

METROPOLITAN CHAPTER OF THE VICTORIAN SOCIETY IN AMERICA

Fall 2009

UPDATE ON THE SOHO-CAST IRON HISTORIC DISTRICT EXTENSION

We are happy to report exciting news! On June 23rd, the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission calendered the proposed SoHo-Cast Iron Historic District Extension. This is the first step in the designation process of an expanded historic district, composed of masonry and cast-iron-fronted commercial and residential buildings on the margins of the existing district. Designation of these unprotected buildings on the opposite side of the street from the existing historic district will preserve a complete grouping reflecting the distinctive character of SoHo. This proposed extension, initiated in 2005 by the Preservation Committee of the Metropolitan Chapter, has received the enthusiastic backing of neighborhood residents and property owners dedicated to the preservation of SoHo and its irreplaceable architectural legacy. Local groups, such as

Community Board 2, the SoHo Alliance and the Friends of SoHo, along with elected officials, particularly Council Member Alan Gerson, have come out in support of the extension.

Designated in 1973, the SoHo-Cast Iron Historic District preserved the world's largest concentration of Victorian full and partial cast iron-fronted façades in the world. Spurred by the work of the indefatigable Margot Gayle, a founder of the Victorian Society in America, the SoHo-Cast Iron Historic District is one of New York's great success stories. Since designation, the historic district has more than surpassed anyone's expectations for the transformation of an urban neighborhood from a former industrial landscape to one of New York City's most renowned artistic and shopping districts. As art galleries and fashionable retailers have opened in former warehouses, and sympathetic new construction has been inserted into formerly vacant lots, the oversight of the Landmarks Preservation Commission has been crucial to the continued success of the neighborhood.

However, it is those buildings on the opposite side of streets that are most at risk for inappropriate alterations and redevelopment. Like the buildings in the historic district, the masonry and cast-iron-fronted buildings in the proposed extension were built primarily in the post-Civil War period as functional store-and-loft and warehouse buildings. They share a commercial history unique to this New York City neighborhood. They are just as significant as those within the district. They are strikingly similar to the buildings within the historic district, reflecting the same quality, materials and styles. Many were designed by the same major late-nineteenth-century commercial architects. The current proposal from the Landmarks Preservation Commission extends the boundaries proposed by the Metropolitan Chapter from 75 structures to include a total of 109 buildings.

The Landmarks Commission needs to know that there is overwhelming support to protect the character and scale of the entire historic neighborhood by designating the SoHo-Cast Iron Historic District Extension. Please send a letter to the Commission and encourage your friends and neighbors to write letters. A sample letter can be found on our website, www.metrovsa.org/SoHo.htm. Letters should be sent to: Hon. Robert B. Tierney, Chair, New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, 1 Centre Street, 9th Floor North, New York, NY 10007

Be sure to mark your calendar for the public hearing scheduled for Tuesday, October 27 from 11:25 AM to 12:40 PM at the Landmarks Commission. We will need a large turnout to show support for designation of the proposed SoHo-Cast Iron Historic District Extension. (Subways, 4, 5, 6, Brooklyn Bridge/City Hall) ☉

~ Joyce Mendelsohn, Co-chair Preservation Committee

42ND ANNUAL BUSINESS MEETING, MAY 19, 2009

The 42nd annual business meeting of the Metropolitan Chapter of the Victorian Society in America was held at the Bohemian National Hall, 321 E. 73d Street, a landmarked building.

Following President Jeffery Sholeen's address, minutes of the April 2008 meeting were reviewed, Treasurer Ed Mohylowski reported on the chapter's finances, and Joyce Mendelsohn reported on the chapter's historic preservation work. Summer school scholarships were presented to **Frampton Tolbert** and **Jennie McCahey**. **Justin Ferate** received a scholarship to the London summer school. Tributes were delivered to notable figures in the field of preservation who died during the past year: **Margot Gayle**, **Regina Kellerman**, **Dorothy Miner**, and **Jan Hird Pokorny**. A Margot Gayle Fund

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134-40 Grand Street, a splendid building in the proposed Extension. Photo: Andrew Dolkart

THE ARTISTIC FURNITURE OF
CHARLES ROHLFS
BY JOSEPH CUNNINGHAM

~ book review by Brian Coleman ~

A revolution in design was sweeping the country in the early twentieth century. Labeled the Arts and Crafts movement, we most often associate it with a few prominent designers and architects - Gustav Stickley, Elbert Hubbard, the Greene and Greene brothers in California. But there were other important contributors who have been largely unrecognized until recently, including furniture designer Charles Rohlf's, (1853-1936) whose unique synthesis of Aesthetic, Arts and Crafts, Art Nouveau and proto-modernism resulted in highly innovative and idiosyncratic pieces. Exhibited and praised both in the United States and abroad when he was active in the early twentieth century, Rohlf's work today is being rediscovered and is now highly sought after by collectors and is represented in the decorative art collections of major museums across the country. Thus, it is quite timely that curator Joseph Cunningham has published the first book on Rohlf's after nearly a decade of research and careful scholarship, resulting in a fascinating and comprehensive work for both collector and scholar alike.

This is a handsome book, expertly and artistically designed and profusely illustrated with 321 striking color and 16 black and white photographs including clear illustrations of Rohlf's monogram and labels, important details for collectors. Cunningham was even able to locate Rohlf's great-granddaughter living in Colorado and was given full access to the well-preserved, extensive family records and archives and that is what makes this book groundbreaking - Rohlf's diaries, letters, records and especially family photographs, documenting how his furniture was originally intended and used within his creative and purposefully "artistic" life. The book is accompanied by a traveling museum exhibition which will be at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in October 2010. This book is a must for any library. (Yale University Press, 2008. \$65)

Newletter embellishments are taken from
The Artistic Furniture of Charles Rohlf's

MOHYLOWSKI JOINS BOARD OF NATIONAL VICTORIAN SOCIETY



Ed Mohylowski, treasurer of the Metropolitan Chapter, has joined the board of the national Victorian Society (VSA), bringing more than 30 years of experience in historic preservation and fundraising to the organization. Under a Fulbright-Hays scholarship, Mohylowski conducted research in Warsaw, Poland on the reconstruction of Warsaw's Old Town, in 1978-1979. He subsequently earned an M.S. in Historic Preservation from Columbia University's storied Historic Preservation program and later worked at the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission and the New York Landmarks Conservancy, where he directed the Sacred Sites Program. Mohylowski is currently Director of Institutional Giving at Environmental Defense Fund in NYC. He is a member of the Preservation Committee of the Municipal Art Society and the board of the James Marston Fitch Charitable Foundation. He is a former board member of the Fairfield Historical Society and the Kosciuszko Foundation, as well as a former commissioner of the Fairfield (CT) Historic District Commission.

HAVE YOU MET THESE NEW BOARD MEMBERS?



BRIAN D. COLEMAN is a practicing psychiatrist who, beginning with his enthusiasm for old houses, has developed a second career based on his love for restoration and design. He is the editor-at-large for *Old House Interiors* magazine and has written numerous articles on house design for magazines ranging from *Old House Journal* to *Period Living* in the UK. Brian is the author of fourteen books, including *Farrow & Ball: The Art of Color*, *Scalmandre*, *Window Dressings*, and most recently, *Barry Dixon Interiors*. Brian received his BA from Stanford University and his MD from Chicago Medical School. In 1973 he received a Stanford University Grant to study chimpanzee behavior with Jane Goodall in Gombe Stream National Park, Tanzania. Brian currently divides his time between Seattle and New York. He is a member of the National Board of the Victorian Society in America.



RUSSELL NEEDHAM is a social worker with over thirty years' experience as a psychiatric social work administrator, program manager, supervisor, and clinician. Most of his experience has been with the New York State Office of Mental Health. Russell also

works part time as a psychotherapist and supervisor for a Chelsea-based clinic. He is Vice President of the Shorefront Mental Health Board in Brooklyn and is active in the Empire State Pride Agenda's Health and Human Services Network, a coalition of 50 statewide not-for-profit social service providers. Russell travels frequently to the UK, and was drawn to the Victorian Society through its lectures on 19th century writers, literature, and artists. He lives in Manhattan and also owns a 19th century farmhouse near Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.



STEVEN WHITESELL is a landscape architect with the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation with a lifelong interest in 19th century decorative arts and art history. He teaches landscape history to undergraduate students at Farmingdale State College on Long Island, and has served as a guest critic in CUNY's Landscape Architecture Program. He is a member of several professional and amateur horticultural organizations and serves on the Board of the Manhattan Chapter of the North American Rock Garden Society. Steven received his BFA and BLA degrees from Rhode Island School of Design, and recently completed an MA at the Bard Graduate Center in the history of decorative arts with an emphasis on garden history. He lives in Queens and is building a new garden to accompany his Greek Revival house in Schoharie County, New York.



Annual Meeting, continued from previous page

Grant for the Preservation of Victorian Heritage was presented to the Merchant's House Museum for ceiling repairs. Awards for publications were presented to: **Kathryn E. Holliday** for her architectural monograph, *Leopold Eidlitz: Architecture and Idealism in the Gilded Age*; **Roberta A. Mayer** for her decorative arts monograph, *Lockwood de Forest: Furnishing the Gilded Age with a Passion for India*; and **Ethan Mordden** for his book on theater history, *Ziegfeld: The Man Who Invented Show Business*.

The following awards were presented for to local organizations for preservation advocacy:

- **PRESERVATION ADVOCACY:** The Historic Preservation Grant Program of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission;
- **GRASSROOTS PRESERVATION:** 491 Henry Street, in Brooklyn's Cobble Hill Historic District;
- **ADAPTIVE RE-USE PRESERVATION:** First Reformed Church of Jamaica, Queens, now the Jamaica Performing Arts Center;
- **EXTERIOR RESTORATION:** The terracotta façade of 475 10th Avenue in Manhattan;
- **HONORABLE MENTION FOR EXTERIOR RENOVATION:** The Marymount School of New York, Manhattan, for its solarium restoration.

LECTURE SERIES

All lectures are at The New York New Church, 114 E. 35th St., New York City, admission is FREE; no reservations required.

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 8, 6PM

Lockwood de Forest and the 'Red Hot Iron' of the East Indian Craft Revival

Roberta A. Mayer, Ph.D., associate professor of art history and Visual Arts Area Head at Bucks County Community College, Newtown, Pa. and author of *Lockwood de Forest: Furnishing the Gilded Age with a Passion for India* (2008)

Lockwood de Forest (1850-1932) was an interior designer whose style was profoundly influenced by Indian decorative arts. De Forest's New York City clientele included some of the Gilded Age's most celebrated figures. His fascination with India was part of the East Indian Craft Revival, a movement that earned the support of British Arts and Crafts proponents as well as India's British colonial rulers.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 13, 6PM

The Panorama: Painting the "All Embracing" View

Suzanne Wray, author, lecturer, and board member of the Metropolitan Chapter of the Victorian Society in America

In the Victorian era, panoramas depicting 360 degree views of landscapes, cityscapes and battles were popular attractions in the U.S. and Europe, enabling their viewers to "travel" without leaving home. They were a unique art form created by painting on a circular canvas that completely surrounded viewers, making them feel part of the scene. Many panoramas were shown in 19th century New York City, to the delight of their enthralled audiences.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 6 PM

Florenz Ziegfeld: The Man Who Invented Show Business

Ethan Mordden, author of *Ziegfeld: The Man Who Invented Show Business* (2008) and historian of music, theater, and film.

Florenz Ziegfeld has been called one of the "most inventive, ruthless, street-smart and exacting men ever to fill a theatre on the Great White Way." His shows featured humorists such as Will Rogers, Fanny Brice and Eddie Cantor, as well as scantily clad showgirls dancing to the music of composers such as Victor Herbert and Irving Berlin. He was one of the first impresarios to fea-

ture performers of diverse ethnic backgrounds, and was an early proponent of mixed-race casting. Ziegfeld's influence lives on in today's lavish Broadway extravaganzas.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 8, 6PM

Two Brothers: One North, One South

David H. Jones, author of *Two Brothers: One North, One South* (2008), and American Civil War scholar

When author David H. Jones discovered the compelling story of brothers Clifton and William Prentiss, who fought on opposite sides in the American Civil War and are buried side by side in Green-Wood Cemetery, he recognized it as one that had to be told. The brothers' story exemplifies the intensity of the conflict as experienced by 19th century Americans, as well as the culture and beliefs that held sway during the Civil War. Walt Whitman wrote about William Prentiss at Washington, D.C.'s Armory Hospital in *Memoranda During the War*. Mr. Jones's recent research took him to the swamps of Dinwiddie County, Virginia, where he rediscovered the lost location of a pivotal event described in his book.

TOURS & SPECIAL EVENTS

Members received detailed flyers or invitations before events. Nonmembers may contact (212)886-3742 for tour flyers. Advance prepaid reservations are required for tours.

MOHONK MOUNTAIN HOUSE: ELEGANCE IN THE WILD



Saturday, October 17th, 7:30 AM.

All day with lunch in the dining room and a tour of the renovated greenhouse and free time to wander the grounds and public rooms.

The tour should coincide with the peak of fall color and the scenic views should be spectacular. Come see and understand the glories of the Catskill Mountain landscape so well appreciated and understood by 19th century travelers.

THE SPLENDORS OF SUNSET PARK

Saturday, October 24th, 2:00 to 4:30 PM

Walking Tour \$25 members/\$35 nonmembers (Limited to 25 participants)



The first walking tour of the fall season will be of Sunset Park, Brooklyn. The tour will be given by

Mr. Joseph Suehlak. Some members may remember Mr. Suehlak from previous tours and recall his expertise and delivery. Sunset Park is the largest National Register District in the Northeast comprising over 3,000 buildings. The area gets its name from the twenty-four and one half acre hilltop park, which has spectacular views of the harbor and city. On its hillside streets are found the last significant development of Victorian and Edwardian row houses within the border of the old city of Brooklyn. By the early 1900s many Scandinavians lived here. The co-ops founded by the Finns still remain. Today Sunset Park is home to many diverse ethnic groups. The tour will conclude on 8th Avenue, the heart of NYC's third China Town.

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MEMBERSHIP LEVEL:

- Individual \$40
- Household (two adults) \$60
- Sponsor \$75

Acknowledgement in newsletter, annual meeting presentation and website

- Patron \$150

Same benefits as Sponsor,

plus admission for one to a special annual event

- Senior (over age 65) \$30
- Student (with copy of student ID) \$30

Name(s) Please print clearly

Address, including apartment designation and zip code

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ADDITIONAL SPECIAL CONTRIBUTION(S):

VSA Summer School Scholarships \$ _____

Margot Gayle Fund for Preservation of Victorian Heritage \$ _____

TOTAL ENCLOSED: \$ _____

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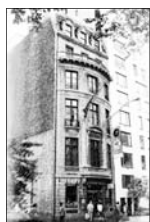
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THE VICTORIAN SOCIETY IN AMERICA
232 EAST 11TH ST.
NEW YORK, NY 10003
www.metrovsa.org



Tours & Special Events - continued from previous page

**BRIDGING THREE CENTURIES:
THE NATIONAL ACADEMY MUSEUM
AND SCHOOL OF FINE ARTS**

Saturday, November 14th, 11:00 AM to 1:00 PM
- Walking Tour \$25 members/\$35 nonmembers.
(Limited to 25 participants)



The National Academy Museum and School of Fine Arts was founded in 1825 by Samuel F. B. Morse, Thomas Cole, and others "to promote the fine arts in America through instruction and exhibition," and is located in a stately Beaux-Arts style mansion along Fifth Avenue's Museum Mile. The tour throughout this important institution includes viewing *Re-configuring the Body 1820-2009*, a major exhibition examining the critical role that the human figure has played in the history of American art.

**THE HISTORIC HERITAGE
OF FAIRFIELD COUNTY**

Saturday, December 5th, 2009, 7:45 AM-All Day
Bus Tour \$110 members/\$120 nonmembers (Limited to 40 participants)

This tour to Connecticut will include several destinations including the Second Empire Lockwood-Matthews Mansion Museum in Norwalk, the Gothic Revival Sturges House in Fairfield, the Fairfield Museum and History Center, and the Associated Artists Gallery, a remarkable collection of late 19th century furniture and decorative arts assembled by David Parker and Walter H. Buck in Southport,



Connecticut. Fairfield County boasts miles of beautiful coastline and rolling hills, all set in the picturesque New England countryside. A box lunch will be served at the newly constructed Fairfield Museum and History Center. Tour participants will have time to tour the facilities and temporary exhibitions.

**RESERVATIONS REQUIRED FOR ALL
TOURS AND SPECIAL EVENTS.**

Meeting places will be provided in the confirmation of registration. Participants in our educational tours must be in excellent health and be able to participate safely in the activities involved. Sites visited may have many challenging stairs; if you have any doubt about your ability to participate fully due to health conditions or disabilities, please contact events@metrosva.org or (212) 886-3742. The Metropolitan Chapter reserves the right to decline to accept or retain any person as a member of our tours at any time.

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The Metropolitan Chapter thanks the following members for their generous support:

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