

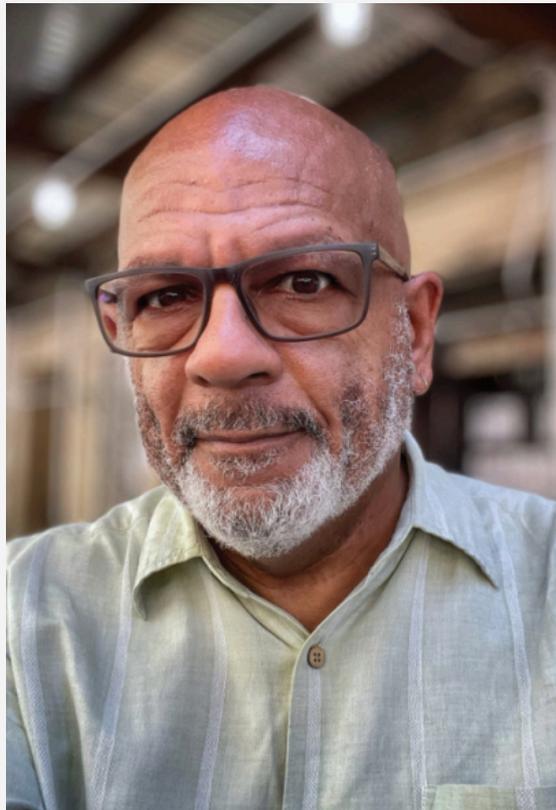
THE Village View

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WELLNESS OPINION

A local historian helps reveal the city's earlier Black communities

By D. Silverman



HISTORIAN ERIC K. WASHINGTON, above, in front of Former Colored School No. 4.
Photo courtesy of Eric K. Washington.

Around 25 years ago a newly-licensed tour guide, Eric K. Washington, led groups around

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Seneca Village for the New-York Historical Society. For those not familiar with it: Seneca Village exists today as a footprint in Central Park, spanning about five acres northwest of the Great Lawn.

That Village is notable for having once been a vibrant mid-19th-century interracial community of primarily Black Americans and Irish immigrants. It also comprised the largest concentration of African American landowners in New York State — until 1857, when the land was forcibly acquired by the city and the structures demolished in constructing the park.

Washington would go on to lead many more historical walking tours in Manhattan, including in and around Trinity Church Cemetery in Washington Heights, which gave him ample opportunities to uncover the lives of notable residents.

In 2013, while preparing a tour of Grand Central Terminal under the auspices of the Municipal Art Society, Washington was again drawn towards the stories of individuals connected with the site. In this case it was the all-Black contingent of station porters, called Red Caps, who were a ubiquitous part of rail travel for well over half a century.

Digging deeper into the lives of the porters and their connection to the city’s upwardly mobile Black middle class resulted in his award-winning book *Boss of the Grips: The Life of James H. Williams and the Red Caps of Grand Central Terminal*.

Which brings us downtown to another ‘Village’ in the city — also a vibrant



Maggio

“Hey, have you seen that big Shephard that walks around here?” I don’t know how many times I’ve been asked that question. I answer, “Yes, that’s Maggio! I call him the King of our Kingdom of Hudson River Park Greenway!” As a member of American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), I received a 2024 calendar with a picture and story about Maggio. Here’s some of what ASPCA wrote in “A Big Dog with an Even Bigger Heart: Maggio’s Story.”

Joy in the Moment

What a lesson a day can make!

If you have been keeping up with the presidential election, you may have had a variety of thoughts and emotions about the future. You might have been concerned or even worried

community with many Black and Irish residents in earlier centuries. (For some decades in the late 1800s, there was an area below Washington Square Park commonly referred to as “Little Africa.”)

While researching the Red Caps’ leadership, Washington learned that James H. Williams grew up on West 15th Street and graduated from Colored School No. 4 on West 17th. An exploratory walk by the former school revealed an unused 19th-century Greek Revival building owned by the city.

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THIS HISTORIC 19TH-CENTURY PUBLIC SCHOOL FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN, right, located at 128 West 17th Street, stands as a testament to the cultural heritage of the community. *Photo by Bob Cooley.*

g in a desirable neighborhood might not remain standing for long, Washington

about what was going on politically on July 20, 2024. But the next day, we received a much different message than we had the weeks before.

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marshaled his documentation and submitted an evaluation request to Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) to consider protecting this unique surviving example of the “colored” public schools and for its relevance to the surrounding Black neighbors of that period.

Last May, after a nearly five-year process involving a broad coalition of support, the LPC designated the schoolhouse at 128 West 17th Street a protected landmark. Additionally, the city has committed \$6 million to restore it for a final use to be determined.

While many noteworthy individuals were connected with the school — as educators, students and visitors — one deserving special mention is Sarah J.S. Tompkins Garnet, one of the first Black female principals in New York City.

In recent years, as appreciation of Garnet’s story spread — including having risked her life in protecting her students during the Draft Riots of 1863 — two city public schools, and a playground, have been renamed in honor of the prominent educator; an example of rediscovered history inspiring future generations.

Emerging understanding of Garnet’s life continues to have relevance beyond her work. She resided for about a decade in a building owned by the eminent Black caterer and abolitionist, Jacob Day, at 50 West 13th Street (more recently the home of the 13th Street Repertory Company). This interconnected relationship of influential members of the downtown African American

community adds to the growing awareness of the complex multi-racial history of the Village — and Washington has identified several significant Black figures who were tenants of Day.

Village Preservation (GVSHHP) has been gathering supporting evidence of the historical importance of the “Jacob Day House” for potentially landmarking the structure — and Washington alerted them to Garnet’s tenancy to bolster the case. On June 18th, the LPC voted to “calendar” the proposal, which means further research and a public hearing on preserving the building will be scheduled on their upcoming calendar.

Like a meandering tour of the mind, the path of history has led Washington roundabout the borough. Starting in Central Park, then up to Harlem (where he published the history guidebook *Manhattanville: Old Heart of West Harlem*), then further up past Trinity Cemetery, then ride to Grand Central and the Red Caps, then attend a former “colored” schoolhouse in Chelsea, with relationships spreading into the Village.

In 2021, On Site Opera commissioned him to narrate *The Road We Came*, which explored African American musical history around town through song performances woven into recorded walking tours. For last year’s Village Trip festival, he presented the keynote lecture on “Greenwich Village as Harlem’s Preamble and Echo.”

It struck me that Washington, now an independent historian and author (who has mostly hung up his tour-guide mantle), often takes an interest in understanding the lives of

the city’s earlier Black middle- and upper-class communities — a perspective often overlooked or obscured in more-conventional historic narratives.

When I mentioned this to Eric, who once lived on 13th Street, he responded, “A close look at Greenwich Village today reveals an often surprising pentimento of New York’s 400-year-old African American presence.”

“Only a century ago, the storied Harlem Renaissance cultural movement of the 1920s captured the world’s attention. But those heady days also often floated on wistful backward glances downtown. Even though Black New Yorkers had demonstrably claimed Harlem by then, their once familiar Greenwich Village still sparked a collective sentimental interest that was palpable.”

Twenty-five years ago, a participant in a walking tour around a grassy field in Central Park, led by an enthusiastic recently-credentialed guide, got to enjoy hearing history vividly unfold. Memory of that experience inspired this article.

Eric K. Washington is currently at work on a group biography recounting the people and stories connected through the modest former schoolhouse now preserved on West 17th Street.

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