

# A Neighborhood for a 'Higher Life': Columbia College's Move to Morningside Heights and Ethno-Racial and Class Exclusion

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## Introduction

There's a joke that's become commonplace during campus tours at Columbia University. As groups of prospective students pass by Buell Hall, only steps away from the very center of campus, they're told that this two-story, red-brick house is the last remaining structure left over from an insane asylum that was supposedly once in the area. If this legend is true, tour guides say, it only makes sense that the building is home to the French Department today.

Jokes about the French and their mental state aside, this factoid is not just some historically questionable piece of Columbia lore — it is actually true. The contiguous plot of land that makes up the heart of Columbia's Morningside campus today, from 114th and 120th Streets between Broadway and Amsterdam, was in fact once home to the Bloomingdale Insane Asylum. A major institution operated by the powerful New York

Hospital, the asylum counted present-day Buell Hall among one of its few structures, in a vast, wooded terrain that spanned much of present-day Morningside Heights. The plot of land between Claremont Avenue and Broadway — now occupied by Barnard College's first-year quad — as well as the residential block across 116th Street (today, home to Shake Shack, FedEx, and some other Barnard dorms) were likewise both owned by the New York Hospital for most of the 19th Century.

However, as urban development crept further north into uptown Manhattan, many New Yorkers began to argue that the asylum should be replaced with higher-density buildings that would serve all people — not just the Bloomingdale Asylum's largely wealthy patients. While the New York Hospital did end up being forced to give away this plot of land, most of it went to an equally exclusionary institution: Columbia College. The transfer of land between these two elite institutions led to social and demographic consequences for the neighborhood that can be traced all the way through the following century to the present-day.

In this paper, I examine how Columbia College's purchase of the asylum and its move to its current campus at the turn of the 20th Century served to preserve the area's elite, white, Episcopalian character and keep out people of other ethno-racial or religious backgrounds, many of them middle- or working-class. Along with the parallel sale of what is now the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, the College's move uptown all but guaranteed that Blacks and immigrant Catholics and Jews — many of whom were moving in droves to other newly urbanized parts of upper Manhattan — would never be able to call this neighborhood home. Although the hospital explicitly took measures to restrict the use of its land for mostly upper-class housing, its other real estate decisions did just as much to determine the future of the former Bloomingdale Asylum. Indeed, the presence of a large educational institution like Columbia slowed booming real estate development and ensured that the neighborhood would maintain its exclusive and exclusionary character. As a result, then, I argue that land transactions taken on by the Hospital and by Columbia College set up stark divides between the College's campus and nearby neighborhoods like Harlem — then a budding community for middle-class

European immigrants, and later, the center of African-American cultural life in the United States.

## Early Bloomingdale

The Bloomingdale Insane Asylum was established in the early 1800s, when the surrounding terrain was a wooded, largely rural area. In response to limited space at a facility downtown, the Hospital's Board of Governors began looking for an isolated facility with fresh air and open space to house the patients it had deemed insane.[1] The board found its desired location in an area known as Bloomingdale, on some 21 acres that stretch from present-day 112th to 120th Streets. Equivalent to about 558 city lots, this plot was purchased from Thomas Buckley in 1818 for about \$10,500, using funds from the city government.[2] The Bloomingdale Insane Asylum officially opened its doors in 1821.

Like some other subdivisions of the New York Hospital, patients at the asylum came almost exclusively from the city's white Protestant upper class. The Bloomingdale facility was sparsely populated, normally housing about 250 patients at once. In comparison, Blackwell's Island Asylum, located on present-day Roosevelt Island, had an average of 1700 patients.[3] Bloomingdale patients were charged anywhere from 10 to 40 dollars a week — as much as \$1000 in today's dollars — a restrictive sum of money that meant only the wealthiest of the mentally insane would be able to afford a stay.[4] Initially, the New York Hospital's charter had set out a section that would allow "indigent" patients — in other words, those who are needy or poor — to receive treatment for mental illness in the hospital free of charge.[5] But in reality, the asylum seemed to be doing little to serve the city's neediest populations. A New York State Senate report found that between 1883 and 1888, only about 20 of the asylum's 250 patients, on average, were considered "indigent." [6] Likewise, nearly all of those listed on 1880 census records as "inmates" in the asylum are listed as having attended school — a sign of privilege and elite status — with birthplaces mostly consisting of various U.S. states as well as Scotland, England and Germany.[7] Few New Yorkers were

served by the asylum to begin with, and even fewer of those who were served came from the city's middle- and working-class sectors.

During the asylum's early years, most of northern Manhattan was undeveloped and cut off both politically and geographically from the bustling urban life present on the southern part of the island. Bloomingdale was managed as its own independent township, and a single pathway, Bloomingdale Road, was its only connection south to the City of New York. Maps of the area from this time show largely empty lots surrounding the asylum itself, with most structures on the map colored yellow to signify wood — rather than brick — construction.[8] Indeed, in the years since its initial purchase, the New York Hospital had bought up additional tracts of land in Bloomingdale surrounding the asylum. Of its 558 lots, only about 372 were located on the asylum proper, which was north of 114th Street between Tenth and Boulevard. The rest of the plots were located outside of this contiguous plot of land, with approximately 183 of them functioning as a vegetable garden for the asylum and for external sales to other buyers. And the area directly south of the asylum was not much more developed, occupied by the Leake and Watts Orphan asylum, as well as a farm belonging to a man named Joseph Schmidt.[9] As a result, then, it is unsurprising that one former state assemblyman described "the district around 116th Street and Morningside and Riverside Avenues [as] a howling wilderness."[10] Even as late as the mid-1870s, only two other houses were located between Tenth Avenue (now Amsterdam) and Boulevard (now Broadway) in the asylum's vicinity.[11]

By later in the century, however, uptown Manhattan had seen a rapid increase in urbanization that made it a much more attractive location for land developers and potential residents alike. In 1860, a paved Boulevard replaced Bloomingdale Road, and between 1878 and 1880, elevated railroads opened on Second, Third, and Ninth Avenues as far north as 129th Street, increasing land values on both the East and West sides of Manhattan.[12] As a result of this increased transportation and urbanization, then, developers were eager to build housing for both the poor and the wealthy in these previously less accessible areas. The construction of nearby parks helped spur development, too. In 1858, the city government bought land as far north as 110th Street

to build Central Park, bringing up land values on the park's eastern and western edges.[13] Riverside and Morningside Parks would follow not long after, beginning construction in 1868 and 1877, respectively, the latter's construction a way to avoid stretching the Manhattan grid across difficult terrain. Given this rapid urbanization, it was only natural that wooded, peaceful Bloomingdale became a prime target for development.

## The Campaign for a New Bloomingdale

In the late 1880s, politicians, land developers, newspapers, and plenty of other interested parties began a campaign against the New York Hospital to try and seize control of the asylum's land. While the hospital's board of governors had begun searching for a new, more isolated home for the facility as early as 1866, the asylum was still occupying the Bloomingdale facility over two decades later, likely because of an economic downturn in the 1870s. Land developers and land owners with parcels in the area grew fed up with the Hospital's stalling, wanting to take advantage of this increasingly valuable real estate for themselves or their constituents. Under the auspices of supporting housing for the city's working class, members of the Democratic Party — backed by the Tammany Hall machine — maneuvered to force the asylum further north: City councilors and state assemblymen drafted bills and newspapers wrote editorials, picking up support along the way from the Democrat mayor, Abram Hewitt.

Many of these critics argued that the asylum's increasingly desirable location, between the Hudson River and the top of a crest overlooking the east side of Manhattan, was being underutilized. "This beautiful and picturesque neighborhood, near two parks, is like a beautiful waste," one newspaper declared.[14] "The locality is one of the most important on the island, but this institution impedes its improvement," the editorial added, calling on the New York Hospital to move the asylum to some of its empty real estate in White Plains.[15] Following increased development in northern Manhattan, critics noted that the price of each of the asylum's 558 lots was already high and would only keep increasing. Estimates put the value of each lot between \$4000 to \$12,000,

and the land value of the Bloomingdale asylum property as a whole at \$1.6 million — making it the New York Hospital's second most-valuable asset, and a stark jump from the \$10,500 price tag for which the hospital bought the area.[16] Given the valuable location of the asylum, one Democratic state assemblyman even called its presence “a black eye and a juggernaut to the City of New York” — especially the city's northward development.[17]

Another one of the major arguments in favor of relocation claimed that the asylum was an exclusive, elitist institution that used up city money but did little to support the broader community. The New York Hospital received about \$220,000 annually in city funds specifically for the asylum, but it paid no taxes because it was considered a charitable enterprise.[18] “Is not this a most extravagant, unnecessary luxury, for the rich against the desires of the community, and at the expense of the taxpayers?” asked a New York State Senate report on the asylum.[19] Similarly, a *New York Herald* editorial railed against the tax exemption: “The Bloomingdale Asylum has ceased to be a charitable institution and ought, therefore, no longer have the benefit of the [tax] Exemption.”[20] Furthermore, the *Herald* argued that the small number of people served by the asylum — about 250 at once — was not substantial enough to keep receiving funding from the city government. “It receives no patients from the city, and thus the city should derive no benefit from it.”[21] The New York Hospital, which had been chartered to serve as a public institution, was anything but public, its critics claimed.

Behind these arguments, however, were a simmering political fight between the city's two parties. Rather conveniently, the targets of the campaign to move the asylum — the Hospital's board of governors — largely consisted of New York elites with close ties to the state's Republican Party. Democratic lawmakers' arguments about “the hollow pretensions of a so-called charitably asylum” for the “opulent insane” were just as much an attack on their rivals in the statehouse and City Hall as they were a criticism of the asylum itself.[22] In response, Republicans tried to argue that they were battling against greedy developers — many of them connected to the Democrats — who wanted to make a profit from the influx of people into the area. (Notably, one of the most ardent supporters of the anti-asylum campaign was Assemblyman John Connelly, who

represented Morningside Heights in Albany and would have likely wanted more money and influence in his district.) But their argument was no match for the class-based argument put forth by the Democrats and land developers.

It was their argument — that the Hospital did not deserve its charitable status — that grew strongest. Democrats and other pro-development advocates pressured the state government to investigate the hospital's tax-exempt status. An investigation on this matter was carried out by the state assembly's Committee on Taxation, but the Hospital's board managed to use its political clout to sway the investigation in its favor. However, as Rosner writes, a simultaneous government probe — this one carried out by the State Assembly's Committee on Cities, also due to pressure from developers— ended up recommending that streets be opened across the asylum's terrain.[23] This report effectively sealed the deal on a new vision for Morningside Heights, as the Hospital's board was left with few political cards to play and instead turned towards trying to gain tax-exempt status on its new upstate property. Indeed, the nail in the coffin came on March 29, 1889, when a bill by Assemblyman Connelly was passed, forcing the opening of 116th Street between Broadway and Amsterdam (or what we think of nowadays as College Walk) three years later.[24]

As Rosner argues, “the hospital's quest to control the use of the land on the West Side was doomed as long as its only alternative to urban development was maintaining the status quo.”[25] Faced against increasingly valuable land and increasingly strong opposition, it was inevitable that the asylum would have to move. But even as the Board gave up the Bloomingdale facility, it did not quite give up on its efforts to control the future of Morningside Heights.

## Selling the Asylum Land

Even after the political battle over the Bloomingdale facility, the New York Hospital's board tried to exert an influence over the changing character of the neighborhood. As it prepared to move upstate, the board was careful to maintain control over the actual plot of land on which the asylum stood, between 114th and 120th Streets. After battling real

estate developers for so long, the Hospital would have much rather strategically kept this tract of land in one piece—rather than dividing into smaller residential units, which would have been most welcome to speculators.[26] The Hospital instead focused first on selling off the scattered parcels it owned directly south of this territory, creating a covenant that restricted the type of commercial and residential activity that went on in these parcels.[27] A document signed by Hospital representatives and the land buyers declared that for the 20 years following the sale of these Hospital's southern plots, this land could not be used to operate:

[a] railroad depot or car house, smith shop, carpenter shop, livery stable, foundry or manufactory of any kind, bone boiling establishment, nor any establishment for the tanning, dressing, or preparing of skins, hides, or leather, nor any brewery or distillery nor establishment for refining or storing oil or petroleum, nor any other noxious, dangerous or offensive trade, occupation or business, nor any houses commonly known as tenement houses.[28]

In other words, the agreement banned most industries that commonly employed immigrant workers and Blacks at the time, limiting employment opportunities for these middle- and working-class New Yorkers to come to the neighborhood.

The same was true for the housing permitted by the agreement. Apartment buildings could only be constructed when each floor housed only one family and 100 feet from the avenues, effectively banning tenements from the area.[29] Most notably, this document prescribed that any housing built on cross streets "shall only be first class private dwelling houses of brick, or stone, with roofs of slate, tin or other metal or any fire proof material, and not less than 4 stories in height, and designed for the occupancy of a single family each." [30] Effectively, then, the only kind of construction that could be built upon the asylum's southern edge was sturdy, brick housing for the city's upper class. Legal documents indicate that many of the earliest purchases of this land came from lawyers who represented private developers. One set of parcels was sold to the Atlas Improvement Corporation, while another was sold to a man named Benjamin Beekman and Joseph Valentine, who represented the Bowery National Bank and German-American Title Company, respectively.[31]



## Columbia College Makes an Offer

In the midst of these land sales and slow legal procedures, however, one much larger offer was presented to the New York Hospital: On November 18, 1891, Columbia College President Seth Low wrote a letter to H.H. Cammann, the secretary of the hospital's Real Estate Committee, expressing an interest in purchasing the asylum's main contiguous plot of land, from 116th to 120th Streets between Broadway and Amsterdam.[32] (Boulevard and Tenth Avenue had been renamed in 1880.) Low and Wm. Schermerhorn, one of Columbia's trustees, had been appointed to a committee by the College's trustees to explore possible new locations for Columbia, which was housed in a series of buildings on East 49th Street that were proving to be too small for its growing operations and student body. In his appeal, Low made it clear he was only expressing interest—rather than making an offer—but nonetheless suggested that selling the land to his College, rather than to private developers, would leave a very different legacy behind in Morningside Heights.[33] “I hope that the Board of Governors, in considering this question,” Low writes, “will not forget the public character of Columbia College, and its usefulness to the City of New York and to the whole country.”[34] Low's letter also emphasized the connection between the two institutions as powerful parts of the city's Protestant elite, writing that “in this spirit alone is it possible for anything to be done between us.”[35] Both Columbia and the Hospital maintained strong connections with the Episcopal Church in particular; the leadership of the Episcopal Diocese was dominated by Columbia graduates, and the leadership of both Columbia College and the Hospital was dominated by Episcopalians.[36] Within less than a month, on December 2nd, the Hospital's board made an offer to sell Columbia the plot of land between Broadway and Amsterdam, from 116th to 120th Streets, for \$2 million.[37]

While there is little tangible evidence that Low's connections to the New York City elite played a role in his ability to purchase the Bloomingdale Asylum so quickly, it would be hard to ignore his status given the rapid transaction that took place. Prior to becoming president, he served as the Republican mayor of Brooklyn — then an independent city — from 1881 to 1885, and would go on to serve a two-year term as mayor of New York

City (now including Brooklyn as well as Manhattan) in 1902, under a reform platform that challenged the Tammany Hall machine.[38] There is also an undeniable connection between the New York Hospital and Columbia College as two of the city's oldest and most elite institutions. The hospital's 1771 charter set out that the president of King's College would be one of about 75 people elected as a member of the Society of the New York Hospital to oversee the hospital's finances. (This is a separate entity from the Board of Governors, which managed the hospital's day-to-day operations.) While there is no clear evidence suggesting that Low or his immediate predecessor, Fredrick A.P. Barnard, served on the board, at least two board members — Stuyvesant Fish and Edwin Gould — were graduates of Columbia College and helped the school secretly buy two city blocks in 1902. The former of the two was also the son of Hamilton Fish, the longtime chair of Columbia's board of trustees.[39]

As it seems, Columbia's noble "public character" and the connections between Low and the College were enough for the Hospital's board to sell the facility without receiving a full payment. Columbia College itself was far from wealthy enough to be able to afford such a large and desirable plot of land. Low even confessed as much in his letter to Cammann: "It remains to be determined, after the details have been argued between us, whether Columbia can justly afford so large a sum for this property," he writes.[40] In the letter, Low also requested that the Hospital's board "fix as distant a date as possible at which Columbia would be expected to take possession" if the College did in fact end up making a purchase.[41] Likewise, reports from the Committee on Site of the College's Board of Trustees note that the price for the entire contiguous plot of land for sale — from 116th to 120th Streets between Tenth Avenue and the Boulevard — as well as the costs of making the site suitable for the college's daily operations would be too expensive and untenable for the College to purchase immediately given its finances at the time. "If Columbia is to secure this site, and is to proceed without interruption in her development as a university, she must have material support," the report said.[42]

This financial need in fact inspired several prominent men affiliated with Columbia to donate their respective fortunes in order to help the College grow. Wealthy and influential figures associated with Columbia, such as J.P. Morgan and Cornelius

Vanderbilt, began donating money in order to help the College raise the funds to purchase the asylum. Nearly one-quarter of the site's \$2 million price tag was financed through eighteen donations to Columbia College, all solicited in 1892.[43] Subsequent donations also served to finance early construction on the new facility: Low used \$1 million of his father's estate to erect the new campus's first commissioned building, with similar gifts following from Board Chair Williams Schermerhorn, Samuel P. Avery, William E. Dodge and Adolph Lewisohn.[44]

The most official version of Columbia's history has painted the creation of this philanthropic culture as the most prominent legacy of the College's purchase of the Bloomingdale facility. In *Stand, Columbia*, Robert McCaughey's official history of the University's first 250 years, he largely focuses on how the move uptown led to the first philanthropic donations to the College.[45] As he writes, what the hefty donations from Low and Schermerhorn "put into local practice was the since-tested fund-raising truism that those who do the asking should already have done some of the heavy giving." [46] Notably, the Board's Committee on Site had also written about Columbia's likely impact on the neighborhood as a way to appeal to alumni for funds. "If Columbia should be enabled to develop the property to its full possibilities, the locality would become a part of the City which every stranger would want to visit, and every citizen would be proud," they wrote.[47] However, these arguments about intentionally shaping the character of Morningside Heights are largely absent from McCaughey's account of rising philanthropy to the College. Thus, it is this legacy—of how Columbia shaped the neighborhood—that is worth a closer analysis.

## Columbia's Purchase as a Restriction on Neighborhood Development

Developers' and politicians' arguments in favor of forcing the asylum out of Morningside Heights all boiled down to the idea that it was an exclusive, elitist institution that drained plenty of the city's funds and increasingly limited land while only serving a privileged few. But the Bloomingdale facility was replaced by Columbia College — an exclusive, elite institution in its own right. As Rosner argues, it was the social legitimacy of a

college compared to that of the asylum that protected Columbia's move from the same kind of public criticism.[48] Although this new arrival to the neighborhood was equally, if not more exclusive, the fact that the college was serving future leaders and seeking to make an impact was seen as a noble and useful purpose — one that was worth giving up previous desires to use the former asylum land for private housing developments. In theory, the social legitimacy of Columbia College was enough to quiet many of the key critiques of the asylum's impact on urban development in the neighborhood. But in practice, many of these problems — a lack of access to mass transit, the under-development of land with the potential for higher-density development, the preservation of a highly privileged population — persisted because of the College's arrival.

Columbia's unobstructed presence in Morningside Heights continued to impede development and transportation in the newly urbanized neighborhood. Although streets had been assigned to the area under the Commissioner's Plan of 1811, which developed the New York street grid well before the asylum was opened, laws passed later in the century halted the construction of some of these streets in order to make room for the asylum.[49] While the Bloomingdale Asylum was in operation, no cross-streets ran from Bloomingdale (later known as Broadway) to Tenth Avenue (later known as Amsterdam Avenue) between 114th and 120th Streets. When Columbia moved into the neighborhood, the same remained true between 116th and 120th Streets, blocking access from the westernmost part of the neighborhood to the elevated railroad stop on Ninth Avenue (today known as Morningside Avenue) and depressing land values in the area.[50]

As a matter of fact, the issue of railroad access had been the subject of contentious debates between newspapers, developers and the city government before it became predetermined that Columbia College was to move to the neighborhood. During the campaign to move the Bloomingdale Asylum further north, real estate firms testified at a State Assembly hearing that the asylum impeded land values and development in the westernmost part of the neighborhood.[51] Other arguments focused on the obstacles this continuous parcel would create for transportation and accessibility: One Democratic assemblyman complained that the asylum's presence meant that residents "are obliged

to make wide detours in order to get across” to the elevated railroad or to visit Grant’s Tomb and Riverside Park, which had both been opened recently.[52] This latter issue was pressing enough that it was brought up even after the removal of the Bloomingdale asylum had been guaranteed. George Washington Plunckett, a state senator with close ties to the Tammany machine — someone, who, by all accounts, should have cared only about removing the asylum to win a battle against the Republicans — drafted a bill to open up 119th Street once Columbia had already committed to buying the facility.[53]

From an urban planning perspective, then, it’s also easy to see how Columbia College’s presence in the neighborhood would extend the same kinds of issues beyond the asylum’s departure. While it is unclear if entrances to campus was gated off then, or if unaffiliated pedestrians would be able to cut across, it would be impossible for carriages (and, later, other vehicles) to travel across the campus. The presence of an asylum was a major obstruction to those who wanted or needed easy access to the Ninth Avenue El to the far west part of Morningside; an education institution like Columbia, however, seemed to many a fine reason to need to travel around campus a few blocks in order to reach the El. More to the point, perhaps, the presence of an educational institution taking up four whole city blocks meant that those blocks could not be used for some other higher-density use, including all kinds of housing. “[I]ts prison-like enclosure is a bar to the development” of the neighborhood, *The New York Sun* wrote in an editorial.[54] Because of Columbia’s presence, Morningside Heights would not reach the type of urban development that Democrat politicians had advocated for in the early 1890s.

## Columbia’s Purchase as a Restriction on Population Diversity

In a similar fashion, the transfer of land from the New York Hospital to Columbia College ensured that nearby growing populations of white ethnics and African-Americans would not be able into the neighborhood. Real estate trends in the late 1800s suggested that Morningside Heights could have housed the kinds of working-class people who had moved into East Harlem’s flourishing Little Italy, or to the predominantly Black and Irish neighborhoods further south on the West Side. But because the College’s student body

was largely elite and Anglo-Saxon, the neighborhood remained just as diverse in population as it has been while the Bloomingdale Insane Asylum was operating in its place. The few minority residents of the area—whether Irish, African-Americans or Jews—were either lowly staff and servants or students passing through a largely white, Protestant, upper-class neighborhood during their studies.[55]

To the south and to the east of Morningside Heights, middle- and working-class neighborhoods rapidly urbanized in the late 1800s, becoming home to New York's ethnic and racial minorities. On the far East Side, the construction of elevated railroads on Second and Third Avenue led to a boom in tenement housing for thousands of newly arrived immigrants. By 1890, East Harlem was known as Manhattan's first Little Italy, with Jewish, German and Irish communities also establishing themselves in the area and as many as 85 percent of the population being foreign-born.[56] The Irish community in particular spilled across upper Manhattan to reach Morningside Park: Census records from 1880 show that the tract of land between 108th and 123rd Streets and west of Eighth Avenue — which included the entire asylum facility — was almost entirely inhabited by Irish immigrants along Eighth and Ninth Avenues (now Morningside Avenue and Fredrick Douglass Boulevard).[57] Likewise, lower parts of the West Side had emerged as a working-class Irish neighborhood named San Juan Hill, filled with breweries and slaughterhouses where many of its residents were employed. The area was one of Manhattan's most dense districts with 10,000 people crammed into an 80-acre area between 57th and 64th Streets and west of Tenth Avenue.[58] The poverty of both of these neighborhoods can be illustrated by their frequent outbreaks of disease and high death rates, which could get to be as much as 40 per 1000 people—well over the city's 1890 average of about 25 per 1000 people.[59]

Morningside Heights, with little development in comparison, had an uncertain demographic future in the 1880s. The neighborhood at the time was largely empty, thanks in no small part to the asylum, and different changes in housing and population meant that—if the Hospital did in fact relocate the asylum—the area was largely up for grabs. On one hand, the construction of Riverside and Central Park brought mansions and upper-class apartment buildings like the Dakota (which opened in 1880) along their

flanks.[60] As a result, some thought that the rest of the Upper West Side would follow suit. On the other hand, developers suspected that Morningside Heights could also grow into an economically diverse neighborhood or become the next East Harlem or San Juan Hill, connected to the rest of the city by the recently-opened stops on the Ninth Avenue El. In *Manhattan Moves Uptown*, the architectural historian Charles Lockwood writes that some believed that Ninth and Tenth Avenues could be filled with tenement-dwelling Irish and Black communities, “like the blocks south of West Fifty-Ninth Street.”[61]

With developers eagerly eyeing the area, working-class immigrants pouring in nearby and the campaign mounting for the asylum to relocate, the New York Hospital’s elite and mostly Episcopalian board could probably sense that the neighborhood’s demographics were on the verge of change. For example, many of the developers who had testified to the state government about land values in Morningside Heights came from the real estate firm of Lespinasse and Friedman, and the brokerage house of Scott and Meyers, which were both Jewish-owned businesses.[62] Likewise, some nearby businesses in the neighborhood provided examples for what might come with a more industrial, working-class character. For instance, the farm southwest of the Bloomingdale Asylum had become The Lion Brewery (complete with horse stables, a granary, a dyeing plant and a very rowdy hotel that often ended up in the newspapers), while an infamous saloon was up and running on 125th Street and St. Nicholas Avenue.[63] Judging by the *New York Times*’ reports of a knife fight and the arrest of a notorious criminal, this saloon far from the type of establishment the New York Hospital’s board hoped to see expand in the area.[64]

Although the Hospital had been forced to move the Bloomingdale Asylum further upstate, it still had the power to avoid this fate in how it sold the facility. Shutting out certain populations — namely, anyone who was not a white, wealthy Protestant — was a way to control the future of the neighborhood and avoid more poverty, more rowdy drinking establishments, and more population diversity — even if the asylum would no longer be standing. As Rosner writes, “By keeping the immigrant population from settling in certain areas of the city... the merchant and banking families in control of the

boardrooms of charitable institutions might stop or at least stall the demise of the social order to which they were accustomed.”[65] In selling the asylum to Columbia, they arguably did.

As previous researchers have found, Columbia at the turn of the century was no more inclusive in letting New York’s diverse population inside its gates than the Bloomingdale Asylum. At the turn of the century, students at the College were entirely male and overwhelmingly white and Protestant.[66] Census records from the its early years in the neighborhood list several dozen men as “student[s] of College,” and all of them are classified as white, with both they and their parents having been born in either the U.S., England or Germany.[67] There is scant historical record of students who differed from this norm.[68] In *Stand, Columbia*, McCaughey explains that Jewish students were systematically excluded from Columbia in the early 20th Century; racial minorities have no such trace in the written record.[69] If there were any Black students enrolled in the University in the very beginning of the 20th Century, they would have likely been passing as some other race.

Following Columbia’s move to the neighborhood, Morningside Heights contained little more diversity than the University at its center. Structurally, residential parts of the neighborhood were filled mostly with single-family brownstones, with some taller apartment buildings closer to 110th Street.[70] Families living immediately next to campus were classified on the 1900 and 1910 censuses as mostly American, English, German or Scottish, with Anglo-Saxon last names like Winthrop, Chatefield, and Baker. There was a significant Irish population in the area, but most of them were live-in servants or janitors in these brownstones. (The apartments on 110th Street are a notable exception, having been rented by a few Irish, Italian and Swedish families.) The few African Americans living in Morningside Heights were mostly employed as household servants and cooks or butlers, respectively, in single-family brownstones that had been converted into rooming houses; the same is true for the even smaller number of Asian residents, who worked as butlers or cooks.[71] Two Black servants, Lotty Jemkins and Martha Colburn, both lived and worked in a building on 113th Street now occupied by the Law School; another, Betty Winston, was at a brownstone on 114th



Street whose address is today used by an undergraduate dorm known as “Potluck House.”[72] The only exception to this pattern seems to be the Websters, a Black family of three from Tennessee who rented in the same building where Winston lived and worked.

## Preservation of “Neighborhood Character”

The comparative demographics and developments before and after Columbia’s arrival in Morningside Heights make it clear that the College’s arrival helped to preserve the neighborhood’s elite, low-density character. But media coverage of the land purchase suggests that this outcome was largely intentional, as understood by the boards of the College and the Hospital as well as by the press. These reports strongly suggest that governors on the Hospital’s board sold such a large parcel to Columbia to protect the neighborhood from becoming a densely populated, working-class area filled with immigrant Catholics, Jews and Blacks.

In a packet of newspaper articles compiled and sent to college alumni, the news media describes that Columbia’s move as a decisive moment that would go onto shape the neighborhood’s character. An editorial in *The New York Times* praised the move to Morningside Heights, calling it beneficial to the northward development of the city as well as the growth of Columbia. Together with other neighborhood institutions like the Cathedral, the College “would anchor the buildings of which the purpose is to promote a higher life” in an area “which is destined to become... the most distinguished in New York.”[73] Furthermore, the specific topography of the neighborhood meant that it would be more difficult for nearby urbanization to end up meeting these elite institutions. “The crest of the hill at the west of the Harlem flats has been kept comparatively unoccupied, while new rows of serried buildings have been advancing farther and farther over the flats themselves,” the paper wrote, describing the cramped tenement housing for immigrants that were rapidly being built across Manhattan in East Harlem. “The precipitous bluff that has been converted into Morningside Park is a safeguard for whatever stands on the plateau behind it.”[74] Here, the contrast between phrases such as “higher life” and “ordinary uses” make the *Times’* perspective on the matter clear:

Columbia's move uptown will keep the neighborhood from becoming an immigrant, potentially more middle- or working-class area like nearby East Harlem or San Juan Hill.

In addition, many articles also pointed out that Columbia's status as an educational institution gave it a kind of social legitimacy that the Bloomingdale Asylum lacked. While newspapers had complained of how the asylum used up valuable space and city resources, they presented an entirely different attitude towards Columbia. "Every citizen of New York... should feel an interest in this honored and honoring seat of learning," the *New York Tribune* wrote in an editorial. "No citizen could more wisely contribute to... the best welfare of the community than by aiding Columbia" in securing its new campus.[75] The asylum was not worthy of being kept in Manhattan proper, but multiple newspaper editorials argued that it was essential to maintain the College within the city's bounds so that it could contribute to the city's intellectual, business and cultural life. As Rosner argues, this social legitimacy helped maintain "the long-term hegemony of the elite" over this Morningside Heights.[76] The College was just as elite as the asylum, but its comparative exclusivity did not seem to matter to popular opinion. Unlike the Bloomingdale facility, Columbia was worthy of occupying space in Morningside Heights — and thus, impeding the neighborhood's possible development — because of the "intellect, art, science and learning [it would] tend more and more to New York," as another editorial put it.[77] Thus, in effect, Columbia was able to accomplish what the Hospital had failed to do: shut out working-class immigrants and racial minorities — and the densely packed tenements, industry, and poverty that would come to the area along with them.

Other real estate transactions in the area served to propagate the neighborhood's status as one that served a mostly white, elite, upper class residential population. In 1891, the 12-acre Leake & Watts orphanage — located directly to the south of the Bloomingdale asylum — was sold to the Episcopal Diocese of New York in order to build the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.[78] Around the same time, increasing calls emerged to convert President Ulysses S. Grant's tomb — on 122nd Street and Riverside Drive — into a national monument.[79] Teachers' College, St. Luke's Hospital, and Barnard College would follow Columbia into the neighborhood in the three years

following its purchase. Whether or not these closely-timed arrivals were coincidental or intentional is contested: In Andrew Dolkart's architectural history of Morningside Heights, he argues that all five institutions ended up in the area due to market forces; indeed, Columbia had not begun searching for a new campus until after the Episcopalian Diocese's purchase.[80] But it is nonetheless striking that so many Protestant—and specifically, Episcopalian—institutions would end up moving to an area that had been dominated by the New York Hospital, which had the same kind confessional leanings. The boards of the Hospital, Columbia, and the other institutions that followed it to the neighborhood came from the same elite, Protestant sector of the city's elite. Besides sharing families, clubs, and business connections, they were also all likely opposed to the Tammany Hall machine, and thus, the real estate developers that had tried to push the asylum out of the neighborhood.[81] As the *Times* wrote in an editorial, “the college and the Cathedral together will attract to their neighborhood... a community of quiet and scholarly people” and would be “protect[ed] from needless and wanton invasion.”[82] It is most telling that John R. Pine — who orchestrated Columbia's move to Morningside Heights — cautioned the school's board not to draw attention to the fact that their Episcopalian school would be moving to the neighborhood together with an Episcopalian cathedral.[83]

## Conclusion

Columbia's initial move to the neighborhood was far from the only consequential real estate deal it would make in Morningside Heights. In 1902, the University purchased the lot south of its facility, extending the campus to 114th Street. The same year, Barnard—which was then housed in Milbank Hall—bought the Hospital's last undeveloped plot, extending the women's college new campus south to 116th Street. These purchases, combined with the arrival of Teacher's College, St. Luke's, and St. John the Divine, made it clear that Morningside Heights had a decidedly upper- and middle-class future. Most of the neighborhood's residential buildings—and ordinary residents, without any connection to the University—only arrived after 1904, when a subway station right at the campus' main gates at 116th Street and Broadway. By then, however, there was little

possibility and little space for immigrants or Blacks to develop a strong foothold in the area. Instead, many of these groups—particularly African Americans—turned to the areas north and west of Morningside Heights, where they would eventually develop thriving neighborhoods at the heart of Black life, culture and politics in the U.S.

It's no coincidence, then, that the exclusion facilitated by Columbia and the New York Hospital has consequences that persist today. Indeed, a clear line can be drawn between the University's move to Morningside Heights and the racial and spatial contrasts that define this part of Manhattan. Although Columbia moved to its current site several decades before most African Americans flocked to Harlem, its board—and that of the Hospital—ensured the move would happen in such a way that made the plateau west of Morningside Park overwhelmingly white, elite and Protestant. A covenant on land use and the preservation of a large, unobstructed tract of land kept industry and high-density housing from reaching the neighborhood; the sale of so much of this land to elite Protestant institutions meant that the buildings and organizations that did reach the neighborhood were ones that never served Blacks, immigrant ethnics, or the city's working class. By shutting out these groups, Columbia and the Hospital all but guaranteed that the demographics of Morningside Heights would be dramatically different from that of its surroundings. From "Gym Crow" in the 1960s to the Manhattanville expansion today, the tensions between town and gown in upper Manhattan is largely a product of whom the former asylum was sold to, and how.

## Endnotes

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- [8] G.W. Bromley, "Plate 26," *Atlas of the Entire City of New York*, 1879, New York Public Library Digital Collections; accessed May 5, 2018, <https://www.nypl.org/collections/nypl-recommendations/guides/fire-topo-property-maps>; G.W. Bromley, "Plate 35," *Atlas of the City of New York, Manhattan Island*, 1891, New York Public Library Digital Collections; accessed May 5, 2018, <https://www.nypl.org/collections/nypl-recommendations/guides/fire-topo-property-maps>.
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[23] Rosner, *A Once Charitable Enterprise*, 173-79.

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[25] Rosner, *A Once Charitable Enterprise*, 180.

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[27] Letter, William M. Powell to Henry C. Crane, June 14, 1889, box 19, folder 4: Law Committee Papers, 1889, New York Hospital Archives, New York Presbyterian/Weill Cornell Medical Center.

[28] "Declaration of the Society of New York Hospital Restricting Real Estate," March 19, 1889, box 19, folder 4: Law Committee Papers, 1889, New York Hospital Archives, New York Presbyterian/Weill Cornell Medical Center.

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[32] Letter, Columbia President Seth Low to H. H. Cammann, November 13, 1891, box 20, folder 6: Sundry Papers, 1891. New York Hospital Archives, New York Presbyterian/Weill Cornell Medical Center.

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[35] Ibid.

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(Columbia University and Slavery seminar paper, Columbia University, 2017).

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