A STROLL THROUGH WASHINGTON HEIGHTS

At the end of the Tony Award-winning musical In the Heights, a sign with a Latino name is removed from a storefront, revealing the Irish name of a previous owner. That one moment defines the constantly changing neighborhood of Washington Heights, and offers a window into the history of immigration in the United States.

Washington Heights is one of the most fascinating sections of Manhattan. It is also one of New York City’s best-kept secrets. It’s not just that the area is off the proverbial beaten path for tourists; it’s that there are probably millions of native New Yorkers who have never visited the area. It’s their loss: Washington Heights has a rich history, and topography unlike any other part of the city.

“It’s always been an immigrant’s first step,” says Lin-Manuel Miranda, the Tony Award-winning composer and lyricist of In the Heights, who also conceived the show. “That’s one of the things I love about the neighborhood. And it has such a different energy from everywhere else in the city, because it’s got this terrain that was never conquered.”

Located in northernmost Manhattan, Washington Heights is bounded to the south by 155th Street – as Usnavi sings in the show’s opening number, “you must take the A train even farther than Harlem” – and continues on to Dyckman Street (200th Street), where Inwood begins. Miranda actually grew up in Inwood, but spent almost as much time in Washington Heights. The two neighborhoods are often thought of as one.

Perhaps the best known area in Washington Heights is Fort Tryon Park, one of the city’s great oases. In addition to its beautiful grounds and spectacular views unlike anywhere else in the city, the park is home to the Cloisters, a reconstructed monastery that houses most of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s medieval works. The other great green space in the area is Inwood Hill Park, which includes the last natural forest and salt marsh in Manhattan. The highest natural point in the borough, 265 feet above sea level, is found at 183rd Street in Bennett Park.

But what gives this corner of Manhattan its unique character are the people who have inhabited it over the years. Washington Heights has been a beacon to immigrants since the last decade of the nineteenth century, when Armenians, fleeing persecution at home, took up residence. They were followed by Irish and Greek immigrants in the early part of the twentieth century. German and Eastern European Jews began arriving in the 1920s and ’30s, and with the gathering storm in Europe, Austrian and German Jewish immigration peaked between 1938 and 1940. In the 1940s and into the 1950s, Washington Heights became a predominantly Jewish neighborhood, with Irish immigrants making up the next largest number of residents. It was not a harmonious coexistence, and anti-Semitic attacks were common through the mid-’50s.
The Greek population exploded in the 1950s, the same decade that saw the first wave of Latino arrivals. Puerto Ricans were followed by Cubans fleeing Castro’s new regime, signaling the onset of what would be a seismic shift in the makeup of the neighborhood. Dominicans began arriving in the mid-1960s – coinciding with the beginning of white migration – and today Washington Heights has the largest Dominican population in the country. The late ’80s and early ’90s were marked by a shocking increase in crime, as crack became epidemic. The number of murders increased significantly throughout New York City, but no area was hit harder than Washington Heights.

That’s all changed. A good portion of the area has been gentrified, as people of all backgrounds have discovered that it’s considerably more affordable to live way uptown. But the area retains a predominantly Latino essence, with Dominicans, Cubans, Ecuadorians and Mexicans making up the majority.

Washington Heights has been home to a number of famous residents, who were either born there, grew up there, or lived there as adults. They include Alan Greenspan, Henry Kissinger, Dr. Ruth Westheimer, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Vin Scully, Rod Carew, Manny Ramirez, Alex Rodriguez, Freddie Prinze, Leslie Uggams and Laurence Fishburne.

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