



RIVERSIDE PARK



**LINCOLN  
THEATRE**  
58 W 135th St

**HARLEM**

W 155TH ST

W 120TH ST

W 115TH ST

W 100TH ST

W 116TH ST

ADAM CLAYTON AVE

ADAM CLAYTON POWELL JR BLVD



**APOLLO  
THEATER**  
253 W 125th St

**Lincoln  
Theatre**

58 W 135th St,  
near Lenox  
Ave

# Historical Significance

- First Harlem theater for Black audiences, opening in 1915 when the neighborhood was still predominantly white. It served as an essential cultural venue when most major theaters barred or restricted Black patrons.
- **Founder:** Previously the Nিকেlette nickelodeon (est. 1909), purchased and renamed by Maria C. Downs expanding it to 850 seats by 1915.
- **Featured performers:** Bessie Smith, Florence Mills, Ma Rainey (only New York venue she performed), Ethel Waters, Fats Waller (hired as organist at age 15), and others, also served the Anita Bush Stock Company.
- **Later years:** Transitioned into a cinema under Frank Schiffman (post-1929), then sold again in the early 1930s. Closed by 1952, the building became the Metropolitan A.M.E.

# Historical Significance

Church, retaining much of its interior architecture despite the modern façade added in the 1960s.



- **Historic exterior (circa 1936)** – The grand marquee and architectural details from the theater’s golden era



- **Early facade photograph** – Another vintage view of the theater, emphasizing its early 20th-century design



- **Modern-day exterior as Metropolitan A.M.E. Church** – Shows how the building looks today with its updated façade



- **Evening shot of the current building** – A clearer, color image of the theater-turned-church at night

# Why it matters for Radical Preservation?

- A deliberate space for Black cultural production and gathering.
- **Tangible vs. Intangible History:** The surviving original interior is a material trace of past performance culture.
- **Preservation vs. Heritage:** Adaptive reuse preserved functional space, yet altered its external appearance highlighting negotiations between heritage and changing community needs.

# Architectural Preservation

- Despite becoming the Metropolitan A.M.E. Church in the 1960s, the interior especially the Mayan Revival style proscenium, sloping floor, and theater boxes remains largely intact, preserving its intangible cultural legacy.

# Key Takeaways

- Lincoln Theatre (1915): First Harlem theater built for Black audiences, a cornerstone of cultural identity.
- From Theatre to Church: Adaptive reuse shows how spaces transform but still carry cultural memory.
- Preservation Beyond Bricks: Radical preservation is about safeguarding stories, voices, and lived histories as much as physical architecture.