

# Tours and Tales of New York

August 2015

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*While studying for my New York City Sightseeing Guide license and preparing tours (which I hope you'll take with me!), I learned many fascinating stories about New York. I've created this monthly newsletter to share some of these stories with you. The newsletter also lists my planned tour schedule for the month. If you'd like to take a tour that is not listed here, please contact me at [lewislaurie2rny@gmail.com](mailto:lewislaurie2rny@gmail.com).*

*Please share this newsletter with your friends. Forward it to them, or better yet, ask them to email me to be put on my mailing list and receive the newsletter directly.*

*Laurie Lewis*

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## Sleight of Height

New York has always prided itself on its tall buildings. In 1913, architect Cass Gilbert wowed the city with his 792-foot Woolworth Building, the tallest structure in the world. Dime-store king F. W. Woolworth flaunted his wealth not only by selecting the finest materials for his “Cathedral of Commerce” but by paying the entire bill in cash.

The Woolworth Building dominated the New York skyline for 17 years. Then challengers to the claim of tallest took aim not so much at the Woolworth Building as at each other.

In the late 1920s architects William Van Alen and H. Craig Severance each were undertaking projects intended to deprive the Woolworth Building of the title of tallest. The two architects had once been business partners, but now they were bitter rivals. Van Alen was working uptown on the Chrysler Building. Severance was erecting the Bank of the Manhattan Company at 40 Wall Street.

How fitting that the rivalry involved this bank! Its founder, Aaron Burr, is infamous for taking his rivalry to the extreme: a duel that cost Alexander Hamilton his life.

When Van Alen announced the intended height of his building, 925 feet, Severance reacted by making his two feet taller. The Bank of the Manhattan Company opened in April 1930 and was the undisputed tallest building in the world—for a few months.

The solid frame of a building is a perfect Trojan horse, a place to conceal the physical evidence of trickery. While Severance basked in the glory of creating the tallest building, construction



Chrysler Building  
(by supergreensbear)

crews secretly were assembling the familiar spire of the Chrysler Building inside that very structure. When the time came to top it off, the spire poked through the pointed roof and soared to a height of 1,048 feet. Chrysler was now the tallest building in the world.

This glory too was short-lived. Just as it had quickly replaced its downtown rival as the tallest, the Chrysler Building lost its title to the Empire State Building nearly as fast, in less than a year.

## The Empty State Building

Clearing of the Empire State Building site began just two months before the 1929 stock market crash, at a time when the Bank of the Manhattan Company and the Chrysler Building were nearing completion. The newest of the three skyscrapers was not just tall; it was huge, with more offices than the other two giants combined. Filling this much space during the Great Depression was a challenge. The massive structure was so vacant in its early years that it earned the nickname “The Empty State Building.” The observatory was a big hit, though, drawing a steady stream of tourists and New Yorkers who wanted to see the city from the highest man-made structure in the world.

The Chrysler building is an Art Deco masterpiece, an amazing work of art inside and out. Step into the lobby and you’ll see that the architect and the car manufacturer spared no expense: walls of veined red Moroccan marble, elevator doors of inlaid African woods in bold mosaics, the ceiling covered corner to corner by a mural paying homage to transportation and human endeavor. The tallest skyscraper in the world was testament that the automobile was king.

And what became of the Chrysler Building’s one-time rival, the Bank of the Manhattan Company? It still occupies 40 Wall Street. It still boasts of its height, with the website 40wallstreet.com noting that it is “the tallest office building in downtown New York City.” That seems like a rather modest proclamation considering the name now emblazoned above the main entrance: The Trump Building.

### And the Winner Is...

Valerie S, who correctly identified the four sites on or slightly off Fifth Avenue between 72<sup>nd</sup> and 92<sup>nd</sup> Streets associated with Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. They are: (1) the apartment building at 81<sup>st</sup> Street developed by her grandfather; (2) the building at 85<sup>th</sup> Street where she and her children lived after the death of the President; (3) the Reservoir in Central Park, which was renamed for her after her death; (4) the school at 91<sup>st</sup> Street that her daughter attended. As the first person to email me the correct answer, Valerie has earned a free tour. For this month’s question and your chance to win a free tour, see the last page of this newsletter.

# August Tours

*These are walking tours. Most tours cover one to two miles and last 2 hours or a little longer. Cost is \$15 per person. Please arrive 10 minutes before the start time listed below. If you don't know me, look for the bright patchwork bag I carry on tours. You don't need to preregister, but it would be nice to get an email ([lewislaurie2rny@gmail.com](mailto:lewislaurie2rny@gmail.com)) if you plan to attend. Tours are cancelled in severe weather; call or text 917-306-2868 if in doubt. Be sure to tell your friends about these tours.*

## Featured tour: Green Spaces & Great Places on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street

Not the glitz and glamour of the Theater District, but a different 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, from Sixth Avenue to the East River. See where Midtown workers seek relief from high-pressure jobs: glorious Bryant Park as well as little-known pocket parks. Enjoy stories about New York City landmarks, including the main library, Grand Central Terminal, and the Chrysler Building. Visit architectural treasures where greenery is as essential as masonry.



Bryant Park  
(by Jean-Christophe BENOIST)

**Take advantage of this quiet time, when many New Yorkers leave town or take staycations.**

**On the weekday tours, we'll be able to enter some buildings.**

### Meet:

On the Sixth Avenue (Avenue of the Americas) side of the Bank of America, on the north-west corner of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street

### When:

Fri, Aug 14 at 1 PM

Thur, Aug 20 at 1 PM

Sun, Aug 23 at 1 PM

## Central Park: Highlights of the Southern Half

Enjoy a vacation in the city. Escape to lush lawns, a rowboat-filled lake, and woodland trails in the popular southern half of Central Park.

**Meet** on Saturday, August 15, at 1 PM just outside the park on the northeast corner of 72<sup>nd</sup> Street and Central Park West.

# Mansions of Fifth Avenue

About 100 years ago, the cream of New York society began to move to Fifth Avenue north of 59<sup>th</sup> Street. They built magnificent mansions, many now museums and other cultural institutions. Before long, luxury apartment buildings — mansions in the sky — sprang up alongside the private homes. Hear stories about these great structures and the people who lived in them.

**Meet** at Fifth Avenue between 70<sup>th</sup> and 71<sup>st</sup> Streets on the Central Park side (across from the Frick). This tour takes place on Friday, August 28, at 3PM. (Note the later start time.)

AUGUST						
Sun	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat
					14 42 <sup>nd</sup> St 1:00	15 CP South 1:00
				20 42 <sup>nd</sup> St 1:00		
23 42 <sup>nd</sup> St 1:00					28 Mansions 3:00	

## Two Ways You Can Win a Free Tour!

### Question of the Month

The view of the East River and the UN from Tudor City is magnificent. Yet few windows in the apartment complex offer this view.

The first person who emails me two reasons (one is sort of a trick answer) wins a free tour, which can be taken any time within a year. The winner will be announced next month. If nobody comes up with the correct answer, the question may be used again.

(HINT: Take the Green Spaces & Great Places on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street tour, and you'll learn the answer.)

### Help Grow My Mail List

Do you know people who would like to receive this newsletter and take my tours? Please send me their email addresses (check with them first so I don't end up spamming), or have them email me and mention your name. When I have received four referrals from you of names not already on my list, you will receive a free tour, which can be taken any time within a year.

Send emails to [lewislaurie2rny@gmail.com](mailto:lewislaurie2rny@gmail.com)