

# Some Informal Neighborhood and Street Names in Manhattan: From *Alphabet City* to *The Dead End*

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An annotated glossary of thirty-five informal, often slang-like historical placenames of socially symbolic neighborhoods and streets in Manhattan is given. The list is limited to the more enduring names of probable New York origin and to similar names that took on highly specialized meanings in Manhattan. The glossary is preceded by a short essay which discusses the social uses and gratifications of informal placenames in city life.

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New Yorkers, like big city people everywhere, responded to the emerging physical and social city of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by naming nearly every aspect of the modern experience in their slang and other popular speech (Allen). Some of these names are highly informal, slang-like placenames for areas and streets of historical Manhattan, whose social character had emerged in the popular consciousness but lacked a suitable denomination. The formal, standard name, if the delimited area had one at all, did not denote the popularly perceived social, ethnic, class, commercial, or other traits of the neighborhood. Imaginative lexical innovation was the response — new names for new places.

From a sociological perspective, all urban placenames denote symbolic communities, streets, and other sites. Informal names especially are given and accepted, among other reasons, because they enable people to decode and make sense of an otherwise lexically undifferentiated city. Many of the popular names for rich,

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poor, or ethnic neighborhoods are a collective linguistic device to belittle, or to express envy of, the people who lived there, to separate "them" from "us," to express social distance and difference. The social history of Manhattan abounds in colorful street names in which, as Jacob Riis wrote, "the directory has no hand." Most spoke to the poverty, misery, and violence in the slums of the late nineteenth century, such as *Rag Pickers' Row*, *Murderers' Alley*, and *Cockroach Row*.

Some of the informal names are status symbols that are accepted and used by residents to raise their status and by others to assign low status to them. Low status names, such as *Hell's Kitchen*, are often rejected and replaced with a new name when the population of a neighborhood changes or aspirations rise. In the last 50 years, most names of social neighborhoods are not spontaneously of popular origin. Some were proposed by commercial interests and became popular through the mediation of newspapers, tabloids, and TV use, which is the way most slang originates and diffuses today. Others, such as *TriBeCa*, were administratively given, but all quickly became popular and many are now variously recognized by the city and are standard.

This list is confined to New Yorkisms, either informal place-names of probable New York origin or, in some cases, names that probably had prior existence but took on highly special meanings when applied to Manhattan sites, such as *Strivers' Row*, the *Gashouse District*, or *Hell's Kitchen*. Like Americanisms more generally, these words were either coined, or were old words given new meanings, to express a new experience in a new world, in this case the new experience of the urban frontier.

Many informal placenames in New York, however, were borrowed from general, national popular speech. Every major city seems to have its *Millionaires' Row* and *Poverty Hill*, its *Little Italy* and *Barrio*. But only New York's Millionaires' Mile later became *Museum Mile*, with about ten museums on Fifth Avenue between 82nd and 104th streets, some in the mansions vacated by millionaires. And *Little Odessa* is only in New York. Many of the obsolete slang names for ethnic neighborhoods were formed on familiar ethnic slurs, such as *Coontown*, and have no original meaning in New York. Less offensive names, such as *Chinatown*,

probably did not originate in New York either. Other cities borrowed a few of the most useful names that originated here, such as *The Tenderloin*, a name now best known as the nightclub district in San Francisco.

A few of the names are famous nicknames for the whole City of New York, namely *The Big Apple*, *Fun City*, and *Gotham*. Whole cities are, in a sense, our national neighborhoods. Finally, I have omitted a number of slang-like names for areas and streets that have little national recognition or were passing, such as *DUMBO*, the acronym for an area *Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass*, or *Bedpan Alley*, York Avenue, so named for the concentration of hospitals.

#### Selected List of Informal Placenames in Manhattan

**Allrightniks Row.** By 1923, Riverside Drive, a neighborhood once favored by affluent Jewish families. From American Yiddish *olraytnik* 'upstart, parvenu,' taken into English as *allrightnik*, one who is set up "all right," and moreover among downtown Jews meaning a striver who has made it and gotten comfortable. Affluent Jewish neighborhoods on the Upper West Side were generally known as *gilded ghettos*.

**Alphabet City.** By the 1980s, a popular name for a poor neighborhood on the Lower East Side, bounded by Avenue A, Avenue D, 14th Street, and East Houston Street. The area is noted for its mix of Latinos, young "anarchists" from the suburbs, and hip gentrifiers. The north-south avenues on this widest jut of the island are not numbered but lettered, Avenues A, B, C, and D. Tompkins Square Park is its moral center. The Latinos in the area have been said to refer, in stereotypically accented English, to the Lower East Side as the *Loisaida*, pronounced with four syllables.

**The American Ward/Quarter.** An informal name for the city's prestigious Ninth Ward, including most of Greenwich Village, from about 1860 to 1890. So named for the demographic fact that so many "Americans" of British-Isles descent and so few recent immigrants lived in the ward.

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**The Big Apple.** Today's most popular nickname for New York City. The name was revived in 1971 by Charles Gillett, who was then president of the New York Convention and Visitors' Bureau. Barry Popik has recently traced the name to early 1920 and African-American usage in New Orleans, referring to the big-time horse racing tracks of New York (Cohen). Later senses extended the name to the acmes of success in New York — making it — in jazz music, show business on Broadway, and about anything else, and these newer senses are pure New York. The name now has its own derivatives: *Big Appler*, *Big Applian*, *Applephile* (Read).

**The Dead End.** A small, poor neighborhood, perhaps mythical, on the East River in the East 50s, so named because it was where crosstown streets dead-ended and also because the name connoted the hopelessness of slum life. Sidney Kingsley's 1935 play, *The Dead End*, popularized the name and the Dead End Kids of subsequent movies spread it further.

**Death Avenue.** A popular nickname for a midtown stretch of Eleventh Avenue early in this century. It was named, not for the high homicide rate in Hell's Kitchen nor the nearby slaughter on Tenth Avenue, but for the frequent death and dismemberment resulting from accidents on the freight-train tracks that ran along the center of the avenue.

**The Deuce.** A recent nickname for 42nd Street, especially west of Sixth, from the "two" in the street's name.

**Dream Street.** Damon Runyon's name for 47th Street, between Sixth and Seventh Avenues, where the offices and stagedoor of B. F. Keith's Palace Theater were, until the Palace became a movie house in 1932. Bookings at the Palace were the highest hope of young vaudevillians. *Panic Beach* was the sidewalk at the Palace, named for the unemployed performers who hung out there, milling and expressing their anxiety about bookings.

**East Village.** A late 1960s real-estate and developers' name for the upper part of the old Lower East Side, trading on the upscale reputation of Greenwich Village, known locally as *The Village*. Perversely, this caused the retronym *West Village* for

**Greenwich Village.** The East Village in some views includes Alphabet City, and broadly defined is bounded by Broadway and Third Avenue on the west, Avenue D, 14th Street and Houston Street.

**Fun City.** An effort of the administration of Mayor John Lindsay in the 1960s to change the faltering touristic image of New York. But the euphemism backfired and became a sarcastic nickname for the city, connoting anything but fun. *The Big Apple*, however, soon caught on and became everything *Fun City* wanted to be.

**Gashouse District.** The mostly Irish tenement district from 14th to 27th, from the East River over to Third Avenue. After the Civil War the District was in the shadows and heaviest odor range of the city's main complex of gasworks.

**The Gay White Way.** Other than *The Great White Way*, the most genuinely popular of the sixty or so slang and columnists' stunt names for the theater, restaurant, and nightclub district along Broadway. (Allen contains a nearly complete list of these quickly passing names that mostly spoke to booze and the bright lights).

**Gotham.** After 1807, Washington Irving's sardonic nickname for New York, from the name of the English Village of Gotham and the medieval legend of its "wise fools." Its intended pejorative meanings were gradually lost and it became the city's most enduring nickname, and it remains prominent in popular culture. Batman watches over "Gotham City."

**The Great White Way.** Broadway, especially through Times Square. Though now taken as a reference to the many white electric lights, the term's first known printed use is 1902 and refers to the appearance of Broadway after a heavy snowfall, apparently alluding to the same name of Albert Bigelow Paine's 1901 novel, *The Great White Way*, an unrelated and distant fantasy of Antarctica (Shulman).

**Hell's Kitchen.** After the 1850s, the mixed Irish and African-American slum that eventually covered 39th to 59th streets, from Eighth Avenue to the Hudson, was a Devil's cauldron of crime and violence. The name was probably first an American

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cultural metaphor and later applied in a special sense to this slum on the West Side of midtown. The area has since gentrified, and real-estate interests renamed it *Clinton*, after the family name of New York's early Governor De Witt Clinton, whose family had a large farm in the area.

**Hobohemia.** By 1917, Sinclair Lewis was using the name, an irresistible blend of *hobo* and *Bohemia*, for the literary pretensions and Bohemian society of Greenwich Villagers. By the 1920s the name had been extended to any raffish society in New York and, in Chicago, to the world of hoboes.

**Holy Ground.** A sardonic name for the city's chief district of prostitution from about 1770 to the early nineteenth century. Many of the brothels in this early red light district stood on land owned by the Episcopal Church, along Church, Vesey, and Barclay streets, below and to the west of St. Paul's Chapel.

**Jewish Alps.** Washington Heights, once a Jewish neighborhood.

**Ladies' Mile.** The department-store district from 8th Street up to 23rd. By 1900, many of the dry-goods palaces or "big stores" concentrated on Sixth Avenue. Ladies' Mile was famous as a promenade for fashionable women whose *window shopping* (a term that may have originated here) made the stretch a symbol of elegance and consumption. Boston's Winter Street was its *Ladies' Street* in the 1880s, but only New York had a whole mile for lady shoppers. Today the northern part of this area is also called the *Flatiron District*, named for the landmark of the twenty-two story Flatiron Building at 23rd Street and the intersection of Fifth Avenue and Broadway, New York's oldest (1903), still-standing, true skyscraper.

**De Lane.** The Bowery — always with the definite article. Echoing the local nineteenth century rendering of the article *the* as *de* or *duh*. *De Lane* is short for the old Dutch-English eighteenth-century name for the street, *the Bowery Lane*.

**Lobster Alley.** Shortly after 1900, a name for Broadway through Times Square. The name alludes to all the glittering lobster palaces there, where late-night dinners of lobster and champagne were the order for the gay after-the-theater crowd.

**Minnesota Strip.** In the 1970s, the local name for the district of street prostitution along Eighth Avenue west of the theater district. The runaways there, most of them from New York and New Jersey, were said to give their home addresses to police and social workers as "Minneapolis."

**NoHo.** A small aspirant SoHo-like district *north* of *Houston* Street. See SoHo.

**Orange Juice Gulch.** The canyon of Times Square, from the many orange-juice stands once there, especially in the 1930s and 1940s.

**San Juan Hill.** A poor neighborhood in the West 60s, west of Columbus Circle, where in 1900 riots between Irish and African Americans raged up and down the hilly streets. The mocking allusion is to the 1898 Battle of San Juan Hill in the Spanish-American War and, it is now said, to the Buffalo Soldiers who distinguished themselves in that battle. When the black neighborhood moved up to Harlem after the First World War, the area became known as Columbus Hill, changing its image.

**Silk-stocking District.** The U. S. 15th Congressional District, which encompasses much of the wealthy East Side of Manhattan. *Silk stocking* is a very old modifier alluding to the wealth of the class whose men wore silk stockings, not humble cotton, when knee britches were in fashion. In later years, but before nylons, it must have come to mean the silk on the legs of wealthy women.

**SoHo.** An acronym for the art-gallery, boutique, and residential loft district south of *Houston* Street. SoHo is roughly bounded by Houston Street, Broadway, Canal, and Sixth Avenue. Properly spelled with a capitalized *H* to distinguish it from London's Soho, which it socially resembles and after which it was also named.

**Strivers' Row.** Two blocks of town houses on West 138th and 139th streets, between Seventh and Eighth avenues. The elegant row houses, designed by Stanford White and built in 1891, were opened to affluent black residents in 1919. In the 1930s, literary treatments and especially Abram Hill's play *On*

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*Strivers' Row* satirized the social-climbing black families that lived there, popularized the name, and made it a trope for middle-class Harlem. Today, new interest in the black middle classes has revived the symbolism of the name.

**Sugar Hill.** The name given in the late 1920s to the Harlem neighborhood of grand apartment houses on Coogan's Bluff, the rise along the heights roughly between Amsterdam and Edgecombe avenues, between about 138th and 155th streets. *Sugar* in the name was Harlem slang for 'money' — the sweet and expensive life that money afforded (Titcomb). The affluent black professionals who lived here were called *Sugar Hillies*.

**Swing Street.** In the late 1930s and 1940s, the two blocks of West 52nd Street, especially between Fifth and Sixth, but extending a little beyond the el at Sixth, and named for the many jazz clubs there. The street was also known as *Swing Alley*, but the real workaday insiders — the jazzmen and taxi drivers — called it just *The Street*. Today, it is unrecognizable, save for the touristic street signs.

**Tar Beach.** By 1940, the tarred and graveled rooftops of tenements and other apartment houses where New Yorkers sunbathed, thus a nowhere placename. The beach at Coney was better, but Tar Beach did in a pinch — and was always closer and less crowded. Long before suntans became fashionable for working-class young women in the 1930s, boys and young men skinny-dipped from *Splinter Beach*, the wooden wharves along the Hudson and East rivers. In 1913 George Bellows so named an oil painting of the scene.

**The Tenderloin.** By 1885, the popular name for Manhattan's chief vice district of the 1880s and 1890s. The Tenderloin was along Sixth Avenue and its side streets, generally between Fifth and Seventh avenues, and stretched from 14th up nearly to 42nd Street. The original allusion in the name is supposedly to police graft, but the name also had strong sexual connotations in this infamous area of prostitution, which preachers called *Satan's Circus*.

**Tin Pan Alley.** By 1899, the popular name for music publishers' row. The district was around Union Square in the 1880s and steadily moved uptown, generally following the theater district up Broadway, until it settled just north of Times Square. Today, *The Alley*, as it is also known, is nationally dispersed, and people in the business rarely use the term. The reference in the name is probably to the tinny sound of the cheap pianos used in many music publishers' studios in the 1890s.

**TriBeCa.** An acronym for the trendy residential *triangle* below Canal street. Formed by the spillover from the SoHo real estate boom in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the district was reportedly named in 1974 by a geographer in the city's Office of Lower Manhattan Development. TriBeCa is bounded on four sides by, roughly, Canal Street, Broadway, Chambers Street, and the Hudson River (West Street), and in fact is shaped more like a trapezoid than a triangle.

**The Valley.** By the 1920s, the rest of Harlem that lay below Sugar Hill, both physically and socially. *Oatmeal Flats* was down here, so named for the reduced diet necessitated by the rent gouging.

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