

Tours and Tales of New York

An email newsletter of Take a Walk New York

April 2017

The recent closing of the famed Waldorf Astoria Hotel for a multi-year renovation called to mind how the hotel came to be. It's an only-in-New-York story, with the very wealthy exercising their clout through real estate. The story below is adapted from My New York Stories by Laurie Lewis, an ebook available exclusively from Amazon (https://www.amazon.com/New-York-Stories-Laurie-Lewis-ebook/dp/B01E18UDII/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1490370617&sr=8-1&keywords=my+new+york+stories).

Also in this issue of the newsletter, in addition to presenting our April tour schedule, we offer a glimpse into this year's Jane's Walk, to be held May 5-7. If you can't join us for a scheduled tour in April or a Jane's Walk in early May, consider a custom tour. Please contact us at takeawalknewyork@gmail.com to plan a custom tour that meets your needs, interests, and timetable.

Laurie Lewis, Alan Cohen, and Deborah Harley

The Family Feud That Led to a Great Hotel

By Laurie Lewis

In the late 1800s, John Jacob Astor III and his brother William Backhouse Astor owned neighboring mansions along Fifth Avenue in the East 30s. These were *the* Astors, grandsons of John Jacob Astor, who had made his fortune in the fur trade and real estate when the United States was young.

Both Astor grandsons married women with impressive lineages. William's wife, Caroline, never let anyone forget that she was a Schermerhorn, descendent of one of the most important families in New York's Dutch colonial days. The center of contemporary New York society, she hosted lavish parties and insisted on being called "Mrs. Astor," implying that no other lady deserved that name.



The original Waldorf Astoria Hotel on Fifth Avenue and 34th Street

When the Astor brothers died, William Waldorf Astor inherited his father John's house and lived there with his wife, who of course also was a Mrs. Astor. After a few skirmishes with his aunt over naming rights—would the real Mrs. Astor please stand up?—William exerted his muscle in a way that would have made his great-grandpa proud: through real estate. He razed his father's mansion and replaced it in 1893 with a hotel, which he named the Waldorf. The architect was Henry J. Hardenbergh, who was already famous for the Dakota Apartments; he later would create the Plaza Hotel.

Aunt Caroline, now a widow, was not pleased. The thirteen-story Waldorf Hotel towered over her home. To be sure, it was an elegant structure, inside and out, and it attracted a proper clientele. But now her once-exclusive street saw a steady stream of commercial traffic.

Before long, Caroline's son, John Jacob Astor IV, hired Hardenbergh to build another hotel on the land occupied by his father's mansion. The new Astoria Hotel, which blended seamlessly with the Waldorf but rose four stories taller, opened in 1897.

The New Astor Mansion

When Mrs. Astor and her son John vacated their home to make way for the Astoria Hotel, Richard Morris Hunt, perhaps the leading architect of the day, created a double mansion for them in a more fashionable Fifth Avenue neighborhood, at 65th Street. The elaborate French-style chateau was the social center of New York City's elite for many years. But it too eventually became victim of the wrecking ball. In 1929 a much larger structure took its place: Temple Emanu-El. The temple still stands on a site that the Astor family once called home.

Although meant to operate independently, the two hotels were joined by a corridor called Peacock Alley, which could be closed at either end. The cousins decided to bury the hatchet, permanently opening Peacock Alley and creating the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel.

By the late 1920s, this grand Victorian hotel seemed dated. The Waldorf-Astoria relocated to a taller, more modern structure on Park Avenue near 50th Street (that was the recently closed hotel). Eventually, the hyphen connecting the two names disappeared, as did any trace of the early hostilities.

On the site in the 30s along Fifth Avenue where the Astor family feud had played out rose an imposing skyscraper: the Empire State Building.

April Tours

Most Take a Walk New York tours cover 1 to 2 miles, last 2 to 2½ hours, and cost \$25 per person. Advance registration is required. To register and to learn the meeting place, email the guide (lewislaurie2nyc@gmail.com or alan.r.cohen@verizon.net). Please arrive a little before the start time. Tours are cancelled if nobody has registered or if the weather is extreme; if in doubt, call or text Laurie (917-306-2868) or Alan (917-363-4292).

Mansions of Fifth Avenue

Although the Astor mansions are no longer standing, other magnificent mansions built about a hundred years ago still grace Fifth Avenue on the Upper East Side. They are interspersed among luxury apartment buildings—mansions in the sky. Hear about these palatial homes and the people who lived in them—New York City’s own rich and famous.

Laurie is giving this tour on **Saturday, April 8, at 1 PM**. To reserve a place and to learn the meeting location, email her at lewislaurie2nyc@gmail.com.

Hidden Treasures of the Financial District

Walking through the canyons of Wall Street, you can easily miss gems hidden in plain sight, including relics of colonial times and park-like oases. Discover these secrets, and you’ll see why the Financial District has a lot more going for it than stock trades and megadeals.

This tour will take place on **Monday, April 17, at 1 PM**. To reserve a place on the tour and to learn the meeting location, email Laurie at lewislaurie2nyc@gmail.com.

Central Park: Marvels of the Northern Half

The northern end of Central Park features some of the city’s most surprising landscapes. Did you know there are woods, complete with a lovely (and newly restored) creek, in the middle of Manhattan? Have you ever visited New York’s own Secret Garden? These are just a few of the treats that await you as you take a walk through the lesser known part of Central Park.

Celebrate Earth Day with Laurie by taking a walk through the northern half of Central Park on **Saturday, April 22, at 1 PM**. To reserve a spot and to learn where to meet, please email her at lewislaurie2nyc@gmail.com.

Fort Tryon Park

Built on a high ridge with commanding views of the Hudson River and New Jersey Palisades, Fort Tryon Park features all-season gardens, lush lawns, and dramatic rock formations. The site also has a fascinating history dating way back before this area was the lovely park it is today. Take a walk to see what's blooming in late April.

Alan offers this tour, which is about 1½ hours long and ends at but does not include the Cloisters Museum, on **Saturday, April 29, at 11 AM**. The route includes inclines and stairs. To book the tour and to learn the meeting place, email Alan at alan.r.cohen@verizon.net.

A P R I L						
Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat
						8 Mansions 1 PM
	17 Financial District 1 PM					22 Central Park N 1 PM
						29 Ft Tryon 11 AM

Please contact the tour guide (alan.r.cohen@verizon.net or lewislaurie2rny@gmail.com) to reserve a space and to learn the starting location.

Coming May 5-7: Jane's Walk

Jane's Walk is a global event held annually the first weekend in May. The event is named for Jane Jacobs, a twentieth-century urban activist who spent much of her life in Greenwich Village. All Jane's Walks are free, and registration is not required. These outings are meant to be walking conversations rather than formal tours.

As in the past, we will be leading Jane's Walks this year. Here is our tentative schedule:

- Friday, May 5, at 10 AM—Fort Tryon, led by Alan Cohen
- Friday, May 5, at 1 PM and at 4:30 PM—The Big Public Square on 42nd Street, led by Laurie Lewis
- Sunday, May 7, at 2:30 PM—Parks of the East 90s, led by Laurie Lewis

For the latest information, please check our website (www.takeawalknewyork.com) or <http://janewalk.org/united-states/new-york-city-ny>. We hope you'll join us on a Jane's Walk!