

Will Marion Cook House
221 West 138th Street
New York
New York County
New York

HABS No. NY-5721

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

WILL MARION COOK HOUSE

HABS No. NY-5721

Location: 221 West 138th Street, New York, New York County, New York
 U.S.G.S. Central Park, New York-New Jersey Quadrangle 1966,
 Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates:
 18.889090.4518850

Present Owner: Calvin J. Innis, 214 West 138th Street, New York, New York

Present Use: Residence and physician's office

Significance: Will Marion Cook was known for his great abilities in musical performance and composition, and theatrical organization. Especially noted for his contributions to ragtime music, Cook is also remembered for his aid to and promotion of other black musicians. He lived in this house from 1918 to 1944.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of construction: 1891
2. Architects: Bruce Price and Clarence Luce
3. Builder: D.H. King

B. Historical Context: A musician of international reputation, Will Marion Cook was born in Washington, D.C. on January 27, 1869. Both his father and mother were graduates of Oberlin College who migrated to the capital. His father was one of the first graduates of Howard University School of Law, where he served as a professor and dean from 1876 to 1878. After his father's death, his mother taught sewing at Howard to provide for the family. She is credited with influencing his musical career by exposing him to black hymns at an early age. He was performing as a boy soprano by the age of five and shortly thereafter took up the violin.

In the early 1880s, Mrs. Cook sent the 13 year old Will to study the violin at Oberlin Conservatory of Music. After three years there, he received funding for professional training in Germany from an integrated church congregation in Washington, D.C. He attended Berlin's Hochschule, where he studied under well-known violinist Josef Joachim. Joachim was so impressed with Cook that he gave him special private lessons. After nine years abroad, Cook returned to the United States because of ill health, enrolling in the National Conservatory of Music in New York City in 1895. He studied harmony and counterpoint under John White and composition under Anton Dvorak.

As the result of a concert Cook gave in New York at this time, critics characterized him as being "the greatest colored violinist in the world." Cook became so angry over being judged separately from other musicians because of being black that he swore never to play his violin again in an orchestra. He turned his attention away from classical music to the increasingly popular musical form of ragtime.

In 1898, Cook met the famous black comedy team of Bert Williams and George Walker, and gave them some ideas for a musical comedy on the origins of the "cakewalk" dance. Walker encouraged him to turn the ideas into a musical comedy. Upon returning to Washington, D.C., Cook convinced poet Paul Laurence Dunbar to write the lyrics. They wrote the lyrics and music to "Clorindy, The Origin of the Cakewalk" in a night. After much effort, Cook was able to convince Ed Rice, manager of the Casino Roof Garden in New York City, to produce "Clorindy." The ragtime musical, starring veteran black comics Bert Williams, George Walker, Ernest Hogan, and Belle Davis, ran the entire summer of 1898. Public reaction was extremely favorable to the novelty of the production. Theatregoers in other cities agreed when they saw the road show. By combining the public's craze for ragtime with professional training, Cook became a pioneer in the development of black musical comedy.

In 1898, Cook married singer-actress Abbie Mitchell who had appeared in "Clorindy." Mitchell, then only 14, continued to appear in works by Cook and went on to become a leading lady of the black stage. The two were later divorced. They had two children, Will Mercer Cook, a noted French scholar who served as United States Ambassador to Niger and Senegal, and Marian Cook Douglass.

In 1899 and 1900, Cook wrote two musicals which were not as successful as "Clorindy." He hit his stride again between 1900 and 1910, reaching his peak as a composer. In 1900, he wrote the tune "Down de Lover's Lane" for the Broadway musical, "The Casino Girl." In 1902, he and Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote "My Little Gypsy Maid" for the musical "The Wild Rose," starring vaudeville performer Eddie Foy, Sr. His greatest successes came as the composer for three highly successful musical comedies starring Bert Williams and George Walker. In 1902, "In Dahomey," a satire of the American Colonization Society, made black theatrical history by opening in Times Square in New York. With lyrics by Paul Laurence Dunbar and Alex Rogers and music by Will Marion Cook, "In Dahomey" featured songs such as "Every Darkey is King" and "When Sousa Comes to Coontown." The play also ran in Boston and for 150 performances at the Shaftesbury Theatre in London.

In 1904, Cook wrote the music for the comedy "The Southerners." Although the play only had a 36-performance run, two of its songs became very popular. Teaming up with Williams and Walker again in 1906, Cook wrote the music for the musical comedy "Abyssinia." At this juncture, he was still known as a composer of "darker" songs. In 1908 with the popularization of his new musical "Bandana Land," a

spoof on black life in the south, Cook overcame his reputation as a composer of "coon" songs, and developed national renown.

The death of George Walker in 1911 ended the comedy team of Williams and Walker. Cook was able to convince a leading producer, presumably Flo Ziegfeld, to star Bert Williams and Fanny Brice together. The Ziegfeld Follies of 1910, co-starring the most prominent black comedian and one of the most famous white female singers and comedienne of the time, was a huge success.

Besides his fame as a composer for Williams and Walker, Cook was instrumental in the development of the first black jazz band. Organized as the Memphis Students in 1905, this band, in reality a string orchestra, consisted of banjos, mandolins, guitars, saxophones, trumpets, trombones, a violin, a double bass and drums. What made this orchestra unique was that its performances included singing and dancing. Heard first at Proctor's Theatre in New York, the orchestra later performed at the Olympic Theatre in Paris.

1911 found Cook helping James Reese Europe to organize the Clef Club's Syncopated Orchestra. Composed of 125 black musicians playing guitars, cellos, basses, and wind instruments, the Clef Club performed at New York's Carnegie Hall in May of 1912. Cook, through the persuasion of Europe, agreed to play with the group. Although his playing of the violin would be a retreat from his prior vow not to do so ever again in an orchestra, Cook consented on the condition that he would not be introduced. Because the concert was such a success, Europe was forced to introduce Cook to a cheering audience. Cook was rendered speechless with joy.

Cook wrote the music to the comedy, "The Traitor," in 1912, also appearing as one of the stars in the play. In the same year, his Collection of Negro Songs was published. Two years later, Cook wrote the music for the comedy "In Darkeydom." He also wrote two ballads, "My Lady" and "Springtime," and collaborated with James Weldon Johnson by writing the music to Johnson's "An Explanation, Characteristic Negro Verses." Again collaborating with Johnson in 1915, Cook wrote the music to "My Lady's Lips Am Like De Honey Words."

During the years 1915 to 1921, Cook aided and befriended a pair of up-and-coming musician-composers, Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle. They recorded several of his compositions. More importantly, Cook taught orchestral conducting to Blake. He also developed the title "Sounds of Africa" for a collection of piano solos released by Eubie Blake in October of 1921.

During 1918, Cook organized the New York Syncopated Orchestra, a symphony of fifty black musicians and singers. This assemblage of musicians, including such future jazz greats as clarinetist Sidney Bechet and drummer Buddy Gilmore, toured a number of cities in the

United States and abroad as well. Their concerts consisted of music from Brahms, the Vienna Waltzes, W.C. Handy's "St. Louis Blues" and "Memphis Blues" and a cappella spirituals. A highlight of the Orchestra's stay in London was a command performance before King George V at Buckingham Palace in August of 1919. In Paris, the Orchestra performed at the Theatre des Champs-Elysees. The trip was a musical success and helped popularize the work of black musicians in Europe.

In 1927, Cook composed the jazz standard "I'm Coming Virginia." He served, in 1929, as the vocal coach for the Broadway musical "Great Day!" That same year, he adapted and arranged the spiritual "Trouble in Mind," while his son Mercer wrote the lyrics.

During the 1930s, Cook was one of several black musicians who served as either consultants, composers and/or performers in several special programs such as the Chicago Century of Progress International Exposition, 1933-1934; the Golden Gate International Exposition, 1939-40; and the New York World's Fair, 1939-40. He and his son wrote a ballad for Alberta Hunter, the radio singer, in 1938, which became the first popular song that Cook had written in more than 20 years. For the last six years of his life, Cook retired from the music world as a result of a severe heart ailment. On July 19, 1944, Will Marion Cook died in Harlem Hospital at the age of 75.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: 221 West 138th Street is on the north side of the street and the east end unit of sixteen townhouses bounded by transverse service alleys. The block is designed in an eclectic Georgian style. The unit is slightly recessed from the unit to the west.
2. Condition of fabric: The building remains today much as it was when it was built.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Dimensions: The unit is three stories tall and 20 feet wide.
2. Foundation: masonry
3. Walls: buff brick
4. Porch and balconies: Delicate wrought iron balconies extend from the base of the first floor windows, and similar wrought iron work is found at the top platform of the stoop and in the handrails for the front steps.

5. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: The main entrance doorway is slightly recessed and has a round arched head with an elongated console-like keystone, which springs from "Greek fret" motif impost blocks. A metal door opens into a rear service alley.
- b. Windows: The sizes vary and there are two different window treatments. The first and third story windows have terra cotta splayed lintels with elongated keystones. The second story of the house has pseudo-Palladian terra cotta windows centered in the south (main) and east facades. The tripartite window is separated by Ionic columns supporting an arch form above a garlanded horizontal lintel. The blind tympanum in the arch has a wreath design within.

6. Roof: The building is surmounted by an overhanging cornice and a stone balustrade.

- D. Site: The block is one of four in the area known as "Strivers Row." The blocks were designed by different architects but were meant by the builder to form a cohesive neighborhood unit. The townhouses have wide service alleys to the rear and shorter transverse alleys between the streets. This unit has an unattached one car garage with an opening onto the service alley.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Cook, Will Marion, National Register of Historic Places nomination form, 1975.

Prepared and transmitted by: Holly K. Chamberlain
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HABS
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