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VSNY News & Features

Update on the Urban Erben	1-3
Grant's Tomb, National Reconciliation	4-11
Testifying for Our Landmarks	12-16
Tours Return to VSNY!	17-18
New to the VSNY Board	19-21

Program Calendar	22
Photograph Album	23
About VSNY	24



Update on the Urban Erben • Jared Lamenzo, Organist & Director of Music, St. Patrick's Basilica

New York City was full of music in the 19th century. It was a center of performance, publishing, and instrument making. One of the most famous instrument makers was Henry Erben, whose organs were considered the finest of the 19th century. His factory, which in the 1840s was the largest in the city, produced organs for cathedrals and churches across the growing nation, Canada, and even the Caribbean and Latin America. His organs were representative of a whole school of New York City organbuilding that flourished at the time.

In 2020, Eve Kahn visited the last "Cathedral" Erben that exists in its original acoustic space, the 1868 Henry Erben organ in the Basilica of St. Patrick's Old Cathedral. This organ is representative of his finest work and was a cultural signpost to the rest of the city that Irish and German immigrants were here to stay. The St. Patrick's organ was the third instrument Henry Erben built for the building—the previous one burned

in the disastrous 1866 fire that gutted the interior of the Cathedral. The organ remained in the loft for 156 years, playing for thousands of funerals, weddings, concerts, and more. Its mechanism and 2,500 pipes (many labeled "St. Patrick's" in beautiful Spencerian script) were long overdue for conservation and restoration. Given its historical importance, extensive documentation of the organ was made *in situ*, and a comprehensive program of conservation and restoration was developed with Brunner & Associates organbuilders. Beginning in February 2024, the organ was carefully dismantled and its over 10,000 components shipped to the workshop in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Though the organ components were removed, the case remained in place. After researching various layers of decoration, the case was re-grained, while beautiful pumpkin pine floorboards in the Basilica's choir loft were preserved along with their hand-forged nails. Each board was numbered so that everything was put back in the same way it came out. During this work, various coins

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Image: A view from above of the newly discovered stencilling on the pipes. Credit: Jared Lamenzo



and ephemera were found, including a dime from 1889, a church music program featuring a 19th-century hymn for a guardian angel, and a postcard featuring Italian actor Rudolph Valentino promoting the film “The Sheik” (released in 1921).

During extremely labor-intensive repairs to the bellows, pipes, keyboards, and other components, much was learned about the history of the organ, including the names of the people who worked on it and the methods employed by the artisans in Erben’s factory. There were also surprises: the biggest discovery was the incredible program of artwork on the twenty-seven façade pipes of the organ (all façade pipes are functional, speaking pipes). Mimicking the rose window behind the altar, the artwork turned out to be original to the organ, with the inscription “P. S. Keeler

Painter Nov 5 1868.” This artwork, covered by layers of gold and other paint, was carefully traced and documented for its reproduction.

In early 2025, the team took measurements in the organ loft, preparing for the reassembly of the organ in the giant “erecting room” at Brunner’s shop. First, the frame that holds the great windchest was assembled around the enormous bellows or reservoirs, which are the lungs of the instrument. Once some pipes were in place and some of the action reassembled, “organ donors” (i.e. patrons!) and the interested public were invited to the shop to hear the organ for the first time in October 2025. The team also made the giant crank that pumps air into the organ functional again. This “exhibition” to the public is part of a great tradition; Henry Erben did the same in his shop back in the 19th century, when such exhibitions of new instruments were eagerly attended by the public and written up in the press.

Most of the organ was as intact as any organ of that age can be, but there were a few missing tonal elements. A few miracles happened along the way to help us. At some point in the 1970s, the Trumpet and Clarion reed pipes were modified, and we could not find any comparable Erben reeds. Larry Trupiano, longtime organbuilder from Brooklyn, found a set of “shallots” from an Erben organ he rescued in the 1960s in Baltimore—the exact pieces we needed. The lost Baltimore organ was a large, late Erben, and sure enough, the shallots fit perfectly. The other missing tonal piece was the Great Mixture of the organ; it was



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Images, top left: Moving day, 2024, when the organ was dismantled and moved from the church to the workshop in Pennsylvania. Credit: Jared Lamenzo • *above, right:* Preservationist, author, and church organist Jared Lamenzo seated at the Erben Organ during “Organ Donor Day” when guests were invited into the workshop to see and learn more about the restoration project. Credit: Aaron Cassara

replaced by a flute stop sometime in the late 19th century; the flute itself was replaced by Sam Donelson in 1969 with a new Mixture for the Organ Historical Society Convention in that year. Sam's work at the time helped keep the organ playing for the next few decades. Desiring to capture the tonal picture of the Erben though, the team looked for an extant Mixture to no avail. However, the frame and windchests of a large three manual Erben were extant in the enormous Church of St. Agnes in Brooklyn (the pipework was parted out decades before). Careful measurements were made of the toeholes and racking to give us evidence of the composition of that stop. The stoplist of the St. Agnes Erben and extant other archaeological evidence matched our instrument—another really important find.

The process of re-installation will begin in February 2026, and we look forward to hearing the beloved instrument again in its home. Its return is a cause for celebration, and we hope you will join us to hear the organ when it is back—making music for the next 150 years.



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Image, above right: A wonderful “find” tucked inside the organ, discovered during dismantling—Rudolph Valentino! Credit: Jared Lamenzo • *above left:* Jared Lamenzo, on Organ Open House, demonstrating the restored original hand crank system for operating the bellows; organs today typically have electric motor-driven blowers. Credit: Mikhail Lamenzo

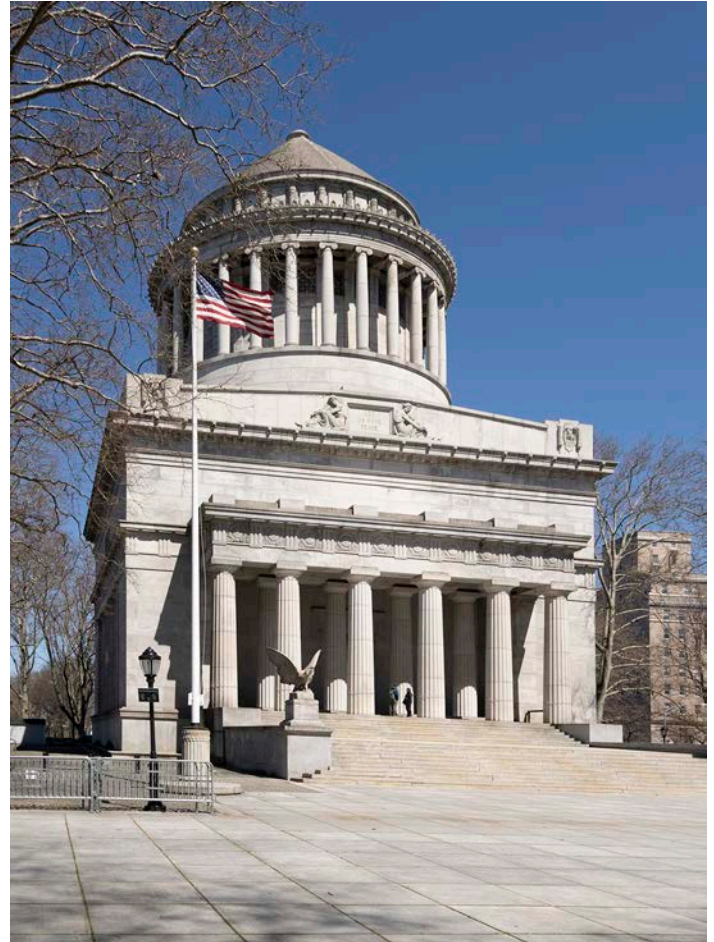
Grant's Tomb and National Reconciliation • Louis L. Picone, Author & Bruce M. White, Photographer and VSNY Board Member

On April 27, 1897, President William McKinley spoke at the dedication of Ulysses S. Grant's Tomb in Riverside Park in New York City. He proclaimed, "A great life, dedicated to the welfare of the nation, here finds its earthly coronation. . . Architecture has paid high tribute to the leaders of mankind, but never was a memorial more worthily bestowed or more gratefully accepted by a free people than the beautiful structure before which we are gathered." McKinley added, "Great as he was in war, Grant loved peace. . . . With Washington and Lincoln, Grant has an exalted place in history and the affections of the people."¹

Indeed, the hundreds of thousands gathered that day—a crowd that rivaled the crowd attending his funeral twelve years earlier—were a testament to Grant's "exalted place in history." In the quiet hours before the dedication ceremony, two incidents demonstrated the unique place Grant's Tomb would hold in American hearts. Before crowds gathered, a group from the Sons of Confederate Veterans placed a floral arrangement at the crypt. Earlier that morning, an elderly Black man approached with a handful of violets and told a guard, "He helped to make me a free man."² In a nation still divided a generation after the Civil War, both former oppressor and oppressed mourned the former president together.

While Grant's Tomb is one among the pantheon of presidential graves, it is unique. At 8,100 cubic feet, the 150-foot-tall tomb was, and remains to this day, the largest tomb in North America. Designed in 1890 by John Hemenway Duncan for a location that was sparsely settled and barren of buildings, he envisioned "a monumental tomb, no matter from what point of view it may be seen."³ Built in the neoclassical style favored in the Gilded Age, its white granite and Doric columns harkened back to the ancient Greeks and Romans. Inside the stark white mausoleum, Grant's and his wife Julia's sarcophagi rest in a sunken chamber (inspired by Napoleon's tomb), which forces the visitor to bow their head to see them.

Of the massive Gilded Age tombs built for Abraham Lincoln, James Garfield, Ulysses Grant, and William McKinley, only



Grant did not die in office. His colossal tomb—which would likely have horrified its humble, unassuming occupant—was not a reaction to a sudden, unexpected death, but rather reflective of a deep and enduring affection for the general who led the U.S. Army to victory in the Civil War yet was magnanimous to the defeated, and the president who led the nation in Reconstruction.

When Grant died on July 23, 1885, he was among the most admired people in the world. A year before his death, he was wealthy and aside from a nagging leg injury, healthy. But in 1884 he suffered two catastrophes: his wealth evaporated when he discovered his trusted financial advisor was running a Ponzi scheme and he was diagnosed with cancer. Bankrupt and terminally ill, he embarked on his final battle:

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Image, above: Exterior view, The General Grant National Memorial at Riverside Drive and West 122nd Street in New York City, the largest tomb in North America, holds the remains of President Ulysses S. Grant and his wife Julia Dent Grant. Credit: Bruce M. White for the White House Historical Association

to complete his memoirs before death took him. He spent his last weeks in a friend's cottage on Mount McGregor in New York's Adirondack Mountains. There he was visited by Union veterans offering their support, including members of Post 327 of the Grand Army of the Republic from Brooklyn. The day Grant died, they renamed themselves the U.S. Grant Post. For their allegiance, the family asked them to serve as honor guard. They remained on constant watch from the day Grant died until his coffin was placed in the temporary tomb two weeks later.⁴

While Grant could have been buried in a military cemetery, Julia Grant directed that her husband should be buried in New York City so she could be by his side upon her death. New York's mayor, William Grace, offered Riverside Park toward the northern end of Manhattan Island, at the highest point along the Hudson River. For such a great man, no ordinary coffin would do, so the Stern Manufacturing

Company in Rochester designed one of polished oak lined with copper, with silver handles, an interior of "the finest purple silk velvet,"⁵ and a gold nameplate simply engraved "U. S. Grant." It was extolled as "one of a kind" and "the finest ever made in this country."⁶ While Grant's remains lay in a temporary casket in Mount McGregor, the new one was shipped to the Stephen Merritt Burial Company in New York City, where an industrious funeral director put the coffin on display. A few passersby stopped. Then a crowd formed. Eventually seventy thousand people waited hours to see an empty casket. These people, noted a reporter, were "of no particular class."⁷

The outpouring of grief for the general and president was universal. The mourners included victor and vanquished; white and Black; native-born and immigrant; men and women; Democratic and Republican; Gilded Age rich and tenement poor; American and European. At Westminster Abbey, a minister praised Grant for having fought for "the unity of a great people, the freedom of a whole race."⁸ And powerful words came from famed abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who regarded Grant as "a man too broad for prejudice, too humane to despise the humblest, too great to be small at any point. In him the Negro found a protector, the Indian a friend, a vanquished foe a brother, an imperiled nation a savior."⁹ Even throughout the South condolences were offered and services held in Grant's honor. One such proclamation came from Columbia, South Carolina, the capital of the first state to secede and a city burned to the ground by Union forces. It read, "The death of General Grant will be honestly felt as a national affliction all over the wide union without reference to section or party."¹⁰

Grant's funeral was one of the largest single events of shared public mourning in the nation's history. One and a half million people—more than the entire population of New York City—witnessed the 8-mile procession of sixty thousand. Along with Union generals William Tecumseh Sherman and Philip Sheridan, two former Confederate generals served as pallbearers, Joseph E. Johnston and Simon Buckner. Grant's friend before the war, Buckner had surrendered to Grant at Fort Donelson in 1862 and resumed their friendship after the war. He explained, "I go to bury him as one of the Nation's great men."¹¹ A reporter declared, "These visible evidences that the war is over will have weight in every household in the land."¹²



Image: President Ulysses S. Grant and his wife Julia Dent Grant, 1860. Courtesy of: Library of Congress



In addition to former Confederates, Black Americans were also prominent in Grant's funeral procession. His coachman from the White House, Albert Hawkins, drove the hearse, and regiments of Black veterans marched in the procession.¹³ On the Upper West Side, when the procession passed, a Black man held up a hand-painted sign that read "He helped to set me free."¹⁴ At the funeral, Rabbi Edward Browne, Grant's friend and honorary pall bearer, eulogized, "Moses liberated three million people, his own brethren, from bondage. Grant liberated three million people, a race not his own, from American bondage, over the bodies of his own brethren."¹⁵

Even before Julia Grant chose New York as her husband's final resting place, Mayor Grace formed the Grant Monument Association to erect "a great national monument which

shall appropriately testify to future ages, the appreciation by the civilized world of the genius, valor and deeds of the grandest character of the century."¹⁶ The association was chaired by former President Chester A. Arthur, and its members included Gilded Age luminaries such as John Jacob Astor and J. P. Morgan. The job of fundraising was led by Richard Greener, Harvard University's first Black graduate, a prominent attorney, and Grant's political ally and friend. They believed that "the honor of having the tomb of Gen. Grant in our city imposes on our people a sacred duty,"¹⁷ and they set out to raise \$1 million—three times the combined costs of Lincoln and Garfield's tombs.¹⁸

After a promising start, the effort languished. Fundraising stalled at about \$100,000, hindered by competition from other memorial efforts and uncertainty over what would be

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Image: Interior view of the caskets of President Ulysses S. Grant and his wife Julia Dent Grant, The General Grant National Memorial. Credit: Bruce M. White for the White House Historical Association



built at Grant's final resting place. It took five years and as many failed attempts just to choose a design. By that time, debates were under way in Congress about the possibility of relocating Grant's remains. While funding never reached the ambitious goal, a record \$600,000 was donated by ninety thousand individuals. The ledger reflected Grant's broad appeal: 20 cents from "Two Yankee women"; 25 cents from "Virginia, the daughter of a Confederate general"; \$15 from the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church; and a

\$500 donation from Chinese Viceroy Li Hung Chang.¹⁹ The viceroy had met and befriended Grant on his world tour, taken after the presidency, and he had asked Grant's help in negotiating a treaty with Japan over disputed islands. As construction of Grant's monument neared completion, Li Hung Chang visited the temporary tomb of "my glorious, departed friend General Grant" and added in his memoirs, "I offered sweet incense and holy flowers to his spirit."²⁰

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New York, NY 10003



Image: More than 1.5 million people lined the route of the funeral procession held for President Ulysses S. Grant, August 8, 1885. The procession is seen above as the catafalque holding President Grant's remains proceeds up Broadway, crossing 13th Street while crowds fill sidewalks, rooftops, and open windows for a view. Courtesy of: Library of Congress



But as the Civil War generation passed away, Grant's legacy declined. By the middle of the 20th century, Grant's Tomb was being vandalized. Graffiti marred the memorial, liquor bottles and drug paraphernalia littered the grounds, and only a few brave souls dared to visit. At Grant's 150th birthday ceremony in 1972, a handful of tourists were shadowed by gang members who boasted to a reporter that Grant's Tomb was an ideal backdrop for fights with rivals.²²



For a generation after its dedication, Grant's Tomb was one of the most visited sites in New York City—over half a million people every year. For some it was a pilgrimage of sorts. It even gained something of “pop culture” status. The tomb was featured on postcards and advertisements, and Thomas Edison used it as a backdrop for a film about a lovesick bachelor who places a personal advertisement for single women to meet him at the most popular place in New York—Grant's Tomb.

The faithful aging veterans of Brooklyn's U.S. Grant Post led annual Memorial Day ceremonies at Grant's Tomb, sometimes joined by southerners. In 1902 a Confederate veteran spoke before a crowd of five thousand:

When but a beardless youth I drank of the cup of defeat at Appomattox and was one of those who was “allowed to return to his home, not to be disturbed by the United States authorities, so long as they observed their parole and the laws in force where they resided.” From that day to this there has never been an hour when I would willingly omit an opportunity to do honor to the memory of the immortal who forbore to add to the burden of our sorrows. No true soldier can deny to the illustrious man whose mortal remains lie here, the possession of all the qualities of a great commander.²¹



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New York, NY 10003



Images, top left: A temporary vault, designed by Jacob Wrey Mould, architect of Central Park. The vault was located beside what would become the permanent site, and held President Grant's remains from 1885 until 1897, while the tomb was designed and erected. Courtesy of: Bruce M. White • **above right:** Fundraising for and finalizing the design extended for more than five years before ground was broken in 1891 to begin the construction of President Grant's tomb. By c. 1893 the exterior granite walls were nearly complete. Courtesy of: National Park Service • **top right:** A small donation box now preserved in the collection of the National Park Service recalls the grassroots effort that brought in more than \$600,000 from supporters across the nation and abroad. Courtesy of: National Park Service



But even in its darkest days, there were glimpses of how Grant's Tomb could still unite people. In the 1970s, the National Park Service, which had taken over as custodians in 1959, made an effort to build community interest and reduce vandalism by commissioning continuous mosaic benches to partially encircle the tomb. While controversial and anachronistic, 2,500 people from all walks of life contributed to the folk-art project. As the man behind the idea recalled, "We had graffiti artists elbow to elbow with professors from Columbia."²³ For thirty years, dismal conditions persisted into the 1990s when Frank Scaturro, a young student from nearby Columbia University who was horrified by what he saw at Grant's Tomb, embarked on a personal crusade to raise public awareness. Scaturro was tenacious: He contacted politicians, appeared on a morning television program, and drew the attention of "The New York Times." But while the public could dismiss a private

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New York, NY 10003



Images, top: President Benjamin Harrison (in top hat standing beside stonemason) prepares to lay the cornerstone of President Grant's tomb on April 27, 1892, the seventieth anniversary of Grant's birth. Courtesy of: New York Public Library • *above left:* The completed tomb is dedicated five years later on what would have been President Grant's seventy-fifth birthday, April 27, 1897, as thousands gather to observe the ceremony. Courtesy of: New York Public Library



citizen, it was much harder to ignore Ulysses Grant Dietz, who joined Scaturro to plead to save the tomb of not just an American president and First Lady, but also that of his great-great-grandparents. When, once again, debates began in Congress to relocate the deceased to safer grounds, money was finally allocated by the federal government for restoration and enhanced security. Rarely has a private citizen done so much to save a sacred and historic treasure, and the swift turnaround was almost miraculous. On April 27, 1997, 150 years after Grant's birth, a rededication ceremony was held.²⁴

In past decades Grant's legacy has been resurgent, with recognition of his unwavering commitment to a more perfect

union. Today Grant's Tomb is neither exalted as it was after its dedication, nor the dystopian place of its darkest days. Located in America's most diverse city, it attracts an equally diverse range of visitors. In a nation once again divided, Grant's Tomb remains an ideal place to renew the American motto, *E Pluribus Unum*.

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Image: An interior view of the coffered dome central to the design of President Grant's Tomb. Credit: Bruce M. White for the White House Historical Association



Notes

1. "President's Address," *Ann Arbor Argus*, April 30, 1897.
2. "A Nation's Tribute to a Nation's Hero," *Kansas City Journal*, April 28, 1897.
3. "Gen. Grant's Mausoleum," *New York World*, September 12, 1890.
4. "Grant Day," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 25, 1897.
5. "Grant's Tomb: Three Sites Offered the Family Today," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 24, 1885.
6. Quoted in *ibid*.
7. "Viewing the Casket," *Chicago Inter Ocean*, July 28, 1885.
8. Quoted in "Gen. Grant's Funeral," *The New York Times*, August 5, 1885.
9. Quoted in James Monroe Gregory, *Frederick Douglass, the Orator: Containing an Account of His Life; His Eminent Public Services; His Brilliant Career as Orator; Selections from His Speeches and Writings* (Springfield, Mass.: Wiley Company, 1893), 170.
10. Quoted in "Grant's Tomb: Three Sites Offered the Family Today."
11. "Buckner's Tribute to Grant," *The New York Times*, August 8, 1885.
12. "The Burial of Grant" *The New York Times*, August 9, 1885.
13. "Rest at Last: Imposing Ceremonies in New York City at the Occasion of Gen. Grant's Interment," *Waterloo Press*, August 13, 1885.
14. "The Burial-Place of General Grant," *Harper's Weekly*, August 8, 1885.
15. Quoted in "In Memoriam: World-Wide Tributes to the Dead," *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 26, 1885. In actuality, more than 4 million enslaved individuals were liberated by the Civil War.
16. Quoted in David M. Kahn, *General Grant National Memorial Historical Resource Study* (National Park Service report, 1980) 29.
17. Quoted in "The Monument," *The New York Times*, August 6, 1885.
18. Abraham Lincoln's tomb in Springfield cost \$206,550, and James Garfield's cost \$134,755.76. "The National Lincoln Monuments: Completion of the Bronze Statue," *Chicago Tribune*, July 18, 1872; Townsend Malcolm, comp., *U.S.: An Index to the United States of America* (Boston: D. Lothrop, 1890), 333.
19. "Account Moneys Received, 1886," Manhattan Historic Sites Archive, www.facebook.com; "Viceroy Li at Grant's Tomb," *Philadelphia Times*, August 31, 1896.
20. Li Hung Chang, *Memoirs of Li Hung Chang*, ed. William Francis Mannix (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), 196.
21. Quoted in "At Grant's Tomb: An Ex-Confederate Pays Hero of America a High Tribute," *Astoria (Ore.) Morning Astorian*, May 31, 1902.
22. "Grant's Tomb Gang Territory," *Vancouver Sun*, April 28, 1972.
23. Quoted in "Whimsical Benches Around Grant's Tomb Restored," *The New York Times*, June 20, 2008.
24. "[President Grant's Tomb Rededication](#)," C-SPAN, April 27, 1997.

Victorian Society New York
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New York, NY 10003



Image: To mark the 100th anniversary of the Confederate Surrender at Appomattox, the Grant Memorial Association commissioned three mosaic murals from artist Allyn Cox in 1964. Completed in 1966, the murals were added to the lunettes within the interior of the dome. Cox depicted Union General Ulysses S. Grant accepting Confederate General Robert E. Lee's surrender beneath an American eagle bearing a banner embellished "E Pluribus Unum, Let Us Have Peace." Credit: Bruce M. White for the White House Historical Association

Testifying for Our Landmarks • John Graham & Jeremy Woodoff, Co-Chairs, VSNY Preservation Committee

Since 1966 the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission has had the responsibility of identifying, designating, and regulating historic buildings standing within the five boroughs. The Commission now protects over 36,000 buildings, both those in historic districts and individual landmarks, as well as interiors, scenic landmarks, and civic art. Among them are tens of thousands of buildings dating to the Victorian era. For over five decades, VSNY has participated in public hearings at the Commission, testifying on proposed alterations to buildings built within the reign of Queen Victoria. We also give evidence on proposed changes to landmarks of more recent vintage that we believe have outstanding architectural significance. Testimony is read into the record at each meeting by John Graham and Christina Britton Conroy, and occasionally by other members of the Preservation Committee. Three presentations appear below.

LPC-25-09619 — Governors Island, Building 19 - Governors Island Historic District, Manhattan

On May 6, 2025, VSNY testified regarding proposed changes to Building 19, Governor's Island.

“Creative re-use of 19th-century buildings is the lifeblood of historic preservation. Changes need to preserve the structure’s essential character while supporting new uses. Building 19 was built as a two family house in 1891. Unfortunately, if all the changes being proposed are approved, its domestic character will be lost.

We must note the extreme difficulty in understanding the full extent of the proposed changes because the presentation doesn’t use the standard convention of showing existing and proposed conditions side-by-side.

The Victorian Society has no objection to the removal of the existing 20th-century garage, parking pad, and driveways. However, we question the following changes: The applicant is proposing construction of two ADA ramps for this small building. Building 20 was recently re-built with only one ramp. One of the ramps at Building 19 should be removed from the proposal.

The applicant is proposing to double the width of the two sets of entrance steps leading from the pedestrian path to the twin front porches. Access is also provided to these porches by ramps and stairs on each side. Twelve-foot-wide stairs are totally out of scale for a small 19th-century house. The existing width should be maintained.

The historic photos provided by the applicant show that the porches had wood railings. The wood railings on the south porch should be retained, not eliminated.

The chain-link or metal-wire fencing on the north access ramp, shown on Board 26, is alien to this building. Brick, painted wood balusters, and wood lattice are appropriate materials.

At the west elevation, the metal canopy supported by tie rods, the two large openings in the façade at the ground floor, the stone deck base, and the obtrusive attic louver are all false notes.



PROPOSED EAST ELEVATION



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8 East 8th Street
New York, NY 10003



Images, above: Current conditions at Building 19, Governors Island, from the East • *below:* Proposed East Elevation plan. Courtesy of: Landmarks Preservation Commission

This building is seen in the round. The back façade should be treated in a way historically typical of a free-standing Victorian house. The metal canopy supported by tiebacks above the west deck is especially notable for looking out of place. It has the appearance of a loading dock in Tribeca. Pergolas or retractable canvas awnings are historically typical for buildings like this and would be more in keeping with a small 19th-century house. The standing seam metal roofs in place at Building 19, which appear to be the design source for this canopy, are completely different. They are roofs over buildings, and in any event these additions are labeled “Rebuilt” on the plans and may not be historic.



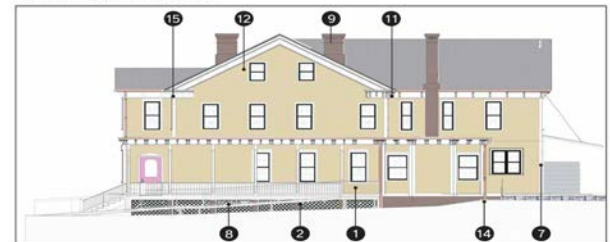
Finally, we note that the Commission has approved the addition of lifts to several buildings on Governors Island. The use of a lift at Building 19 would be a less obtrusive way to provide access.”

The commissioners largely agreed with us and took no action following the hearing. They required the applicant to revise the proposed materials and designs to be more sympathetic to the historic house. The applicant returned on July 22 with a revised proposal. It was considerably improved along the lines we requested, though the rear deck and cover were still there, with a slightly better design. We submitted written testimony commending the changes but still objecting to some elements of the design. The revised proposal was approved 7-0.

PROPOSED SOUTH ELEVATION



PROPOSED NORTH ELEVATION



PROPOSED WEST ELEVATION



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Images, on the left, from the top: Current conditions at Building 19, Governors Island, from the South, North, and West • *on the right, from the top:* Proposed South, North, and West Elevations indicating proposed changes before the proposal was revised. Courtesy of: Landmarks Preservation Commission

LPC-25-09203 — 284 Fifth Avenue - The Wilbraham - Individual Landmark, Manhattan

On May 13, 2025, VSNY testified regarding proposed changes to the Wilbraham building. The Wilbraham is an individual landmark at 284 Fifth Avenue, built in the Romanesque Revival-style in 1888 by D. and J. Jardine. The storefront base of the building has been altered, and this proposal would have further altered it without any attempt at restoring missing or covered historic features. Our testimony recommended significant changes to the proposal:

“The Victorian Society recommends that proposed first floor display windows be redesigned to better reflect the historic configuration of this Romanesque Revival-style individual landmark building. The designation report and

historic photos describe missing features as well as those that exist but are covered over.

First, the Fifth Avenue storefronts should include bulkheads, as do the ones on 30th Street. These storefronts originally had bulkheads, as do all historic storefronts from this period. Second, the large decorative cast-iron column visible on the second floor of the Fifth Avenue façade should extend down through the first floor. According to the designation report, this column remains behind modern cladding. It’s seen in historic photographs, starting on slide 4 of the presentation, and shown most clearly in the 1930 New York Public Library picture on slide 7.

While the Commission perhaps can’t require that it be uncovered, it can disallow the proposal to recover it. The designation report also states that original bulkhead grilles



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New York, NY 10003



Image, above: The Wilbraham Building as seen in 1893. Courtesy of: Landmarks Preservation Commission

remain behind plywood panels. Finally, the storefront originally had glazed transoms where the proposed sign bands are. Signs were placed on the masonry band above. Reinstating the transoms is important to restoring the grand, historic proportions of the building.

Many first-floor modifications here were made without a permit. The extent of all original historic materials should be clarified in the presentation, with clear notes that this is to be retained. This renovation is an opportunity to regain some of the lost detail and articulation seen in 19th-century streetscapes so that this building can further contribute to Fifth Avenue's rich character."

The Commission took no action on the proposal. It requested the applicant to restudy the signs and transoms, fix the inconsistency between façades of this corner building, and

agreed with VSNY that historic conditions should serve as the guide in revising the design.

LPC-25-09313 — 768 Fifth Avenue - The Plaza Hotel - Individual and Interior Landmark - Manhattan

On October 28, 2025, VSNY testified on alterations to the 59th Street Lobby at the Plaza Hotel, a part of the ground floor at the Plaza that was designated an Interior Landmark in 2005. The proposed work included repairs to the original mosaic tile floor installed in 1906. This floor had been coated with a layer of urethane after the Trump Organization bought the hotel in 1988. In our testimony we urged the Commissioners and the applicants to consider removing that layer of urethane to bring the tile floor back to its original natural finish. Very happily, we were also able to show the Commissioners the original finish on a sample of the floors removed during alterations in the pre-Trump era.

"The Victorian Society is happy to support the changes the applicants are proposing for the 59th Street entrance and lobby. However, we believe that they are missing a chance to bring this historic Designated Interior closer to its original condition.

One of the members of our Preservation Committee worked for the architectural firm that renovated the Plaza when Westin Hotels owned it. The firm had a branch office up under the Plaza's roof between 1982 and 1988: John Graham worked there from '84 to '88.

At the time, the lobby tile floors had their original muted natural finish. In 1988, when the Trump Organization bought the hotel, they made the decision to seal the stone floors with a heavy molasses-thick coating of what looked like urethane. It added the Trump-glitter effect and destroyed the historic appearance of the tile floors. The floors can be glimpsed at the beginning of the 1959 Alfred Hitchcock movie, "North By Northwest," which was filmed at the hotel. Cary Grant is seen in several shots crossing the lobby. I [John Graham] also have a sample of the tile floor, removed when an area was core-drilled. A picture taken from the film, a shot of the floor tile sample, and a photo of



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New York, NY 10003



Images, above: Current conditions at the Wilbraham Building • *below:* Proposed Plans for the Wilbraham Building. Courtesy of: Landmarks Preservation Commission

a similar stone tile floor in a designated church in Brooklyn are provided with our testimony. The tiles in the Brooklyn church are not sealed.

Drawing 37 includes a list of the proposed work that includes “Remove and dispose of non-historic front desk,” and “New mosaic flooring behind desk.” This will require repairs to the historic floor under that desk and work to join the new and old mosaics. We urge the applicants to take this opportunity, when the lobby is under construction, to remove the non-historic sealant and restore the stone floor.

We are aware that the original tile floors extend throughout a large area of the public rooms on the ground floor, but historic restoration is often done over a period of years. This would be a start. And we see, in photo 32, that there are doors between the lobby and the hotel corridors that will provide a visual break until all the floors can be redone.”

The Commission, after consulting with the project architect, approved removing the modern finish as well as the other changes the applicant showed them.



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New York, NY 10003

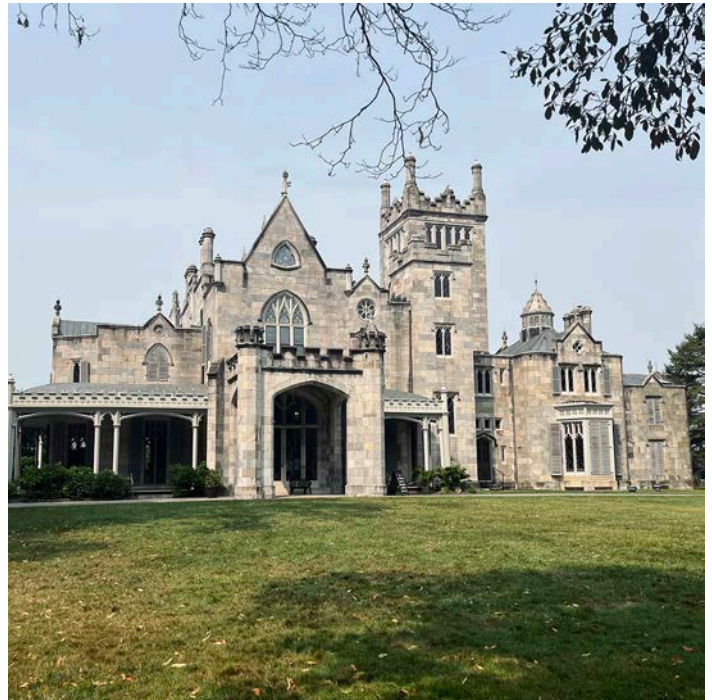


Images, top: A scene from Alfred Hitchcock’s 1959 film “North by Northwest” with Cary Grant strolling across the tile floor in the lobby of the Plaza Hotel • *above:* Detailed view of a similar stone tile floor in a designated church in Brooklyn, although the tiles are not sealed in this case. • *inset:* A small sample of the tile floor, removed when an area was core-drilled. Courtesy of: John Graham

Tours Return to VSNY! • Erin O'Connor, Co-Chair, VSNY Tours Committee

In-person tours are returning with a bang with Victorian Society New York! Chaired by Brian Coleman and Erin O'Connor, the tours committee has pledged to bring our members back to the streets—so to speak. When COVID-19 brought the world to a standstill, it affected every aspect of our lives, right down to how humans interacted on a daily basis. The pandemic brute-forced the introduction of “remote”—everything from the day job to dating to school, and yes, even tours.

VSNY has been working hard behind the scenes to build up a strong roster of new and exciting locations to explore and learn about, including not only those local to New York City, but upstate and even the tri-state area! This fall, we had our first visit as a group in several years, taking a coach bus to beautiful Tarrytown, New York, where we toured Lyndhurst, one of America’s finest Gothic Revival mansions; the house sits upon what was once the hunting grounds of the Lenape and Munsee people. Designed by architect Alexander Jackson Davis, this mansion was at one point in its history the summer home of Gilded Age robber baron Jay Gould.



VSNY members received a full tour of the breathtaking home, its lush landscape (which is being preserved and maintained according to original plans and historical documents), as well as the visiting exhibit, *Alexander Jackson Davis: Designer of Dreams*, led by none other than Mr. Howard Zar, Executive Director. We stayed afterward for a private afternoon tea in the carriage house, hosted by Bridget Bray.



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8 East 8th Street
New York, NY 10003



Images, above right: A view from the lawn of Lyndhurst, Alexander Jackson Davis’s masterpiece. Credit: Erin O’Connor. • *above, left:* Our custom afternoon tea menu. Credit: Erin O’Connor • *above:* Howard Zar and the group of happy visitors at Lyndhurst. Credit: Aleya Lehmann

Our second tour was held in our own backyard; a walking tour of Prospect Park in Brooklyn, which was hosted by the president of our local chapter, Jeremy Woodoff. Members were led on a two-hour discovery tour of the park's history, its lost features, and why that loss matters. One attendee wrote in to say, "It [Finding Prospect Park] was the very best park tour I've ever had in NYC. Sensational."

Brian and Erin continue to coordinate and schedule a number of new tours for the upcoming year that are certain to delight members, including a visit to the Lockwood-Mathews mansion, a significant Second Empire Style country home in Norwalk, Connecticut, recently re-opened after a two-year renovation project. We hope you'll join us on our upcoming adventures and continue to remain curious about, and dedicated to, the appreciation and preservation of our nation's 19th-century history.



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New York, NY 10003



Images, clockwise from top left: A view of the dining room at Lyndhurst. Credit: Erin O'Connor • A view of the piano room at Lyndhurst. Credit: Erin O'Connor • Aerial view of the The Lockwood-Mathews Mansion. Credit: Steve Turner, Courtesy of David Scott Parker Architects • Tour leader Jeremy Woodoff, in Prospect Park with attendees. Credit: Aleya Lehmann

New to the VSNY Board • The Victorian Society New York welcomes the following individuals, who have joined our Board during the past year.

Joie Anderson

Current job and homebase: Head Docent for the National Society of Colonial Dames in the State of New York, coordinating education program tied in with public schools' 4th-grade social studies curriculum; also interior designer. Lives on Upper East Side in prewar building with terracotta ornamentation.

Background: Grew up in Philadelphia suburbs; BA, University of Pennsylvania, majored in art history, specifically English and American decorative arts.

Why Victoriana? "I love the flamboyant ornateness of the Victorian era, how every little thing was decorated (like door hinges). At the same time, I am horrified by how the working classes were pretty much just left to wallow. This is one of the things that also horrified Mary Harriman and led to her forming the Junior League in 1901. I helped save the City and Suburban model tenements and organize the docent program at the Merchant's House Museum."



Charlotte Fiehn

Current job and homebase: Professor of English and Writing at Stern College at Yeshiva University, living in Hamilton Heights.

Background: Grew up in England; BA at Cambridge; MA and PhD in English at the University of Texas, now pursuing PhD in Classics at CUNY and in Jewish Studies at YU.

Why Victoriana? "I am a Victorian specialist (19th- and early 20th-century lit). I love the literature of the period and always have."



Emily Kahn

Current job and homebase: Executive Director of the New York Preservation Archive Project (@nypap_org), a nonprofit dedicated to celebrating, documenting, and preserving the history of New York City's historic preservation movement. Adjunct Professor, New York School of Interior Design. Lives on Upper West Side in a landmarked Art Deco building designed by Boak & Paris.

Background: Grew up in Westchester, NY; summered on Nantucket; studied History and Museum Studies at Colgate University, Historic Preservation at Columbia University GSAPP.

Why Victoriana? "I am a total maximalist, so I have always been drawn to the drama of well-preserved Victorian architecture with its vibrant colors and extravagant ornamentation. During college in Central New York, I saw countless dilapidated, vacant Victorian homes, and realized the opportunity for preservation to transform these homes once built for the elite into affordable housing or public resources for underserved communities."



Victorian Society New York
c/o Village Alliance
8 East 8th Street
New York, NY 10003



Matthew J. Kennedy

Current job and homebase: Writer, editor, designer, and historian; formerly at Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum; lives in East Harlem.

Background: From suburban Chicago, Purdue University undergraduate studies, Parsons School of Design MA (Decorative Arts & Design History).

Why Victoriana? “I’m fascinated by history at large. My interest in the 19th century stems from my study of theater history and LGBTQ+ studies, as well as research into the world of Sarah and Eleanor Hewitt, sisters and founders of Cooper Hewitt (as the Cooper Union Museum for the Arts of Decoration in the 1890s). I am drawn to all things design, decorative arts, theater, fashion, history, and the written word; the Victorian era was certainly a moment for all of that.”

**Aleya Lehmann**

Current job and homebase: Painter/photographer with studio in the Garment District; formerly an administrator for the Department of Photograph Conservation at The Metropolitan Museum of Art; lives in Park Slope.

Background: Born in New York City, grew up in Wilmington, Delaware; BFA in Painting, Boston University; MFA in Painting, American University in Washington, DC.

Why Victoriana? “I’ve always been sort of mesmerized by 19th-century photographs and had an opportunity while at The Met to research many of the now long-forgotten photography studios active in the late 19th century, in New York and around the country. I also have a soft spot for Victorian-era scenic landmarks!”

**Leonard Marcus**

Current job and homebase: I am an independent historian, author, book critic, exhibition curator, and educator living in Brooklyn, NY.

Background: My work is focused on children’s books and their illustration as social and cultural history, literature, and art. I am the author of over twenty-five books, am a frequent contributor to The New York Times Book Review, and have lectured across the world. I discovered my field as an undergraduate at Yale; my literary papers are now in the collection of Yale’s Beinecke Library.

Why Victoriana? “Lewis Carroll, Randolph Caldecott, Kate Greenaway, and Walter Crane are among the Victorians I have featured in books, essays, and exhibitions.”



Erin O'Connor

Current job and homebase: Mystery and spec-fic author and Gilded Age New York historian; lives on Upper East Side.

Background: Grew up in New England; BFA, School of Visual Arts.

Why Victoriana? “I’ve always been drawn to some of the lesser-known aspects of the 19th century, and avidly study Victorian mourning customs, culture along the Bowery including queer history, early women’s movements, and New York City gang warfare.”

**Grace Stokan**

Current job and homebase: Legal Counsel at Lyft; lives in Chelsea with partner Drew.

Background: From Pittsburgh; BA in History, Brown University; Cambridge, Masters of Philosophy in Early Modern History; JD, Georgetown.

Why Victoriana? “I’ve always been passionate about history and now that I’m working as a tech attorney, I was searching for ways to return to those pursuits. I love living around history, and New York is bursting with so much from the Victorian era, I was drawn to VSNY. I’m also a burgeoning antiques collector (shoutout to the Fine Objects Society) with a special interest in Victorian pieces.”

**Bethany Vickery**

Current job and homebase: Parsons School of Design adjunct professor, this fall to be teaching Topics in Decorative Arts and Design for the History of Design and Curatorial Studies Masters program; lives in Williamsburg.

Background: Grew up in Amherst, Massachusetts; undergraduate studies, Hamilton College (history major); master’s degree, Parsons, History of Design and Curatorial Studies.

Why Victoriana? “I was initially drawn to the Victorian period because of the Arts and Crafts Movement, which has always held a special place in my heart. During grad school, my research led me to consider the relationship between William Morris’s view of medieval history and his views on contemporary social issues during the Victorian era. I feel that looking back at Victorian social movements can present interesting perspectives on contemporary issues, and am eager to share my enthusiasm for the period with current and future members of the Victorian Society.”

**Margaret Wood**

Current job and homebase: Specialist and Head of Sale on the 20th Century Design team at Sotheby’s; lives on Upper West Side.

Background: Grew up in Haddonfield, NJ; BA, University of Delaware; MA, George Washington University.

Why Victoriana? “I specialized in 19th- and 20th-century wallpaper during grad school and have always been attracted to William Morris wallpapers. This love was only reaffirmed during the London study school when I was able to visit numerous sites with original Morris wallpaper!”



Victorian Society New York
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8 East 8th Street
New York, NY 10003



Recent Programs

Washington Irving, the Dutch Saint Nicholas, and the American Santa Claus • Friday, January 23, 2026 @ 6:30–8:00 p.m.,

Early 1800s Music and Dance Extravaganza! • December 10, 2025 @ 6:30–8:00 p.m.

How Boss Tweed Killed New York's First Subway! • November 13, 2025 @ 6:30–8:00 p.m.

Walking Tour: Finding Prospect Park • October 19, 2025 @ 11:00 a.m.–1:00 pm

The Queen of Bohemia Who Fought for the Poor • October 15, 2025 @ 6:30–7:30 p.m.

Queens: From Agricultural Hinterland to Vital Urban Corridor • October 14, 2025 @ 6:30–8:00 p.m.

Beyond Self-Reliance: Biography, Recovery, and Women's Contributions to the American Renaissance • September 30, 2025 @ 6:30–8:00 p.m.

A (Nearly) Unknown 20th-Century Preservation Hero: Albert Sprague Bard, a Servant of Beauty • September 17, 2025 @ 6:30–8:00 p.m.

"Alexander Jackson Davis: Designer of Dreams" at Lyndhurst • September 6, 2025 @ 9:00 a.m.–3:00 p.m.

Upcoming Programs

America's Greatest Unknown Author: Rediscovering George Templeton Strong • Monday, February 9, 2026 @ 6:30–8:00 p.m., St. Paul & St. Andrew United Methodist Church @ 263 W 86th St, New York City • Scholar Geoff Wisner will lecture on the Civil War diaries of George Templeton Strong, which offer unique insights and first-person encounters with Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, Edwin M. Stanton, and others—told with Strong's wicked humor. [Tickets!](#)

Love and Loss After Wounded Knee: Two Star-Crossed Lovers and the Event that Changed Everything • Thursday, February 26, 2026 @ 6:30–8:00 p.m., St. Paul & St. Andrew United Methodist Church @ 263 W 86th St, New York City • Scholar Julie Dobrow will lecture on her new book about Elaine Goodale and Ohiye S'a, or Dr. Charles Alexander Eastman, 19th-century Indian education and policy advocates who defied their era's norms, fell in love, and were determined to marry—until the Wounded Knee Massacre changed everything. [Tickets!](#)

Museum Tour and Irish Heritage at Lockwood-Mathews Mansion • Saturday, March 21, 2026 @ 10:00 a.m.–12:00 p.m., Lockwood-Mathews Mansion, Norwalk, CT • Lockwood-Mathews mansion is one of the earliest and most significant Second Empire-style country houses in the US. A rare opportunity to visit before public hours for a tour of the mansion, including the Irish heritage exhibit, which will be unveiled the week of St. Patrick's Day. [Tickets!](#)

Stay Tuned • Emerging Scholars Presentations • Margot Gayle Fundraiser • Annual Meeting • Coming up later this Spring!



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8 East 8th Street
New York, NY 10003



Images, at left: On the grounds of Lyndhurst on September 6th with Howard Zar, Executive Director. Credit: Aleya Lehmann • *above right:* George Templeton Strong, whose Civil War diaries will be the subject of a talk on February 9th. Courtesy of: Geoff Wisner



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Images, clockwise from upper left: Sitting down for tea with director Howard Zar at Lyndhurst on September 6th. • Program co-chair Eve Kahn and Board member Emily Kahn stand by while author Tony Wood signs copies of his new publication *Servant of Beauty* on September 17th. • A full house for Kate Culkin and Patricia Valenti's presentation on "Women's Contributions to the American Renaissance" on September 30th. • After Eve Kahn's talk on October 15th, program attendees line up to purchase her new book on journalist/social-justice activist Zoe Anderson Norris. • Jeremy Woodoff leads the group through Prospect Park on October 19th, noting where lost architectural treasures once stood. Credits: Aleya Lehmann • On December 10th, a stellar group came together for our "Music and Dance Extravaganza" including, from the left: dancer, actor, and scholar DeWitt Fleming Jr. performing Black-Irish tap dance; author April Masten and cultural historian John Reddick, who organized the evening; vocalist, musician, writer, and VSNY Board member Christina Britton Conroy; instrumentalist and singer Hubby Jenkins playing old-time banjo; legendary fiddle player Gabe Terracciano; and VSNY Board Vice President and Lectures Co-Chair, Eve Kahn. Credit: Matthew J. Kennedy

Panorama Contributors: Most sincere thanks to the following contributors for this relaunch issue of our quarterly newsletter: Jared Lamenza for his article on the “Urban Erben” • Louis L. Picone and Bruce M. White and the White House Historical Association for the article on Grant’s Tomb • Jeremy Woodoff and John Graham for compiling testimony text • Erin O’Connor for writing up the latest on our tours • Eve Kahn for assembling new Board bios • Aleya Lehmann, Bethany Vickery, and Matthew J. Kennedy for design, layout, and copyediting.

Editor • Eve M. Kahn
Managing Editor • Aleya Lehmann
Committee • Erin O’Connor, Matthew J. Kennedy, Bethany Vickery, and Jeremy Woodoff.

JOIN US! Our active and growing membership contributes to the development and vitality of our programming. Please join as a student, young professional, seasoned professional, patron, or in one of our business membership categories. You may access [membership information](#) or a [donation form](#) on our [website](#) or with the QR code below!



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Board of Directors • The twenty-one-member Board of VSNY is an all-volunteer group of individuals passionate and knowledgeable about all things Victorian!

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Acknowledgements • We extend heartfelt thanks to all those who contribute in varied and important ways to VSNY, especially to our over 100 members and patrons, thank you! As an all-volunteer non-profit (with no office and no staff!) we rely on the energy and smarts exhibited by the many brilliant authors, lecturers, presenters as well as venue hosts. All of our programs and services are organized and implemented by our Board committees including: Annual Meeting, Archives, Hospitality, Lectures, Margot Gayle Fund, Communications, Membership, Preservation, Tours, and Newsletter.

Mission • Founded in New York City in 1966, the Victorian Society in America is dedicated to fostering the appreciation and preservation of our nation’s 19th-century heritage as well as that of the early 20th-century (1837–1917). The Victorian Society New York (VSNY), the oldest of numerous chapters now flourishing throughout the USA, is an independent nonprofit organization affiliated with the national Society.

Membership contributions at any level help to provide the foundation for all that we do—from our lecture series, walking tours and excursions, to our grant and awards programs honoring worthy preservation projects in New York. Members also help provide scholarships to the Victorian Society in America Summer Schools for advanced study. Donations to the Margot Gayle Fund make possible monetary grants for preservation and conservation of Victorian material culture in our region.



**CELEBRATING 60 YEARS
 1966–2026**

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