

Our Historical Neighborhood – An Anecdotal History of New York City with Glimpses into the Past of Particular Relevance to 300 West 23rd Street

Our neighbor Joe Polacek offers us this look at our surroundings – part memoir and part historical discourse – to enhance our appreciation for our building and neighborhood.

Chapter One

Since we at 300 West 23rd Street live in the middle of an interesting and historic area, in addition to living in an interesting building, I thought I would do a mini-series to increase your enjoyment of this fascinating area we call home.

Lower Manhattan was first called New Amsterdam and a wall was built at its northern-most boundary to protect the settlers from the English and the Indians. Wall Street runs where that wall originally stood. For further protection and transportation, a canal was dug from east to west further uptown from the wall; when this was later filled in, it became Canal Street.

From its original site at Broadway and Murray Street, the new Columbia University was built a half-day's journey up Broadway, at 116th Street. Later, some enterprising builders built a luxury apartment house at Central Park West at 72nd Street. Because it was so far from downtown, people said you "might as well be living in the Dakotas." The name stuck, and that building is well known for both its architecture and for the individuals who live there.

Between lower Manhattan and Columbia University, many interesting areas developed, such as Greenwich Village, Chelsea, Murray Hill, etc. We will center our attention on Chelsea.

Clement Moore, the author of "The Night Before Christmas," lived downtown but had a farm in what's now our area. His farmhouse (and I believe where he wrote his famous story) stood on the southwest corner of 23rd Street and 9th Avenue. What really makes Moore so important to us is that when he died, he left the farm to St. Peter's Church on 20th Street, between 8th and 9th Avenues, with the stipulation that no building on that property will be built higher than the church steeple. Hence, those of us on the south and west sides of our building benefit from the (mostly) unobstructed view.

For those of you who have not had the pleasure of walking down the blocks surrounding the seminary, on 9th Avenue between 20th and 21st Streets, I recommend it. Go through the entrance on 9th Avenue and into the seminary courtyard. If you take a camera and photograph the gardens and the 19th century buildings, you could easily show the pictures to anyone and say you took them in England. Just beyond the west wall of the seminary, on 10th Avenue, was the Hudson River water line and the piers.

In days gone by, sailors whose ships docked at the 23rd Street pier would walk one block east to shop for provisions at the northeast corner of 24th Street and 10th Avenue. This supply store still exists as the Chelsea Commons restaurant. On a nice day, if you are sitting in the backyard of the restaurant, you can almost touch the wall of the "ice house." This small

structure served the landmark house next to it. I remember some years ago an ongoing battle between the owners of that house and city officials. The city claimed the ice house was an illegal structure, since it was not registered on maps of the area. The owners, realizing they had an historic edifice, fought the city and won, thus preserving a piece of history.

Our building was built at the same time the London Terrace apartments were constructed. The London Terrace complex of apartment buildings was the largest in the world at that time. The apartments were rented with very basic furniture and utensils. The furnishings allowed landlords to charge higher rents.

Our building opened with two months' free rent when you signed your lease. It was an elegant building for the area, with the opera house across the street, on the northwest corner. We had doormen and elevator operators 24 hours a day. The back lobby office spa was the original mail room. A staff member stood in the room, which had a dutch door, and handed tenants their mail on a silver tray. The attendant wore white gloves and a formal uniform. Later, residents collected their own mail in the same room in open pigeon holes.

The lobby was Spanish tile, with circular Spanish rugs and Spanish chairs and sofas scattered around. Table lamps stood on small side tables. Although the motif was Spanish, surprisingly there was a huge mural on the wall opposite the elevators. The mural was not colorful but rather an old-fashioned pen-and-ink drawing in sepia tones. It was an enlarged reprint of a cobblestone street, with circular mini-park and church in the background and passersby in the foreground.

Chapter Two

In the 1700's, before George Washington was sworn in as president, he engaged in a battle with the British General Howe in Brooklyn (Brooklyn Heights section) and was badly defeated. Fortunately, he was able to retreat with his troops across the East River to lower Manhattan, which of course was New York City.

General Howe decided to finish off Washington once and for all. He followed Washington across the river and headed north on the East Road (Boston Post Road, corresponding approximately to 3rd Avenue or Lexington Avenue.) Circumventing Turtle Bay and Kips Bay, he planned to go as far north as the Transverse Road (now 42nd Street) and cut off Washington from escape by land. Since Washington was blockaded by water, he would have to surrender.

Washington, sensing he must escape as soon as possible, organized his troops and headed at a quick pace along Broadway, which was on the east side but veered towards the west. Under various names, Broadway ran outside of New York City, and it was called longest road in America, ending in Albany.

Fortunately for the United States, and unfortunately for the British, a Mrs. Murray, whose house stood on a hill at approximately 37th Street and Park Avenue South, pretended to be a Tory, friendly to the British cause. She invited General Howe and all his troops to refreshments. She plied them with food and drink and delayed them long enough to allow Washington to pass the Transverse Road and escape north. In appreciation for the deed, we now call that part of the City Murray Hill, for Mrs. Murray.

By the time General Howe continued his chase, he was too late and Washington had escaped. Only a small skirmish – shooting from behind stone walls – took place at the site where the reservoir was later built, now the site of the New York Public Library at 5th Avenue and 42nd Street. Washington marched north at a fast pace and finally stopped to make camp high on the bluffs at 128th Street, known to this day known as Washington Heights.

I mentioned in Chapter One that London Terrace and our building were built during the same time period. Our building had the advantage of being a whole block from the 9th Avenue “El,” as the elevated trains were called. The station at 23rd Street and 9th Avenue made life a little unpleasant for residents of London Terrace, as the trains would screech to a halt and start up again, always noisier than just having trains pass by. Before the “Els” were electrified, many belched black smoke into open windows, which made living along the side of the “Els” even more unpleasant. To the east of our building were the 6th Avenue “El” and farther away the 3rd Avenue “El.”

For those living on the east side of our building, the 8th Avenue side, we can see a tall, slender black building raising at 25th Street and Madison Avenue. A beautiful old mansion which stood across the street from the original Madison Square Garden was demolished in order to build that black building. That mansion was the home in which Winston Churchill's mother was born.

Also, the rooftops seen out of the windows on the east side of the building were the actual locations of the earliest movie studios. Small room size studios were created, built on revolving dishes and put on the roofs to capture the sunlight needed for filming.

During the time from 1930 to 1950, many tenants of our building had housekeepers. I can remember making a delivery in 1949 (long before I was a resident), going through the basement and seeing about six maids washing clothes. The wall between the superintendent's office and the present laundry room did not exist. Instead, there was one big laundry room with many large tubs and many permanent ironing boards on the opposite wall.

In the laundry room, four inch thick pipes ran the length of the room along the wall then curved back to join another pipe lower down the wall and then snaked back and forth to perhaps four feet off the ground. The maids used these pipes, which were continually warmed by hot water, to hang layers of bed sheets, tablecloths, etc. This removed most wrinkles and dried the sheets at the same time.

Chapter Three

From our building at 300 West 23rd Street, many of us can see the Consolidated Edison building on 14th Street. At the turn of the century, 14th Street was the Great White Way of its time, well before the theater district of Broadway came to be known by that name. Most of the legitimate theaters were located there on 14th Street. The term “great white way” comes from the fact that this area was lighted by electricity while its neighboring communities such as Chelsea and Greenwich Village were still lighted by gas. In *Hello Dolly*, Jerry Herman has Dolly tell us, “I went away from the lights of 14th Street ...”

In the late 1800’s, there was a very famous singer and actress named Lillian Russell, who frequently dated or was seen with the famed “Diamond Jim” Brady (named for his huge fortune and huge appetite, frequently eating three to four dozen oysters as an appetizer!) One of their favorite restaurants was Luchows, a famous gathering place on 14th Street specializing in German food. This restaurant remained open until the early 1970’s. I was privileged to attend the closing gala!

Another favorite of Lillian Russell and Diamond Jim was Cavanaugh’s on West 23rd Street. It was a grand old restaurant, one that many of us enjoyed right up until the early 1970’s. The New Orleans-style wrought-iron exterior was demolished to make way for the current Cineplex!

After dinner at Cavanaugh’s, Lillian Russell simply had to cross the street to her brownstone.

300 West 23rd Street has had its share (and still does!) of noted persons. My own apartment, on the 14th floor, had only two previous tenants, one the gangster Joe “Socks” Lanza.

The first tenant, Socks Lanza, whose name came from the very bright socks he wore, was along with his “organization” responsible for the “fish market area.” His name appears in many items that speak of the Al Capone era and other mob history. In the movie *Luciano*, Socks Lanza is portrayed on the ship bidding farewell to Luciano on the occasion of his deportation.

An interesting story was told to me by several of 14th floor tenants, now deceased (by natural causes!), about how the FBI tried to catch Socks. For years the FBI tried to tap his telephones from the neighboring apartments, but access was never granted by the tenants. One lady in particular told me, “I couldn’t. Who he was was his business; but his wife and I were good friends.”

Finally, the FBI was able to tap the telephone by posing as repair men and accessing it through the basement. This evidence and much else helped to convict Socks and send him to jail. During his time in jail his wife remained in the apartment alone.

Eventually, Socks was paroled with the stipulation that he had to remain in the apartment from 8 p.m. until 8 a.m. every day, no exceptions. Today, that does not seem too bad, but at that time it was rough, with no air conditioning, no T.V., no video, no fancy nightlife! After one year, the routine was getting to be too much for Socks. The authorities were aware of this, and I have been told they encouraged his breaking his parole. One night while being

entertained at Copacabana, he got very drunk and was photographed by one of the staff sitting under a conveniently placed clock that showed an hour much later than 8 p.m., and that was the end. He was sent to Sing Sing where he died from cancer. His wife stayed on for a short time then moved out.

Chapter Four

As New York grew, the boroughs beyond Manhattan were joined to the city. With each addition, the physical center of the city also continued to change. If you happen to be visiting the area of Prospect Park, in Brooklyn, you can visit one such former center of New York City and see a plaque imbedded in the ground. This is the “Central Park” of Brooklyn!

The Flatiron building is one of the very special buildings in our neighborhood. When it was completed, it was the “tallest building in the world.” This building gets its name from the fact that its footprint bears the shape of an old-fashioned flat iron.

There is another humorous story that relates to the Flatiron building. The strong winds from the Hudson River blow eastward and the slant of the building pushes the winds north. At the same time, the winds from the East River blow west along 23rd Street and then northward also. When the building was first built, young boys would sit in the park across the street and watch as the young girls passed, hoping for a glimpse of their ankles as the winds blew the girls’ long skirts in the air. This practice continued for a long time until the cops became informed of the problem and were ordered to chase away the young boys with the words: “Skid-doo,” hence “23 Skid-doo,” for 23rd Street, an expression some of the old-timers still use.

In the same area, the original Madison Square Garden stood at 25th Street and Madison Avenue. Although it was not a garden, its close proximity to Madison Square Park gave it the name of the Garden. It was originally built as a showplace for the horse shows of the wealthy elite of New York society. Basically, that was all it was, an arena with seats surrounding a ring where the high-society set could watch the horse shows and exhibitions.

It did have a world-class restaurant on the rooftop. At this very place, the famed architect Stanford White was shot and killed by Harry K. Thaw, the son of a very wealthy New York family. Harry had married the very beautiful model and cover girl Evelyn Nesbit.

It seems that Evelyn was also an object of Stanford White’s great desire. At one point, he lured Evelyn to an apartment on 26th Street between 7th and 8th Avenues where he plied her with drink and made her swing on a swing suspended from the high ceiling. When this story was later made into a movie, the title was *The Girl in the Red Velvet Swing*.

When Harry learned of this, he confronted White at the lovely open-air restaurant atop Madison Square Garden and shot him. Due to his money and influence, Thaw never went to jail but spent the rest of his life in an asylum as a result of his plea of insanity. Evelyn, his wife, lived until recently and served as a consultant for the movie. The murder scene also appears at the beginning of the movie *Ragtime*.

Later, Madison Square Garden was moved to 50th Street and 8th Avenue, across from what was at that time the famed Polyclinic Hospital where Rudolph Valentino died. At this new location, many celebrated events took place, including the wedding reception for Elizabeth Taylor and Mike Todd. Of course, now that spot is the location of yet another tall black office building. Today, Madison Square Garden is at 32nd and 8th Avenue, right out our windows!

Seeing New York as it is today, it is hard to think of it as a place filled with trees, brooks, and streams. But in fact that was early New York. It may surprise many of you to know that even under our building there is still a stream that flows uninterruptedly, as well as one in the lobby of No. 1 Fifth Avenue. Many names of present locations reflect the ponds and bays of days gone by. Such names as Turtle Bay and Kips Bay describe the topography of the original area.

Ice houses were also very important to early New York. One such ice house remains on 24th Street off 10th Avenue. The ice was hand cut upstate in New York's fresh water lakes, dragged to the Hudson River, and packed on barges in huge blocks. Straw separated the various blocks and prevented them from freezing together on the long journey down the river to the city. The ice was then put into specially made ice houses and used year round.

One large ice house was located near the slaughter houses, the present location of the United Nations. The ice was then broken into smaller quantities, sold to the icemen, and again sold by the icemen to the New Yorkers of those days not so long ago. My mother used to buy 5- or 10-cents worth of ice, depending on the time of year and the temperature. As kids, we loved picking up the chips of ice from the big blocks and sucking on them as our ice cream cones. During the Depression, we had no money for such luxuries as ice cream – ice had to suffice.

Chapter Five

Those of us who are lucky enough to live on a high floor in our building and have a view to the west can almost see the spot where the duel between Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr occurred.

Dueling was illegal in New York, so the two rowed across the Hudson, climbed to the summit of the palisades in what is now Weehawken, and dueled. Hamilton was wounded, brought back to New York City, where he died days later. Aaron Burr's barn still exists at 17 Barrow Street in the Village. In my teens, there was an Italian restaurant in it called 17 Barrow Street. It had red-checked tablecloths, wine bottles covered with wax from burning candles on each table, and they played classical music. It was inexpensive so always crowded. After it closed, a new charming restaurant was opened in its place called "One If By Land."

Those of us facing east can see the tops of many buildings on what was known for years as the Women's Mile, along 6th Avenue south of 23rd Street. We are fortunate to see a resurrection of this area and many fine old buildings that used to contain some great stores specializing in women's clothes, hats, etc. An interesting thing was the location of a very elegant house of prostitution on the south side of 23rd Street, a few buildings west of 6th Avenue. It is said that when the women forced their husbands to accompany them shopping, the husbands would find some excuse to leave them for awhile, making location for this "house" ideal.

Some early tenants of 300 West 23rd Street could remember the famous Proctors department store on the north side of 23rd Street between 6th and 7th Avenues. It had its name embedded in the sidewalk, in bold brass letters about 1½ feet tall at entrances on the east and west sides of the store.

Across 23rd Street between 8th and 9th Avenues, about where the Chelsea West movie theater currently sits was the original I. Miller Shoes store. The I Miller brand appealed to anyone in the theatre, especially dancers and wealthy women. Their store later moved to the corner of Broadway and 45th Street and is noted by four statues on the second floor.

Although the Chelsea area has had and has now many famous people living in it, the area never became as popular as Greenwich Village or Harlem. In 1800, anything above Canal Street was rural, with the exception of the small town of Harlem and another small town mid-island called Bloomingdales. Harlem, of course, was named after the Dutch town of Haarlem.

Just north of Chelsea was the notorious area called Hell's Kitchen, made famous by the movie *Dead End Kids*. The movie *West Side Story* was filmed in the area that was torn down to make way for Lincoln Center.

A short walk to the corner of 7th Avenue and 18th Street, there was a restaurant named Le Madri – where a sculpted horse's head protrudes near the roof toward 7th Avenue. Macy's once stabled their horses here during the time the furniture was delivered by horse and wagon.

Gone are the days of coal chutes and coal bins. Our building now burns oil, and the incinerator no longer burns our garbage. Things are a little cleaner, but years ago the garbage outside was restricted to a few barrels of cinders and bottles.

Air conditioning is a blessing in both making the rooms cool and keeping out the noise. How many of you remember living at 300 West 23rd Street in the old days, before A/C? If you had a friendly neighbor opposite you, you would open your inner door (our present door) and leave the screen door latched while your neighbor did the same, creating a breeze through both apartments. If you look closely, you may still see the holes in the doorframes of some apartments where the screen door was attached. However, years of painting has filled in most of these holes.

During the days when new tenants were lured into the building with one-or two-months' free rent, many people found it easy and financially necessary to move each time their lease ended. One old friend in the Bronx said that as a child she remembers moving about six or seven times.