designed to reach and discover the obscure talents of Americans invited McKay to his home to discuss his poetry. Harris admitted that McKay had talent as a poet, but refused to publish any of the poems McKay had brought to him. Instead, Harris suggested that McKay try his hand at prose and to compare his poetry with more fire, more feeling.

The following year of 1919 was one of great physical attacks upon blacks by whites. Many black soldiers who had fought in World War I for the preservation of freedom and democracy abroad returned home to face lynch mobs and race riots; not the victory marches they expected. Still working at the railroad as a waiter, McKay, like most blacks throughout the country, was keenly aware of the constant possibility of attack by angry white southerners. Responding to a national climate of racial hatred and tension which permeated the country, McKay wrote his famous poem "If We Must Die." An explosive expression of his anger over the situation, the sonnet appeared in several anthologies, was translated into several languages, and was read in the British House of Commons by Sir Winston Churchill. Still read and remembered to this day, the poem admirably advocates resistance in the face of death:

So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead. . . .
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!²

While the literary and creative qualities expressed in "If We Must Die" make it an important contribution to the American poetic genre, the social and political climate in which McKay wrote gives it even greater significance. When McKay wrote "If We Must Die," he had received little, if any, encouragement to write such a powerful social statement. Even Harris, who had encouraged McKay to interject more fire into his poems suggested that he might have better luck as a pugilist instead of as a poet.

William Stanley Braithwaite, a black literary critic and poet, who kept his racial identity a secret, suggested to McKay that he also keep his racial identity unknown.

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CONTINUATION SHEET Claude McKay
 Residence ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE Three

McKay, disregarded Braithwaite's advice, explaining:

. . . of all the poets I admire, major and minor, Byron, Shelly, Keats, Blacke, Burns, Whitman, Heine, Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Rimbaud and the rest--it seemed to me that when I read them--in their poetry I could fee their race, their class, their roots in the soil, growing into plants and forming the backgrounds against which they were silhouetted. I could not feel the reality of them without that. So likewise I could not realize myself writing without conviction.³

Thirteen years later in discussing the poem, McKay stated that he wrote it in order to share his personal and honest reactions to social and political issues of the day from the perspective of a sensitive and honest black man. In so doing he launched not only his personal career but also that of an entire cultural movement--the Harlem Renaissance. A number of his contemporaries and several literary critics today date the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance--an era when more black poets, novelists and other artists received more national exposure and published more literary works than had ever before--with the publication of McKay's poem. "If We Must Die" provided the catalyst and the foundation upon which the Harlem Renaissance developed. It was an era when black people, instead of white, described the nature of the black experience in America.

After the publication of "If We Must Die," Max Eastman of the Liberator offered McKay a position as associate editor. Although McKay enjoyed working with the magazine, he stayed just long enough to save his fare to England. In London, McKay's view of social and political movements was greatly broadened. McKay learned about the Bolshevik revolution and came in contact with people who frequently discussed socialism and Marxian ideology. McKay explained:

For the first time I found myself in an atmosphere of doctrinaire and dogmatic ideas in which people devoted themselves entirely to the discussion and analysis of social events from a radical and Marxian point of view. . . The contact stimulated and broadened my social outlook and plunged me into the reading of Karl Marx.⁴

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CONTINUATION SHEET Claude McKay
Residence ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE Four

Within a short time, McKay's newfound interest in social movements landed him a job as a news reporter with Sylvia Pankhurst, editor of Worker's Dreadnought, a British socialist newspaper. While still working as a news reporter in London in 1920 McKay published his first book of verse, Spring in New Hampshire, and later that same year returned to Harlem.

Upon returning to New York, McKay wrote Eastman that he was back in the United States. Eastman answered McKay's letter by asking him to become executive editor of the Liberator. In this position, McKay came in contact with many radicals. He also met and interviewed many of the white literary giants such as E. E. Cummings, H. G. Wells, Hemingway, Nancy Cunard, James Joyce and others who were just beginning to receive national exposure.

With the New Negro Movement gaining momentum, McKay's position and own literary interests led him to the Harlem intelligentsia: Hubert Harrison, Grace Campbell, Cyril Briggs, W. E. B. DuBois, Walter White, Countee Cullen, James Weldon Johnson, and Jessie Fauset. While trying his hand as a dramatic critic, McKay met Florence Mills, the black actress and star of Shuffle Along, one of the first and best known black productions to hit Broadway. Using his influence, McKay was responsible for the inclusion of a feature article on Shuffle Along in the Liberator which caused a sensation among the theatrical crowd in Harlem.

In 1922 two other important events occurred in McKay's life. Since his London publishers of Spring in New Hampshire had not allowed the inclusion of "If We Must Die" in the collection, McKay then began to search for a publisher of his new book. In 1922 the publishing company of Harcourt and Brace printed McKay's Harlem's Shadow with the famous poem included. It was an immediate success and by selling autographed copies he was able to finance a trip to Russia. His previous trip to Europe had developed within him an irrepressible desire to go to the Soviet Union:

All I had was the cominant urge to go and that
discovered the way . . . As a social-minded
being and poet, I too was moved.⁵

When McKay first arrived in Moscow, he was part of the American delegation attending the fourth Congress of the Communist International. McKay was the only black American delegate. The other participants feared his inclusion and wanted him to return to the United States but McKay refused. And long after the other Americans had returned home, McKay remained in Russia being handsomely paid for his articles in Pravada. When not writing

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CONTINUATION SHEET Claude McKay
Residence ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE Five

poetry or articles, McKay was taking special tours of Kremlin military schools or speaking at literary gatherings. During the course of the stay he met with Kamenev, Trotsky and Lenin. Aware of the social and political reasons for the attention given him as a black poet in Russia McKay said:

I came out of Russia with my head on my shoulders
and my pen in my pocket and determined to write
at all costs, as long as I had a piece of bread to
bite and a room in which I could think and scribble.⁶

In the summer of 1923, McKay travelled to Germany and by the fall of the same year, he was living in France. For the next nine years, McKay travelled and delivered his poetry and prose throughout Europe--France, Italy, Spain, Holland and Morocco. While there, McKay published Home to Harlem and became the first black novelist to write a best-seller in fiction. The following year McKay published Banjo and received the Harmon medal for "power skill and originality in poetry and prose." By 1932, beginning to suffer emotional and financial hardships, McKay wrote:

I had come to the point of a breakdown
while working on my novel in Morocco;
and besides I was in pecuniary difficulties.⁷

By 1933 McKay was back in the United States, still writing, but making very little money. During the depression years like many other writers, McKay supported himself by working with the Federal Writer's Project, and in 1937 his autobiography, A Long Way From Home was published.

In 1942 McKay moved back to Harlem, broke and unable to find employment. Having been troubled by poor health since his return to the States, McKay suffered a stroke in June of 1942. Friends suggested that he go to New Milford, Connecticut to rest for the summer. Still possessed by a desire to write, McKay told a life-long friend, Ivy Jackman, "Thought I could wait a month (before writing again), but I just can't. And this time I am putting all I have left into it." He began writing and by January of 1944 he returned to Jamaica only to return to Harlem a week later.

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CONTINUATION SHEET Claude McKay ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE Six
Residence

The last ten years of McKay's life were spent in dire poverty and the last five were spent in and out of hospitals. Nevertheless, McKay continued to write and to frequently lecture on trends in black literature. He was particularly interested in the Harlem Renaissance period from its inception which he helped begin. Finally, however, McKay died at the Alexian Brothers Hospital in Chicago in May, 1948 at the age of fifty-eight.

Claude McKay was one of America's greatest writers, known for his unfaltering commitment to speak the truth, honestly and openly. It was such honesty that caused the poem "If We Must Die" to explode out of him and to so sensitively and effectively express many of the thoughts and fears of all black Americans. That same persistence towards honesty and freedom of expression characterized not only all of his works but also laid the groundwork for one of the most fertile and productive literary period of black Americans, the Harlem Renaissance. His creativity and honesty stemmed from his experience as an Afro-American in this country. Yet the contributions he has made to the nation's entire culture are inestimable. He is recognized today as one of the country's truly creative writers and scholars of the twentieth century.