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An Astonishing Discovery in the Bronx

• John Carini, Volunteer, and Margaret Holmes, Director, Van Cortlandt House Museum with Joie Anderson, Board Member, VSNY and Educator, National Society of Colonial Dames in the State of New York

Van Cortlandt House is the oldest house in the Bronx. Built in 1748 for Frederick Van Cortlandt, the house remained in the Van Cortlandt family for 150 years. In the 1880s, the family sold the estate to the City of New York, creating what is now Van Cortlandt Park. The National Society of Colonial Dames in the State of New York opened the house as New York City's first historic house museum in 1897 and continues to steward the site today.

On July 2, 2026, Joie Anderson spoke with Museum Director Margaret Holmes and Volunteer and Collections Specialist John Carini about the unexpected discovery of a remarkable collection of historic fans, which inspired the exhibition "Unfolded Ornament: Fans from the Collection."

Joie Anderson: Thank you, Margaret and John, for agreeing to speak with me. I really enjoyed the exhibition *Unfolded Ornament: Fans from the Collection* at Van Cortlandt House Museum and thought it would be interesting for our readers to learn more about it. First, how did you come across these fans?

John Carini: I am a volunteer and the Collections Specialist at Van Cortlandt House Museum. For many years

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Image: A stunning—and probably 18th-century—fan (detail) where the sticks are the thing. Pierced, gilded, and painted with elaborate scrollwork, the sticks and guards make a statement. Held together with opal stones and a fancy metal hoop. Courtesy, Van Cortlandt House Museum



my primary assignment has been cataloging the collection. When I came across these objects, all together in a box, there was very little provenance information, and they had not been captured in any earlier inventory. I added them to our database and brought them to the staff's attention. That led to a discussion about the possibility of an exhibition.

JA: Where were they?

JC: The fans were found neatly wrapped in tissue and packed away in a box in our storeroom.

Margaret Holmes: After the exhibition opened at VCHM, New York Society member Dorinda Hawkins generously donated a collection of fine 18th- and 19th-century hand fans and cases. They were added to the exhibition when it traveled to NSCDNY Headquarters on 71st Street.

JA: Why Fans?

JC: The genesis of the exhibition was simply coincidence and serendipity. Just as I discovered the box of fans in storage, we had emptied a small display cabinet from our gift shop. We decided we could put on a show. We also carved out a small space in the stair hall of the house and, before long, *Unfolded Ornament: Fans from the Collection of the Van Cortlandt House Museum* was born. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first special curated exhibition presented in the house in anyone's memory.

JA: How long do you think they've been at Van Cortlandt House Museum?

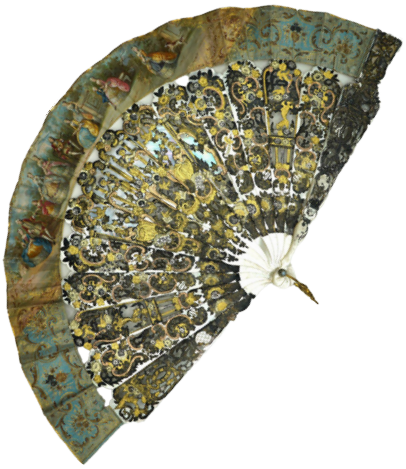
JC: The fans were boxed and stored in our curatorial storage for, I suspect, almost one hundred years. In the early years of

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Images: *top left in the circle:* A signature image, a fan with highly carved lace-like ivory sticks and guards and a paper leaf. The central panel is painted with a mythological scene of neo-classical design. The color remains vibrant. • *on the right:* A fan with a double-sided paper leaf ornately painted, all supported by carved and pierced ivory sticks. Held together by a decorative brass ring and mother-of-pearl stud. • *on the bottom:* A small fan with a leaf of lace supported by sticks and guards of ivory and mother-of-pearl. Typical of a Victorian-era wedding fan. In remarkable condition, usable today!! Courtesy, Van Cortlandt House Museum







the Colonial Dames administration, they presented special curated exhibitions several times a year. These temporary exhibitions included porcelain, portrait miniatures, kitchen utensils, and needlework, assembled by the Dames themselves along with outside curatorial assistance. I suspect these fans were used in such an exhibition many years ago. This is speculation, as I have not come across any mention of a fan exhibition in our records. Nor was there any signage or printed matter stored with the fans. In the first half of the 20th century, these exhibitions were often organized and curated by Alice Garner Burnell Lockwood. Her husband, Luke Vincent Lockwood, was a guiding light in the early years of selecting furniture and objects for this collection.

JA: Was there any information with them?

JC: Unfortunately, there was very little documentation found with the fans. After researching records in our archives, I found evidence of ownership for several of them. One dates to the 18th century and belonged to a member of the de Peyster family. We also have two fans from the Rhinelander family, circa 1800, that were unfortunately unfit for exhibition but would have been dazzling with their gilded ivory sticks, silk leaves, and silvery sequined decoration.

JA: In what condition were they?

JC: Given their age, the majority of the fans were in a remarkable state of preservation. That was the real surprise



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Images: *top left:* This silk leafed fan is decorated with classical scenes in roundels surrounded by stitched sequins, adding sparkle. Supported by pierced and painted ivory sticks and guards. • *top middle:* A brise highly carved, lace-like ivory fan, the sticks held together with a pink silk ribbon. Probably of Chinese origin, this fan is said to have come from the de Peyster family and was a gift in 1909 of Miss Christina Mount. • *top right:* A stunning—and probably 18th-century—fan where the sticks are the thing. Pierced, gilded, and painted with elaborate scrollwork, the sticks and guards make a statement. Held together with opal stones and a fancy metal hoop. • *above right:* Opening the drawer and discovering the fans, neatly tucked away, for over a century! Courtesy, Van Cortlandt House Museum

of the discovery. Unfolding these objects and seeing their startling color and condition was astonishing. The sticks and guards, made of ivory, mother-of-pearl, or sandalwood, were in wonderful condition and were enhanced with gems, mirrors, and small portraits. The leaves, made of silk, wood, or lace, were painted and gilded in bright colors and embellished with sequins. A number of them were stable enough to be used today.

JA: Did you have to do any restoration?

JC: The fans we presented did not require restoration. They were in good enough condition to be exhibited as found. Other fans in the box had condition issues and were not included in the exhibition.

JA: The research and information you provided to accompany the exhibition are wonderful. Did you know anything about fans before you started putting it together?

JC: Not specifically about fans. By researching online and consulting reference books, I found a great deal of useful information. The online collections database at the Victoria and Albert Museum was an excellent resource for visual information and comparison. Putting together this exhibition was an enlightening and enjoyable experience for me, and I think for the whole staff.

JA: How and when did fans become such an important accessory in the United States and, before that, in Europe?

JC: Fans were used on and off for centuries. In the modern era, their popularity peaked during the second and third decades of the 18th century, tapered off toward the end of the century, and increased again after the Federal period (after c. 1830). Fashion in the United States generally followed trends established in Europe, so fans would have been used during the same cycles.

JA: The fans you found are quite elegant. Did only upper-class women use them? Were they luxury items?

JC: Yes and no. The fans in our exhibition were indeed luxury items used by fashionable and wealthy women. They were made from high-quality and, in some cases, rare materials. Some were embellished with gems and miniature portraits, and many were gilded. At the same time, there were also inexpensive fans made of paper, wood, or papier-mâché that served as practical everyday objects.

MH: Once commercial lithography processes improved in the late 19th century, decorated fans could be printed quickly and inexpensively, making mass production possible. This allowed working-class women to afford fans that were both attractive and useful.

JA: Who came up with the "language of the fans" and the culture of their use?

JC: I believe the "Language of the Fans" was developed by the French company J. Duvelleroy during the height of the fan craze. They published *Le Langage de l'Éventail* to promote their products and reinforce the romantic notion that fans were used as a secret means of communication and seduction. Whether that was actually true is debatable. As Joseph Addison wrote in 1711, "Women are armed with fans as men are with swords and sometimes do more execution with them."

MH: It was exciting to watch John and our staff research and assemble this exhibition. It renewed our enthusiasm for our exceptional collection and its interpretation. We look forward to developing more exhibitions like *Unfolded Ornament* and sharing these remarkable objects with our visitors.



Image: The newly acquired fans from Mrs. Roland J. Hawkins in the exhibition at the Headquarters of the National Society of Colonial Dames in the State of New York. Courtesy, Van Cortlandt House Museum

Art of the Olmsted Landscape, Revisited • Jeremy Woodoff, Co-Chair, Preservation Committee, VSNY

Recent projects in New York's Olmsted-designed scenic landmarks have been troubling to those of us who advocate for a restoration approach to these great scenic works of art. The Department of Parks, along with the Central Park Conservancy and Prospect Park Alliance, have proposed and won approval for the insertion in the parks of modernist buildings, large active recreation facilities, construction of raw concrete access ramps, obliteration of historic landscape features, replacement of naturalistic, soft-surface paths with hard-edged steel "boardwalks," and creation of sites reflecting particular political and socio-historic points of view. The review agencies tasked with regulating work in these parks—the Landmarks Preservation Commission and the Public Design Commission (once known as the Art Commission)—have for the most part approved these applications with few or no revisions. It was not always thus, and now seems a good time to revisit a pivotal moment in the understanding and regulation of scenic landmarks.

The construction and reconstruction of city parks has been within the purview of the Public Design Commission since 1898. It wasn't until 1974 that the Landmarks Commission could designate and regulate scenic landmarks. Before that it could designate only buildings and historic districts. A few parks were regulated by dint of being within a district boundary—such as Fort Greene Park and Washington Square Park—or the landmark site of an individual landmark, such as City Hall Park, which is the landmark site of the designated City Hall. By the end of 1980, five of the City's Olmsted and Vaux parks had been designated, all except Morningside. Today there are twelve scenic landmarks, including Morningside.

Because of the fiscal crisis of the 1970s, little work was done in the parks following these early scenic landmark designations, and thus the Landmarks Commission had little to regulate. Beginning in the early 1980s, as the city once again had capital funds to spend in the parks and the new Central Park Conservancy and Prospect Park Alliance began raising private funds, more projects appeared on the Commission's docket for review. It quickly became clear that the Parks Department was still using many of the standard landscape designs and details that had been



developed during the mid-century Robert Moses years. While New Yorkers were accustomed to these types of designs in their parks and they were for the most part pleasant enough and easily installed and maintained because of their standardization, they were not appropriate to the nature of Olmsted's Victorian-era parks. The Conservancy and Alliance, whose mandates were for restoration and maintenance of these parks, knew they would need to produce master plans that looked to the historic designs of the parks for inspiration. And the Landmarks Commission recognized that, to effectively regulate work in the parks, it needed a deeper understanding of Olmsted and Vaux's vision and the techniques they used to implement it.

Kent Barwick was appointed chair of the Landmarks Commission by Mayor Edward I. Koch in 1978. He went quickly to work on strengthening the agency's role in the regulation and preservation of scenic landmarks. A major initiative was the Olmsted Project. With grants from the Arthur Ross Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities he hired four people to staff the project: Gail Travis Guillet as director; Bruce Kelly, landscape architect, as curator; Mary Ellen W. Hern, editor; and Murray Gelberg, designer. Along with permanent LPC staff, the Olmsted Project team undertook research on Olmsted and Vaux's work in New York and around the country, located and copied historic visual materials including drawings and photographs, and took new photographs in the City's Olmsted parks to illustrate the importance of experiential sequences in understanding how these parks were designed.

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Image: A view of the special exhibition *Art of the Olmsted Landscape*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Charles Engelhard Court, September 17–November 1, 1981, showing the tables with photographs and text, end walls of additional illustrative material, hanging banners, and an enormous model of the park. Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY

At the same time, the staff developed guidelines for submission of applications by the Parks Department for work in scenic landmarks and for review of such work by the Landmarks Commission.

During this time, both the Central Park Conservancy under Elizabeth Barlow Rogers and Prospect Park Alliance under Tupper Thomas were producing master plans for the parks' restoration and maintenance. Bruce Kelly was also advising the Conservancy, along with landscape architect Phillip Winslow and Conservancy staff members Judith Heintz and Maryanne Cramer. In Prospect Park, Rex Wasserman and Ralph Carmosino led the way. At the same time, the Parks Department under new Commissioner Gordon Davis brought in architect and preservationist Bronson Binger to head Parks' capital projects division. At the Art Commission, Phil Winslow and then Nicholas Quennell served as landscape architect members who understood the importance of Olmsted's historic designs and could guide proposals to ensure they were oriented toward preservation and restoration. There was, in short, a confluence of interests and objectives among the planners, designers, and review agencies to bring our great Olmsted and Vaux parks back from the brink and restore them to their original glory.

The most public facing of these efforts was led by the Landmarks Commission, whose Olmsted Project staff was preparing for an exhibition and catalogue called *Art of the Olmsted Landscape*. The exhibition was mounted in the American Wing Courtyard at The Metropolitan Museum of Art from September 17 to November 29, 1981. The slip-cased catalogue was published by the Landmarks Preservation Commission in 1981 and consisted of a main volume with ten essays and a slim volume focused on New York City Olmsted parks.

The exhibition was reviewed by Paul Goldberger in *The New York Times*, who called it "as clear an introduction to the work of Olmsted and his partner, Calvert Vaux, as one could ask for. It is based on a correct understanding of Olmsted's multifaceted nature—he was not solely an esthetician or solely an engineer or solely a social scientist, but a remarkable blend of all three." Goldberger continued, "The exhibition presents Olmsted and Vaux's parks as a series of landscape experiences, from formal to informal, from ordered to rustic, all woven together in a carefully wrought sequence. The intent was not just the simple provision of open space, but the more subtle goal of providing visual and psychological relief from the density of the 19th-century city and a chance for different social classes to mix easily. It was Olmsted's notion that urban parks would thus further the democratic ideal." Goldberger went on to describe "An impressive and exceedingly elegant catalogue [which] has been published to accompany the exhibition, and in its wealth of historical photographs alone it provides a contribution to the Olmsted literature."

The exhibition in The Met's courtyard was centered by an enormous scale model of Central Park, which had been constructed by Joseph and Adrienne Bresnan, architects, preservationists, and longtime Parks employees. The Bresnans began working for Parks in 1965 and 1970, respectively. Along with park curators Henry Hope Reed (Central Park) and Clay Lancaster (Prospect Park) they initiated the earliest restoration planning of the modern era for New York's Olmsted parks. While a few of their proposals were implemented—including restoration of the cast-iron Ladies' Pavilion in Central Park, where they met and fell in love—much of their planning had to be shelved because of the city's fiscal crisis.

Around the central model were display tables of photographs and text illustrating the principles behind Olmsted and Vaux's designs. Banners hung from the ceiling and wall display panels closed each end of the exhibition. Lush potted



Image: A large wall display inside the exhibition focused on Olmsted's work in New York City. Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY



plants filled the space to provide a "park-like" atmosphere, though Central Park itself was visible through the windows of the American Wing Courtyard.

The *Art of the Olmsted Landscape* exhibition and catalogue, the research and regulatory activities of the Landmarks Commission, a sympathetic interest in historic landscapes at the Art Commission, and the restoration emphasis of the Parks Department, Central Park Conservancy, and Prospect Park Alliance led to an extraordinary period of revival for New York's long-neglected historic parks, from the 1980s into the 1990s. The quality of projects proposed for review by the Landmarks Commission was on the whole very good; where necessary, the Commission worked closely with the Parks Department to bring the designs up to a higher standard. The Art Commission recognized the expertise of Landmarks; there were few disagreements among these agencies.

This period saw the restoration of the Harlem Meer (including construction of a neo-Victorian pavilion there), Bethesda Terrace, Cherry Hill, and the Mall and Concert Ground in Central Park, along with many smaller landscape projects and recreation of long-lost rustic structures. In Prospect Park the central water course was restored all the way from the Pools at the Long Meadow to the Lake, the Boathouse and Oriental Pavilion were restored as was Lullwater Bridge and Meadowport and Cleft Ridge arches. Rustic bridges were rebuilt and the park's perimeter was reconstructed.

Change began to occur as the 1990s wore on. Several gifted designers who had been involved with both parks died from complications related to AIDS. Others left their positions at Parks, the Conservancy, and Alliance for other jobs. The second generation of planners and designers largely upheld the vision of the early pioneers, especially while Betsy Rogers and Tupper Thomas remained at the helms of the Conservancy and Alliance. But with their retirements and continued staff replacement, the restoration vision became dim and now seems on the verge of going out entirely. Recent projects include modernist structures at Lasker

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Image: The centerpiece of the exhibition, an enormous scale model of Central Park, shows the park as it was completed. Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY

Rink in Central Park (now the Davis Center) and the Lefrak Center in Prospect Park. The historic landscape at the Rose Garden in Prospect Park is being destroyed. Soft-surface paths installed at the Harlem Meer in the 1990s—a rare example of what original paths in the park were like—are being ripped out in favor of an engineered, steel boardwalk at the Meer's edge; changes in the name of "accessibility" are resulting in engineered, urban-feeling landscapes spoiling the parks' naturalistic character. Most ominously, politically oriented installations and virtue-signaling schemes that fill the landscape with objects are being proposed for Prospect Park.

At the same time, the two design review agencies have abdicated their responsibility for meaningful stewardship of scenic landmarks. The Landmarks Commission, whose reviews have always been technically advisory, now emphasizes that point and does not require changes to design proposals. At most, it makes suggestions for changes in its reports and sends them along to the Public Design Commission for final action. That agency no longer has expertise in historic landscape design and generally approves what the Parks Department proposes. If it does mandate changes, they are often in the direction of emphasizing modern design rather than restoration or recreation of missing historic features.

Discussions by commissioners at the two agencies when they review projects are disheartening. Reference is rarely made to Olmsted and Vaux's design principles, and the impact that proposals will have on historic landscape features including all-important views and sequences aren't discussed.

The *Art of the Olmsted Landscape* exhibition traveled to several other venues after leaving The Met. Alas, the display tables and panels appear to no longer exist, and the large model of Central Park is stored in pieces somewhere in the park. The photographs used in the exhibition are, however, still in the Landmarks Commission's library, and the catalogue could be used to recreate the show. While it appears that no one is planning a new exhibition on the *Art of the Olmsted Landscape*, we can hope that a new generation will soon recognize that our Olmsted and Vaux landscapes are again in danger from those who ignore or are ignorant of the principles behind these great works of art.



In 1983, less than two years after *Art of the Olmsted Landscape* exhibition closed at The Met, the Museum released a 25-minute film documentary called *Olmsted and Central Park*, part of its series *At the Met*. After not being available for decades, the Museum has recently posted the documentary on their website. There is a very brief image of the exhibition near the start of the film.



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Image: *above:* Joseph and Adrienne Bresnan, Parks Department employees, built the model to aid in the design of the restoration of the park, largely initiated on their watch in the 1960s and 1970s, but carried out only later because of the fiscal crisis of the 1970s. Courtesy, Joe and Adrienne Bresnan • *below:* The exhibition catalogue, two volumes in a slip-case, for *Art of the Olmsted Landscape*, published in 1981 by the Landmarks Preservation Commission. Credit: Aleya Lehmann

Under Fire: Immigrant New York and How the Safety Infrastructure of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Was Forged In Fire. • Deborah Wolfson, New York Studies and Public Scholarship Master's student, CUNY Graduate Center

Walking through New York, you are surrounded by roof tank water towers but may not notice. Walking through any hallway, you can see an illuminated exit sign above a door that opens outward by a crash bar even if that door is locked, but may not take them in. These design aspects are so ubiquitous and deeply ingrained in our built environment they're rendered invisible by their very success. It's easy to take the slow, plodding pace of fire protection for granted, but modern safety begins in the urgent rush of necessity of 19th century New York City.

Roof tank water towers are spoken of, if at all, as part of the trifecta of technologies that enabled the skyward rise of New York in the late Victorian era: steel, elevators, and roof tanks to supply water above the six floors that the pressure from New York's gravity-fed water system easily allowed. Water towers provided a reservoir that daily use could draw from, using gravity without needing the unsustainable power required to bring water up from city mains. In the 19th century, they were built by Isseks Brothers Tanks or Rosenwach Tank Company, respectively founded in 1890 by five immigrant brothers from Imperial Russian Poland, and Harris Rosenwach, a carpenter from outside Warsaw, who purchased and reorganized Dalton Barrel Company in 1896.



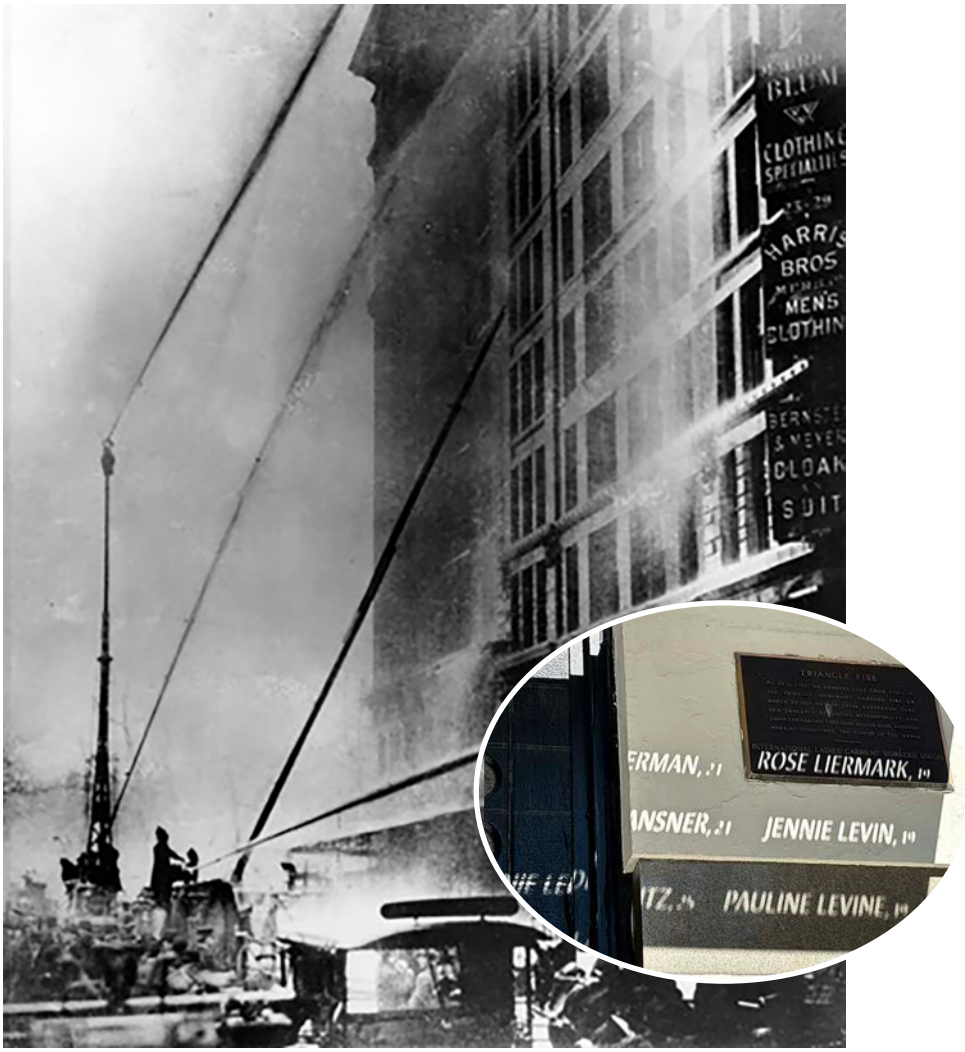


Roof tanks discovered an ally in the insurance industry. As early as 1874, New York City had become a test case for a new rating system by the National Board of Fire Underwriters of the United States. Fires were a high and extremely expensive risk. In balancing the need for fiscal security with the public backlash against rising costs, one compromise in determining rates was consideration for an ample water reserve for the fire department's use in any emergency. This meant the reservoir provided by roof tanks was a smart investment for building owners and that the independent standpipe they provided was essential for fire-suppression.

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Images: *above, left:* A water tower on Eldridge and Division Streets, between the rear windows of the synagogue of the Eldridge Street Museum and the MTA's Second Avenue Power Station. Credit: Deborah Wolfson • *above, right:* A Greenwich Village water tower, pictured on March 25, 2025, framed by an FDNY ladder raised six stories as part of the annual Triangle Fire commemoration. The Asch (now Brown) building is on the left. Credit: Deborah Wolfson • ***N.B.: this article is an excerpt from a presentation made on May 5, 2026 as part of VSNY's Emerging Scholars program sponsored by Li/Saltzman Architects.***





And then on March 25, 1911, someone dropped a cigarette. In most spaces, that would be a throwaway moment, but on the eighth floor of the Asch Building, at a cutting table in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, it was a grenade. With no safety protocols, managers tried to fight the fire when they needed to evacuate, and fled instead of warning others. Fire escapes terminated in a locked courtyard over a glass panel. They collapsed under the weight of fleeing workers. Doors were locked as a means of bottlenecking workers at the end of the day for bag checks, or they opened inward toward the fire. One stairwell had lighting and roof access, but the other had only a skylight, and was so narrow that when one employee fainted in a panic, no one could move. In the half an hour it took to get the blaze under control, 146 people had died.

The tragedy of the Triangle fire does not mean that many hadn't seen it coming. In 1909's Uprising of the 20,000, the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) Locals 23-25 went on strike for months. Chief among their demands were improved safety conditions, which were not in the resulting contract. In January of 1911, just weeks

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Images: *left:* A mangled fire escape on the Asch Building after the Triangle Fire. Unknown Photographer, 1911. Courtesy, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation & Archives, Image 5780pb39f15a • *right:* Triangle Burning: The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory burning, March 25, 1911. Photo: The Brown Brothers, 1911. Courtesy, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation & Archives, Image 5780pb39f20aa • *inset:* The landmark plaque on the Asch (now Brown) Building, placed in 1961 with the names of the Triangle victims in shadow cast by the 2023 memorial. Credit: Deborah Wolfson

before the fire, the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) had run a fire safety campaign, soliciting and collecting information on dangerous working conditions from workers across the city.

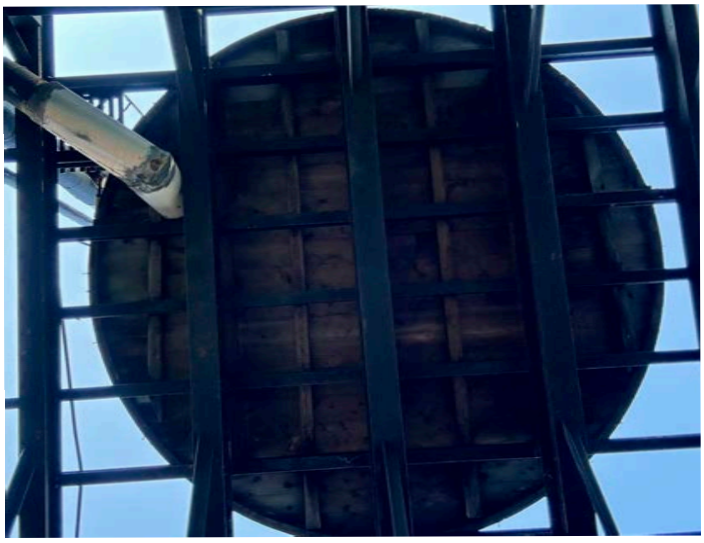
The efforts of the ILGWU, WTUL, and other allies meant that when the governmental response came, they had a head start. City Hall reacted with the Fire Prevention Act of 1911, as well as the creation of the Bureau of Fire Prevention, which investigated whether stairwells and fire safety plans were adequate and if safety measures like fire alarms and sprinklers were functioning. In Albany, the 1911 Factory Investigation Commission passed dozens of laws on safety regulations, reshaping our doors, our hallways, the lighting in our stairwells, and our exit protocols. It reorganized and increased funding to the state Department of Labor and created an Industrial Board that set the Industrial Code: workplace regulations with the force of law behind them.

I look at the advent of these safety infrastructures—New York's water towers and its post-Triangle Industrial Code—together for several reasons. One is simply that the workers behind each of these necessities in our built environment were from the same generation of immigrants. The families who first built New York's roof tanks and many of the workers who swelled the ranks of the garment industry would have been landsmen in Europe and neighbors in New York.

Secondly, this approach allows us to reconsider the framing of the regulatory response to the Triangle fire. Describing these legislative and infrastructural gains as merely a precursor to the New Deal tilts the achievement away from the workers who organized so tenaciously and more toward the allies who, by social, religious, or immigration status, fit more comfortably into nationally prominent roles, while reducing New York from leader to subject. If we are speaking of our built environment, then discerning how it was built and who built it is vital to our understanding. "Top down" is extremely effective in gravity-fed water distribution systems, but not in furthering our knowledge of labor movements.

Lastly, looking at this era of safety infrastructure becomes a needed intervention against the terms even well-meaning advocates use in speaking of immigration; that a place in America is earned by the highest achievements: a New





American "American Exceptionalism." Whether defense or demand, this expectation presumes a level of visibility that is not warranted by history and the contributions subtly woven into the fabric of our built world. That is not indicative of their significance: rather, they are so essential that we would only notice their absence. In examining the infrastructure, physical and regulatory, that undergirds the spaces we move through, we can deepen our sense of connection to this city and the New Yorkers who came before us.

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Images: *above:* A close up of a mid-town roof tank water tower. At this distance, the vertical slats are visible, as are the closures on the metal hoops enclosing the planks. Credit: Deborah Wolfson • *below:* The underside of a roof tank water tower, with an outflow pipe visible on the upper left corner to provide water for fires and other emergencies. Credit: Deborah Wolfson

From Marble to Moving Image: The "White Slave" in American Visual Culture, 1847–1913

• Sam Simons, Master's degree student, Bard Graduate Center, specializing in Public Humanities, Digital Humanities, and Museum Studies.

In August 1847, artist Hiram Powers introduced his sculpture *The Greek Slave* to New York City audiences, and before the year's end, scantily dressed tableaux vivants performers adapted the figure for the stage (Figs. 1 & 3). In 1913, record crowds flocked to the premiere of *Traffic in Souls*, an early feature-length silent American film (Fig. 5).[1] Each sparked heated debates over art and obscenity, and used New York City as a launching pad to national acclaim. Central to each was the "white slave" figure—a young white woman trafficked into sex slavery. Tracing the figure across these works reveals how she moved from marble to stage to screen, becoming a pillar of 19th- and early 20th-century American visual culture.

The Greek Slave was the first widely celebrated nude in American art, and by some accounts, the most viewed 19th-century American artwork.[2] Living in Florence, Powers had the opportunity to study the Uffizi's *Venus de Medici*, upon which *The Greek Slave* was modeled.[3] From the ancient Roman Venus statue to Orientalist odalisque paintings by Powers's contemporaries, the female nude was well-established in European art.[4] However, American courts prosecuted such representations under newly established obscenity laws.[5] Introducing *The Greek Slave* to American audiences required considerable strategy.

Powers's studio created a pamphlet guiding viewers toward a chaste interpretation of his sculpture's nudity. It explained the subject as "a Grecian maiden, made captive by the Turks and exposed at Constantinople, for sale. The cross and locket, visible amid the drapery, indicate that she is a Christian, and beloved."[6] Included was an influential review from Reverend Orville Dewey who exclaimed that



[1] Christopher Diffee, "Sex and the City: The White Slavery Scare and Social Governance in the Progressive Era," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2005): 414.

[2] William H. Gerdts, *The Great American Nude: A History in Art* (Praeger, 1974), 89.

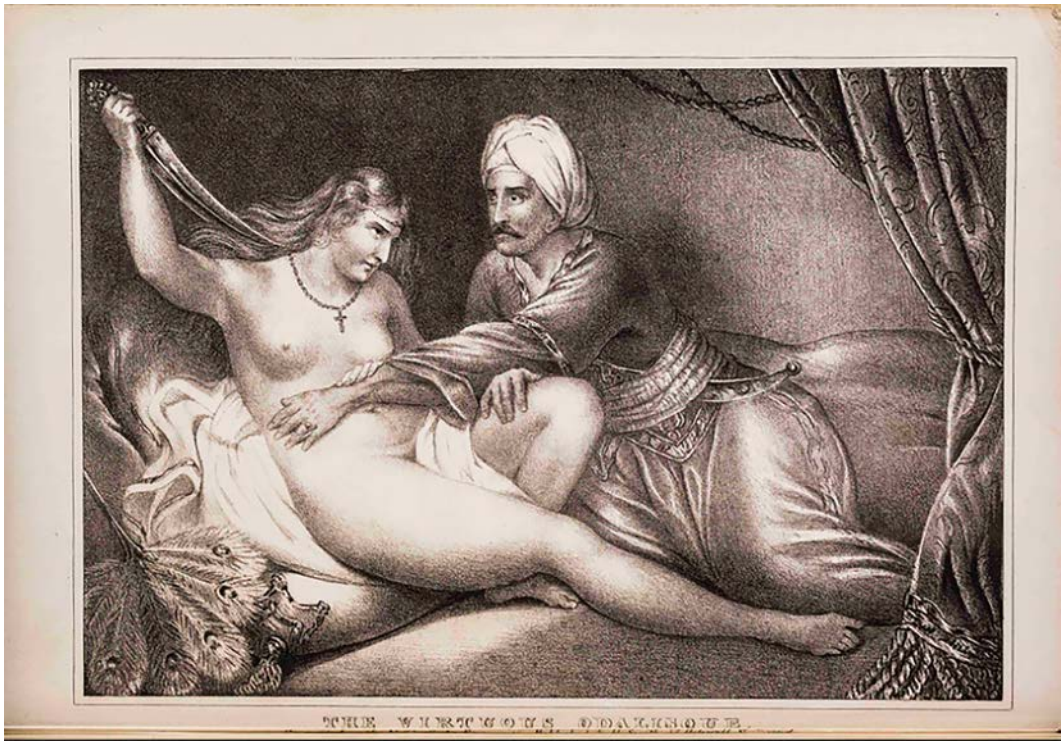
[3] Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny, *Taste and the Antique: The Lure of Classical Sculpture, 1500-1900* (Yale University Press, 1981), 118.

[4] Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (W.W. Norton, 2010), 433.

[5] Donna I. Dennis, "Obscenity Prosecutions and Their Consequences in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America," *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law* 16, no. 1 (2007).

[6] *Powers' Statue of the Greek Slave*, New York: R. Craighead, printer, 1847, p. 4, *Sabin Americana: History of the Americas, 1500-1926*, digital archive.

Image: *Figure 1:* Hiram Powers (American, 1805–1873), *The Greek Slave*, modeled 1841–43, carved 1846, Serravezza marble, 167.5 cm. Courtesy, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. • ***N.B.: this article is an excerpt from a presentation made on April 28, 2026 as part of VSNY's Emerging Scholars program sponsored by Li/Saltzman Architects.***



the statue was "clothed all over with sentiment, sheltered, protected by it from every profane eye."[7] Emphasizing her "innocence and helplessness," Dewey framed The Greek Slave's exposure as beyond reproach.[8] Yet the pamphlet's insistence on the sculpture's chasteness raises an important question: were there foreseeable unchaste associations that his studio worked to suppress?

An answer lies in Orientalist erotica circulating in Europe and the United States throughout the early 19th century. The most famous was *The Lustful Turk* (1828), a novel featuring virginal Christian European women trafficked into Ottoman harems.[9] Within, one Greek slave character is described as "tall and slender," her complexion "fair as a lily," and her disposition as "melancholy resignation."[10] "The Virtuous Odalisque" (1842–44) print depicts the novel's second Greek slave wearing a necklace with a cross pendant (Fig. 2). From their fair skin and facial expressions to the cross pendant, *The Lustful Turk*'s Greek slaves resonate unmistakably with Powers's sculpture.

While there is no evidence to suggest that European women were routinely trafficked to the Ottoman Empire, the erotic fantasy invited audiences to imagine themselves as submissive maidens or the all-powerful "rich and rapacious oriental despot," in the words of literary scholar Colette Colligan.[11] When Powers translated The Lustful Turk's odalisque from ink into stone, he amplified that invitation by placing his Greek Slave at an auction, presenting viewers with a choice: would they be horrified witnesses or eager buyers?

[7] *Powers' Statue*, 17-19.

[8] *Powers' Statue*, 17-19.

[9] Colette Colligan, "Obscenity and Empire: England's Obscene Print Culture in the Nineteenth Century," Ph.D. diss., (Queens University, Ontario, 2002), 96.

[10] *The Lustful Turk*, London, possible first edition, 1828, p. 57, Sex Research: Early Literature from Statistics to Erotica from the Kinsey Institute Collection, Sex and Sexuality, Sixteenth to Twentieth Century Archive.

[11] Colligan, "Obscenity," 89; 943.

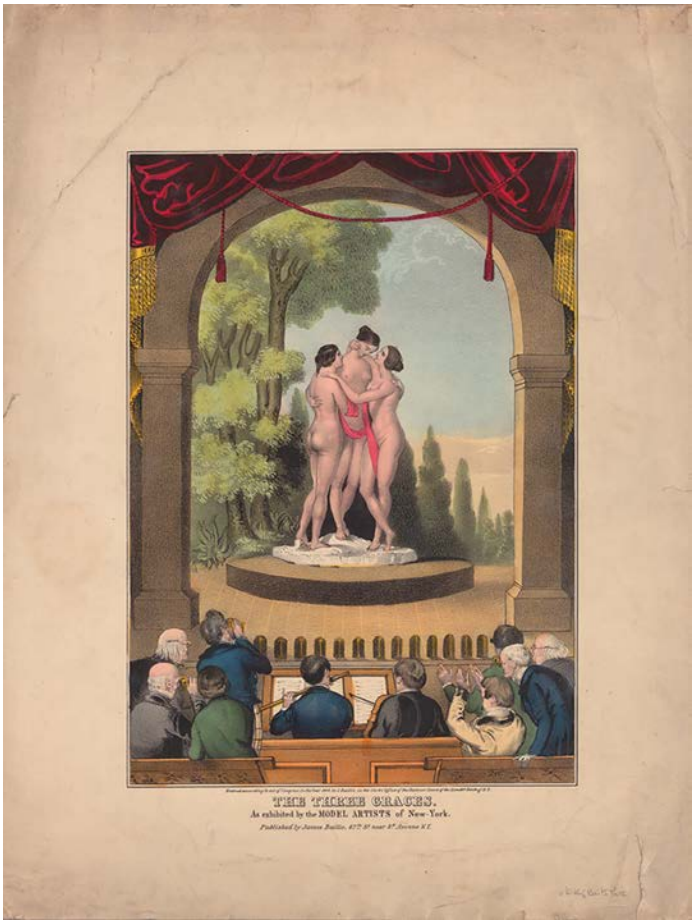
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Image: Figure 2. "The Virtuous Odalisque," plate illustrating a scene from *The Lustful Turk*, featuring a Grecian slave character, from *The Exquisite: A Collection of Tales, Histories, and Essays*, printed and published by William Dugdale, under the pseudonym H. Smith, England, 1842-1844. Archives of Sexuality and Gender. Courtesy, the British Library Collection (P.C.20.B.1, p. 40).

That ambiguity both fueled the sculpture's success and destabilized its claim to moral respectability. Soon after *The Greek Slave* debuted, it was adapted for the stage in "Model Artiste" shows—a type of tableaux vivants with scantily costumed performers striking poses, often on revolving pedestals (Fig. 3).[12] As stage managers leaned into erotic spectacle, broadsides boasted of ever-growing casts of female performers and newspapers reported on the police raids that followed (Fig. 4). A testament to their popularity and profitability, Model Artiste shows persisted despite the raids. As historian Jack W. McCullough observed, "It was not moralistic condemnation which brought about the downfall of tableaux vivants, but a new form of 'living pictures'—moving images on a screen."[13]

By the Progressive Era at the turn of the century, American culture was saturated with white slavery representations—appearing on theater screens and landmark legislation alike. The White Slave Traffic Act of 1910, known today as the Mann Act, was the first general federal legislation to regulate sex.[14] Born from an unsubstantiated panic that international trafficking rings were abducting white women into sexual slavery, the law prohibited transporting women across state lines for commercial sex or "any other immoral purpose."[15] To enforce the vaguely worded Act, the government funded a nationwide project with field offices, special agents, and "White Slave Officers" in each state.[16] Concurrently, the panic was expressed in the "slaver" film genre, which historian Richard Abel described as "the most sexually explicit and popular of their day."[17]

Traffic in Souls was the most celebrated of the slaver films (Fig. 5). The film follows Lorna Barton, a candy-shop worker lured into a trafficking ring after an ill-advised visit to a co-ed dance hall. The first thing viewers learn about Lorna is that she is less responsible than her sister Mary, who is bright, chaste, and ultimately saves Lorna. Unlike



Powers's blameless *Greek Slav*e, Lorna's carelessness is the cause of her misfortune—aligning the archetype with Progressive-Era values of personal responsibility and feminine respectability.[18]

The combination of technological novelty and a familiar white-slavery narrative in Traffic in Souls proved a winning

[12] Jack W. McCullough, Living Pictures on the New York Stage (UMI Research Press, 1983), 19–20; Gillian M. Rodger, Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima: Variety Theater in the Nineteenth Century (University of Illinois Press, 2010), 23–27.

[13] McCullough, 131.

[14] Jessica R. Pliley, *Policing Sexuality: The Mann Act and the Making of the FBI* (Harvard University Press, 2014), 3.

[15] "The Mann Act," PBS, https://www.pbs.org/kenburns/unforgivable-blackness/mann-ac.

[16] Pliley, *Policing Sexuality*, 7.

[17] Richard Abel, "White Slave Films," in *Encyclopedia of Early Cinem*a (Routledge, 2004), 998.

[18] Janet Staiger, *Bad Women: Regulating Sexuality in Early American Cinema*, (University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

***Image**: Figure 3:* James S. Baillie's 1848 hand-colored lithograph, *The Three Graces: As Exhibited by the Model Artists of New York*, provides a rare illustration of Model Artiste performances. 44 x 33 cm. Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society

one. At its premiere, Joe Weber's Theater reportedly sent away a thousand hopeful attendees, and its impact grew exponentially over its first month, spreading to twenty-eight theaters in New York City, grossing over $450,000 (over $15 million today).[19] The National Film Registry praised the film's technical and narrative achievements, stating that "its length was nearly unheard of" (it ran ninety minutes) and that it "presaged the Hollywood narrative film."[20] Like Powers's *Greek Slave*, *Traffic in Souls* offered audiences erotic titillation disguised as moral concern.

Across nearly seven decades and four mediums—from print and marble to stage and film—New York City's audiences were trained to identify and consume the white slave figure. Adapted from Orientalist harem fantasies, Powers's *Greek Slave* flourished in the American market, inspiring new artistic representations of youthful white women in captivity. By staging the figure with living performers, Model Artiste





shows made explicit what marble only implied: audiences' erotic viewing pleasures. With cinema technologies, *Traffic in Souls* adapted the figure for Progressive-Era audiences, cementing the white slave's durable presence in American visual culture. Each iteration used New York City as its stage, confirming the adage: if you can make it here, you can make it anywhere.

[19] Diffee, "Sex and the City," 414.

[20] "Brief Descriptions and Expanded Essays of National Film Registry Titles," National Film Preservation Board, https://www.loc.gov/programs/national-film-preservation-board/film-registry/descriptions-and-essays/.

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***Images**: Figure 4, at left:* "Arrest of the Model Artists," illustration of police raiding a Model Artiste show, *National Police Gazette* (New York, New York), April 1, 1848: 1. *Readex: American Underworld: The Flash Press*, NewsBank. Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society. • *Figure 5, at right:* Theatrical release poster for Traffic in Souls, 1913. While at work, Lorna leans on a counter as a white slave trafficker approaches her from behind. Her sister Mary observes with concern. Distributed by Universal Film Manufacturing Company (Universal Pictures). Courtesy Wikipedia Commons.

Hearings Report: Landmarks Commission • John Graham, Co-Chair, VSNY Preservation Committee

Since 1965 the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission has had the responsibility of identifying, designating, and regulating historic buildings within the five boroughs. The LPC now reviews changes to over 38,000 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, the 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 usually read into the record at each hearing by Christina Britton Conroy and John Graham, and occasionally by other members of the Preservation Committee.

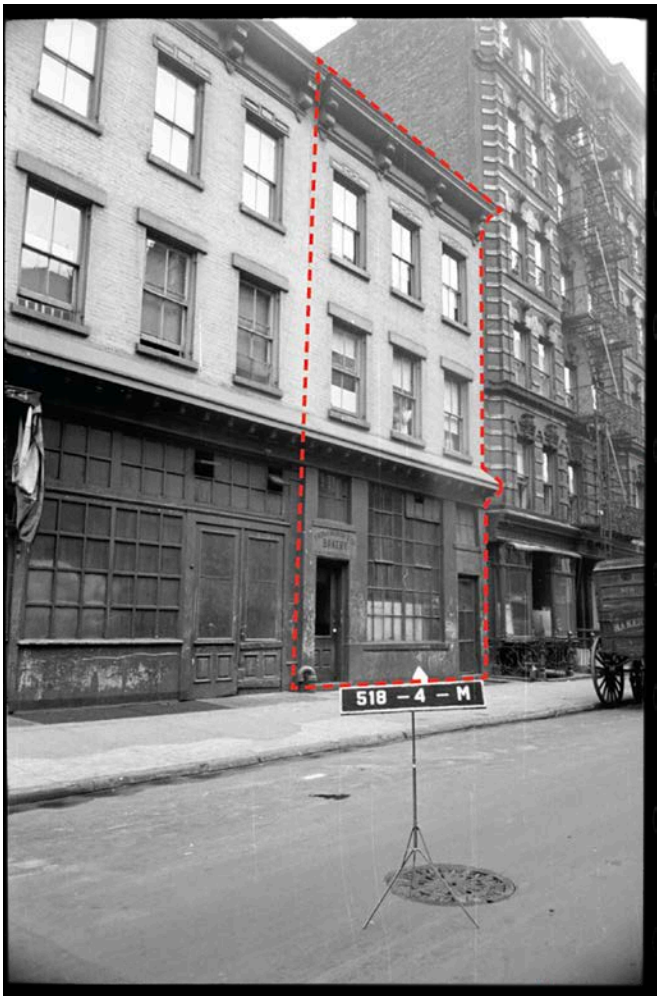
Two recent proposals presented interesting problems: our response to these problems, and our testimony, appear below.

LPC-26-10632 — 44 MacDougal Street — Sullivan-Thompson Historic District, Manhattan, July 14, 2026

This application is an example of the way the Landmarks Preservation Commission and the VSNY reviews proposals for work at buildings that have had several significant alterations. Preservationists often talk of the importance of returning designated buildings to their original appearance. Occasionally this is conceptually easy—remove the modern aluminum siding, restore the wood clapboards, and you're there. But in New York's older neighborhoods it becomes much more complicated.

44 MacDougal Street is a brick row house constructed in 1826–27. According to the designation report, it originally had two stories with basement and attic. There are no historic photographs or drawings showing the original appearance. In 1875 the building was raised a half story, its peaked roof was replaced with a flat roof, and a metal cornice was added. In 1922 architect Frank E. Vitolo lowered the basement and first floor by three feet to make the first floor level with the street. The façade below the second floor was redesigned to





Images: *above:* The Landmarks Preservation Commission recently relocated to newly renovated offices, pictured above. Commissioners and LPC staff are seated around a U-shaped table, and members of the public, included those testifying, are seated audience-style; those testifying may also do so via Zoom. • *below:* New York City Department of Taxation "tax photo" c. 1940 of 44 MacDougal Street. Courtesy, LPC

accommodate these changes. In 1985 the owners removed a portion of the redesigned façade to create a street-facing garage.

There are similar houses on adjacent lots, at 46 and 48 MacDougal, but the three, built by different contractors, are not parts of a row. Most of the other buildings on the block are six story tenements constructed in the late 19th century. The applicants proposed several changes, including the construction of rear yard and rooftop additions, replacement of ground floor infill, and new two-over-two double hung windows on the upper floors of the street façade. The presentation included several historic 1940s tax photos showing similar two-over-two windows on the upper floors, a drawing showing rear yard additions at the adjacent properties, and a drawing showing that the rooftop addition would be visible from some locations in conjunction with the taller building at 40 MacDougal.

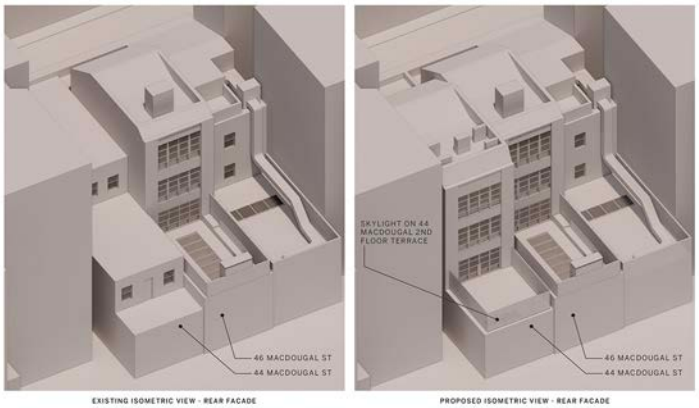
We testified the following:

Good morning, Commissioners, John Graham for the Victorian Society New York. We don't object to the visible rooftop or rear yard additions because of the specific circumstances. There is a similar rooftop addition next door, the addition would be seen against taller buildings, and the rear yards on the block have already been severely compromised.

The front of this building has been significantly altered at various times, making it difficult to return it to a stylistically consistent form while keeping its remaining historic features. We think the applicant has made a good effort to mediate among these features and produce a coherent whole. The two-over-two windows match those in place following the addition of the third floor later in the 19th century. Returning the ground floor to the more industrial aesthetic it had in the 1920s, which would eliminate the suburban-looking modern garage door, also seems to be a reasonable approach. We think the overall treatment creates a coherent whole, which fits nicely into the block.

The Commission essentially agreed with our reasoning. The application was approved.







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Images: *above, top:* Current view of 44 MacDougal Street, with 46 to the left. Courtesy, LPC • *above, middle:* Isometric view of the rear façade, 44 MacDougal Street, indicating current conditions, and proposed plans. Courtesy, LPC • *above, bottom:* View at left of the existing conditions of the front façades of 46 and 44 MacDougal Street, and on the right, 46 and 44 MacDougal with proposed changes to 44. Courtesy, LPC

LPC-26-08905 — 215 West 57th Street, The American Fine Arts Society — Individual Landmark, Manhattan, May 19, 2026

This application is an example of one possible response of the LPC and the Victorian Society when an applicant is proposing to remove non-original material, in place when the building was designated, to allow additional alterations. Under the Commission's rules, any material in place at designation is protected. The Commission has no power to force a building owner to remove modern plastic shutters or aluminum siding or neon pink paint or any other non-historic material installed prior to designation. However, if an owner wishes to remove such material, the LPC requires that the applicant submit an application. It may then be reviewed at either staff level or at a public hearing.

This application for work at the Fine Arts Society had two parts. The first was for the removal of painted wood letters, surface-mounted to the stone façade above the main entrance, reading "THE ART STUDENTS LEAGUE OF NEW YORK." (The League has been the owner of the building since 1941.) The second part asked to be permitted to carve the same sign, in the same location, directly into the stone. The style of letters would match lettering carved into the stone in plaques at the third floor. Small light fixtures would be installed to the underside of the string course directly above the letters.

This building, designed by architect Henry Janeway Hardenbergh, was built in 1891–92 for three associated groups: the Art Students League, the Society of American Artists, and the Architectural League. It was designated in 1968, three years after the LPC was created. Hardenbergh was also the architect for the Plaza Hotel, the Dakota Apartments, and other NYC Landmarks.

The applicant included several historic photographs of the building in their presentation. These showed that the letters carved into the stone at the third floor are original to the building, that the painted wood letters were not in place above the doors in the 1920s, and that they had been installed prior to designation.

Both the VSNY and the Commission had no problems with the removal of the painted wood letters. They are clearly a





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Images: *above:* LPC designation photograph of the Art Students League building main façade on West 57th Street, 1968. Courtesy, LPC • *below:* View of the building, with wood lettering affixed to the main entrance entablature, c. 1950s. Courtesy, LPC

later alteration, the materials don't match historic materials on this façade, and they are in a worn condition. The idea of carving into the original stone was the big concern here. This type of alteration is essentially irreversible. Even if you were able to locate stone from the original quarry, the surface texture of stone installed in 2026 would never match the texture of the stone installed in 1892.

In this case there were several factors that argued for our support. The Art Students League has been in this location since 1892, they own the building, the new lettering would match the historic lettering on the third floor, and the proposed lighting is modestly scaled.

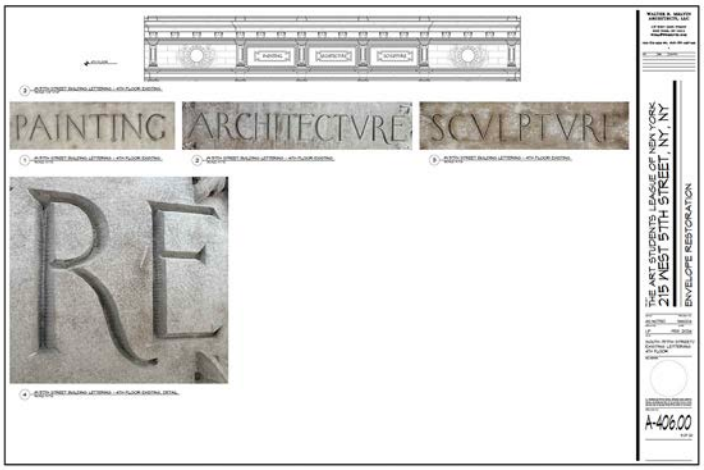
We testified the following:

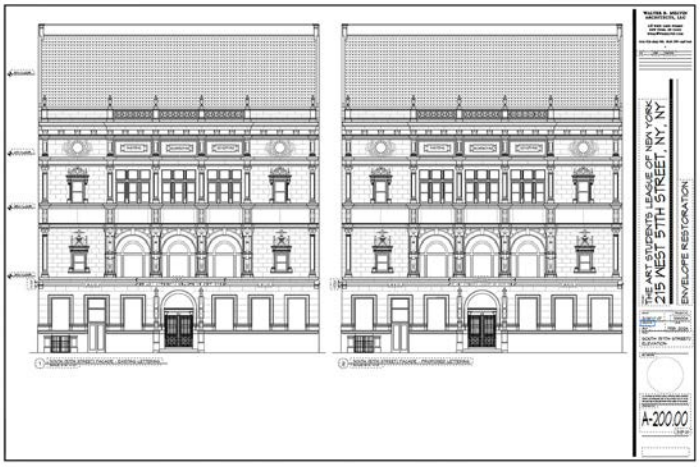
Good afternoon commissioners, John Graham for the Victorian Society New York. We testify in support of this application. VSNY would typically oppose permanent physical alterations to historic material of the kind proposed here. However, because the building continues to be occupied by the organization for which it was built 134 years ago, we think such a change is appropriate in this case. The applicants have presented a tasteful and period-appropriate alteration. We appreciate that the font for the new text on the facade will match what is already there, and the lighting will nicely accentuate this new lettering, while remaining unobtrusive.

The Commission essentially agreed with our reasoning. The application was approved.









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Images: *above, left:* View of the Art Students League, West 57th Street, 2022, showing original lettering above the third floor. Courtesy, LPC • *above right, top:* Existing lettering, upper floors, West 57th Street. Courtesy, LPC • *middle:* Examples of proposed lettering. Courtesy, LPC • *bottom:* Restoration sketches. Courtesy, LPC

Annual Meeting: President's Welcome • Jeremy Woodoff, President, VSNY

Welcome to the 60th Anniversary Annual Meeting. I will start with a few thank-yous, firstly to Natasha Donnelly and the House of the Redeemer, who with VSNY (and House of Redeemer) Board member Emily Kahn, have made our presence here possible, and also to musicians Jason Bae and Eric Chen. Special thanks go to our generous sponsors, all involved in building preservation—often Victorian buildings. Many are here—look for nametags and speak with them about their work. Their support has helped our fully volunteer organization meet expenses for all of our programs and services, and most recently, for acquisition of a new membership records system that will finally allow members to access their membership records online—this is a thrilling move into the 20th century! And finally, special thanks to Barbaralee Diamonstein-Spielvogel through her foundation, for a large, unexpected, and unsolicited grant. But more than the important benefits these funds bring to us, they show that the larger community has confidence in and appreciation of the importance of the Victorian Society's work.

And what is this work? The same things we've been doing for 60 years! To study, appreciate, conserve, and preserve the social and material culture of the fascinating era we call "Victorian." By Victorian we mean the period starting in 1837 when Victoria ascended the throne until her death in 1901. But we typically extend that, as the Victorian sensibility did not end immediately upon Victoria's death. Also, because New York City is filled with fabulous buildings from the first two decades of the 20th century. We finally call it quits in 1917 and let the Art Deco Society take it from there.

Sixty years is a long time to be doing this, and this reminds us that the Victorian Society itself has a history. We're fortunate that we have had Board members who've maintained our physical archives. In celebration of our 60th year, we've set up a little exhibit of photographs and ephemera in the lobby areas, which we invite you to look at following the meeting. Much centers around Margot Gayle, one of the founders of the Victorian Society in America and a giant in early preservation history in New York. In the spring issue of our newsletter, *Panorama*, which you'll receive at the end of the reception, you'll find a fabulous history of the early years of the Victorian Society written by former VSNY Board member James Russiello, currently on the VSA Board. And inside this edition is a facsimile of the fourth newsletter we published, the Winter 1967 issue.

The Victorian Society is believed to be the first private preservation advocacy organization in the city. It predates any official New York State preservation agency and was in formation at the time of the enactment of the city's powerful landmarks law—in fact, the only photo documenting the signing of the bill was taken by Margot—it's on our 60th anniversary display. She, and the Victorian Society, encouraged two early adaptive re-use projects—turning the Jefferson Market Courthouse into a library and turning the Astor Library into the Public Theater, advancing the argument that old buildings can be repurposed. Her advocacy for all things cast iron led to the founding of Friends of Cast-Iron Architecture and put the final nail in the coffin of Robert Moses's Lower Manhattan Expressway that would have destroyed SoHo and much of Lower Manhattan. It encouraged interest in aspects of the city's character not often considered, like historic cast-iron lampposts and sidewalk post clocks, both of which were eventually designated, as was SoHo, by the Landmarks Commission.

It's been said by others that preservation defeats are permanent while preservation victories are temporary. Buildings and artifacts deteriorate, owners change, interests flag, the political winds shift, the Landmarks Commission gets captured by the real estate industry, and the likes of Open New York and their advocates use simplistic high school economics to claim that landmark designation contributes to a housing shortage. So we must remain vigilant and continue and expand our preservation advocacy.

But on a more positive note, we'll now hear from some of our hard-working board members who will go into more detail on what we've been up to during the last year, and where we hope to go in the next. We'll present our Annual Awards and Margot Gayle grants. Then we'll say goodbye to a few of our current board members and elect new ones and officers. The music will start up and our reception will begin.

Jeremy Woodoff

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N.B.: This essay is an excerpt from Jeremy Woodoff's President's Report at the Annual Meeting on the evening of Thursday, June 11, 2026, at the House of the Redeemer, a Victorian-era mansion on the Upper East Side.

2025 Award Winners & Margot Gayle Grantees

• Bruce M. White, First Vice President, Board of Directors, VSNY

On the evening of June 11, 2026, at the House of the Redeemer on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, the VSNY presented our Annual Awards to individuals and organizations in recognition of their outstanding contributions to the understanding, appreciation, and preservation of 19th-century art, architecture, and culture in the New York Metropolitan area. Awardees in categories ranging from publications to exhibitions to preservation initiatives included authors, curators, archivists, architects, educators, and preservationists. VSNY Board member and White House Historical Association photographer Bruce M. White was on hand to document the proceedings. Pictured here are the accepting awardees who joined us that evening and the VSNY board members who announced and presented each award.







Anthony C. Wood, Author, *Servant of Beauty: Landmarks, Secret Love, and the Unimagined Life of an Unsung New York Hero*. This book is the true story of Albert Sprague Bard (1866–1963) and his two all-consuming passions: his love of beauty in the public realm that would forever change New York City and his love for a younger man that would forever change him. Bard fought for cities to have the right to protect their beauty, which propelled him into a David-versus-Goliath combat with Robert Moses. Thanks largely to Bard, we have the New York City Landmarks Law (1965).

April F. Masten, Author, *Diamond and Juba: The Raucous World of 19th-Century Challenge Dancing*. In the tumultuous years before the Civil War, Irish-American John Diamond and African-American William Henry Lane, known as Juba, became internationally famous as competitors in the art and sport of challenge dancing. April F. Masten's dual biography reconstructs the lives and work of these extraordinary dancers, casting fresh light on their contributions to the history of American popular culture.

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Images: *from the top:* The audience in the Library during the Awards Ceremony. • Tony Wood, Author, with presenter Christina Conroy. • April Masten, Author, with Presenter Christina Conroy. Photographs © Bruce M. White

Courtney Chartier, Director, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University. The Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Columbia University has been fastidious in preserving many important 19th- and early 20th-century documents. An esteemed cultural institution, the Library's collection encompasses treasures from all around the globe. Its holdings include approximately 4,500 archival collections and more than half a million volumes, spanning over 4,000 years of the written word.



Fr. Henry Torres, Pastor, Sacred Heart Parish, Mary Nazareth Church, and Carlo Zaskorski, Zaskorski & Associates Architects, AIA, PC. One of the results of the rapid 19th-century urbanization of Brooklyn is a wonderfully rich and varied collection of historic churches. Sacred Heart Church, designed by Thomas F Houghton in 1873, is one of these: a beautiful Gothic Revival structure that stands between Fort Greene and the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Unfortunately, like many buildings that are more than 150 years old, Sacred Heart Church was showing its age. In 2023, the Parish made the decision to embark on a comprehensive program to inspect, document, and restore both the exterior and interior of this church.



Debby Hirshman, Center at West-Park. Debby Hirshman has demonstrated tireless work and advocacy to save West-Park Presbyterian Church through the Center at West-Park. With the Center at West-Park, Debby has provided affordable spaces for arts and cultural organizations needing studio space and space for performances in an effort to fund the preservation of West-Park and get long-standing scaffolding removed. This is no small feat in the middle of Manhattan or given that West-Park Presbyterian terminated their contract and the Center at West-Park has moved a block away to St. Paul and St. Andrew United Methodist Church. She has mobilized the community to overwhelmingly testify at community board meetings and before the Landmarks Preservation Commission.



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Images: *from the top:* Courtney Chartier, Columbia University Rare Book & Manuscript Library, with presenter John Graham. • Father Henry Torres, Sacred Heart Parish, and Carlo Zaskorski, Architect, with presenter John Graham. • Debby Hirshman, The Center at West-Park, with presenter Alexis Mucha. Photographs © Bruce M. White

Kenneth Cobb, Assistant Commissioner, NYC Department of Records and Information Services. Kenneth Cobb was honored for his work in the NYC Department of Records and Information Services, through which all the city records pass. Throughout his career, beginning in 1977, he has been instrumental in turning the Municipal Archives at the Department into the largest local government archive in North America and a vital, highly accessible resource for professional and amateur researchers worldwide. Over his decades of service, Cobb has identified and transferred more than 120,000 cubic feet and 300 terabytes of records to the Archives collections. Cobb has made the New York City Municipal Archives open and welcoming, transforming the model of what archives should be.



Rev. Dr. Katrina D. Foster, Metropolitan New York Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Since her ordination in 1994, Rev. Dr. Katrina D. Foster has become known for her work revitalizing Lutheran churches whose physical buildings and congregations are on the verge of collapse. She accomplishes this through community organizing and building financial support among churchgoers and the wider neighborhood, currently at St. John's Lutheran Church in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. In addition to providing a meeting space for community groups and youth activities, she has created discretionary funds to help people with everyday expenses and offers financial literacy classes for congregants. Foster has turned buildings that were only open for church services to vital community centers with open doors.



Emma Gencarelli, Film, Photography & Collections Coordinator; Krystyn Hastings-Silver, Assistant Director & Collections Manager; Steven Baltsas, Architectural Historian at Lyndhurst Mansion, for the exhibition *Alexander Jackson Davis: Designer of Dreams*. Through the exhibition Alexander Jackson Davis: Designer of Dreams, Lyndhurst Mansion reintroduced the genius and influence of the architect and designer in 19th-century Gothic historic architecture and design. Alexander Jackson Davis was a visionary architect who shaped America's architectural dreams, but also its architectural realities. A man after the Victorian Society's own heart, Davis decried the American habit of demolishing buildings simply because tastes had quickly changed and his American clients needed to keep up with their wealthy peers and instead he advocated for saving houses from demolition.



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Images: *from the top:* Kenneth Cobb, NYC Department of Records and Information Services, with presenter Alexis Mucha. • Rev. Dr. Katrina Foster, with presenter Alexis Mucha. • Emma Gencarelli, Krystyn Hastings-Silver, and Steven Baltsas, from Lyndhurst, with presenter Alexis Mucha. Photographs © Bruce M. White

Karli Wurzelbacher, Curator, Heckscher Museum of Art, for the exhibition *Emma Stebbins: Carving out History*. Most people know Emma Stebbins through her Angel of the Waters sculpture at Bethesda Terrace, in the heart of Central Park. Curated by Karli Wurtzelbacher, this exhibition at the Heckscher Museum of Art was the first to recognize Stebbins as one of the most significant American sculptors of the 19th century. The exhibition showcased most of the sculptor's rare extant work, including fourteen of her sculptures, archival materials documenting lost and unrealized works, and a portrait drawing.



Matthew White, Author, *New York Minute: Public Clocks that Make the City Tick.* Michael White's book, about public clocks in New York, has a perfect title. And, despite its small physical size (approximately six by eight inches), this is actually a big book, in content and in spirit. The public clocks described and illustrated are beautiful objects. But they are treated as stand-ins—almost metaphors—for the city's architectural beauty and heritage, the importance of historic preservation, the need for attention to detail, public spiritedness in designing our physical environment, and the importance of public spaces to the individual and social health of the city and its residents.



Kevin Lee, Mina Marcos, Sofia Zuberbuhler-Yafar, DDC; Zong Jiang, Emily Weidenhof, Mina Boutros, DOT, for the Historic Street Reconstruction Project, DUMBO/Vinegar Hill. DUMBO (Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass) is an old industrial area on Brooklyn's downtown waterfront. Vinegar Hill is an adjacent residential neighborhood. This project reconstructed one-and-a-half miles of historic streets, sidewalks, and plazas, while also replacing deficient underground utilities. This was likely the largest historic street reconstruction project in the city's history. It was undertaken by two city agencies: the Department of Transportation and the Department of Design and Construction. Historic materials were reused with matching new materials brought in when necessary. Rebuilt sidewalks and streets were designed to be accessible and to accommodate bike usage.



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Images: *from the top:* Karli Wurzelbacher, Heckscher Museum, with presenter Jeremy Woodoff. • Author Matthew White, with presenter Jeremy Woodoff. • Sofia Zuberbuhler-Yafar, Mina Marcos, Kevin Lee, and Zong Jiang, representing the joint DDC and DOT project with presenter Jeremy Woodoff. Photographs © Bruce M. White

The Margot Gayle Fund for the Preservation of Victorian Heritage was established in 2003 to honor Margot Gayle, co-founder of the Victorian Society in America and preservationist extraordinaire. Our organization regularly awards monetary grants from this fund to projects related to the preservation, conservation, and/or interpretation of material culture in the New York Metropolitan area from c. 1837 to 1917. Pictured here are this year's grant awardees who joined us at the House of the Redeemer on June 11, 2026, along with VSNY board member Grace Stokan, emcee for the presentations.



Deann Akins, Board of Directors, Friends of Bogardus Plaza. Friends of Bogardus Plaza will produce a children's educational program on Victorian timekeeping and the historic mechanical post clock in Bogardus Garden. Bogardus Plaza in TriBeCa, Manhattan, is home to one of the only remaining hand-wound public clocks in New York City, a restored 1910 Seth Thomas Tower Clock. Every week, a community volunteer winds the clock by hand, exactly as clock winders did when it was built. FBP is launching The Timekeepers Program, a series bringing children from local schools to the plaza to learn how the clock works, explore the history of Victorian-era public timekeeping, and engage directly with a piece of living mechanical heritage in their own neighborhood.



Curator Gabriella Leone and Assistant Curator Colyn Hunt, Historic Richmond-Town. Historic Richmond-Town will expand the digitization of its Victorian-era shoe collection by an additional dozen pairs, increasing public access to this significant material-culture resource available through the organization's online collections database and Bloomberg Connects digital guide. This project builds on the successful launch of the exhibition *Shoes: Two Centuries of Style and Function*, which opened in August 2025 and has since reached thousands of visitors.



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Images: *from the top:* Another view of the audience in the Library during the Awards Ceremony. • Deann Atkins, Friends of Bogardus Plaza with presenter Grace Stoken. • Gabriella Leone and Colyn Hunt, from Historic Richmond-Town, with presenter Grace Stokan • Photographs © Bruce M. White

Executive Director Kelsey Brow, King Manor Museum. The King Manor Museum will purchase a historically appropriate, 1830s antique frame and framing services for a newly identified portrait of John Alsop King. The portrait was rediscovered during a recent collections assessment when museum staff determined that the previously unidentified sitter was John Alsop King, an influential 19th-century political leader, abolitionist, and reform advocate. This project is significant because it preserves and interprets the legacy of a public figure whose contributions to New York political history and anti-slavery activism remain deeply relevant today.



Director Jason Antos and Queens Historical Society Board members Paul Salerni and Patricia Sherwood, Kingsland Homestead and the Queens Historical Society. The organization's plan for production of an educational brochure documenting objects in the house's Victorian Parlor. The Victorian Parlor at the Kingsland Homestead (house, c. 1775) presents a snapshot of 1870s Flushing middle-class family life. Many of the pieces in the room are original to the house, including the grandfather clock from c. 1800. Every year, hundreds of visitors tour the Queens Historical Society at Kingsland Homestead. The brochure—which visitors can either use on the tour or take with them as a keepsake—will tell the story of each item in the Parlor and illuminate Victorian life.



A special treat—Bruce White, a VSNY Board member who has been photographing the White House since the Clinton Presidency, provided each guest at our Annual Meeting with a special edition of the scholarly journal *White House History Quarterly*, a publication he contributed to and which is produced by his client, the White House Historical Association. This organization was founded by Jaqueline Kennedy when she was First Lady as a bipartisan, educational institution with a mission to educate the public about the White House and the Office of the President. This issue of the *Quarterly* focuses on the White House and its connections to New York.



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Images: *top:* Kelsey Brow, King Manor Museum, with presenter Grace Stokan. • *middle:* Jason Antos and Patricia Sherwood, Kingsland Homestead and the Queens Historical Societh with presenter Grace Stokan. Photographs © Bruce M. White • *bottom: White House History Quarterly, The White House and New York*, distributed to each guest, a special issue focusing on New York City.

















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Images: VSNY Board Members, Members, Awardees and Guests at the Annual Meeting & Awards Ceremony on Thursday evening, June 11, 2026, at the House of the Redeemer, a Victorian-era former Vanderbilt home on the Upper East Side in Manhattan. Photographs © Bruce M. White

















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A Remembrance: Hilda M. Regier • James Russiello, Board of Directors, VSA

Hilda Mae Regier (London VSA Summer School 2016) passed away peacefully in the early morning hours of February 15, 2026, shortly after the traditional application deadline for the Margot Gayle Fund for Preservation of Victorian Heritage, a fund Hilda helped to organize.

Hilda was born on May 1, 1934, to descendants of German Mennonite farmers in Goessel, Kansas, retaining many family heirlooms with her over the years. She earned a BA at Bethel College, North Newton, and enrolled in a PhD program at Iowa State University, earning an MA in journalism there before moving to New York City for practical experience, remaining there until 2022 when she relocated back to North Newton to be closer to family. Hilda worked in the trade press, later writing for medical journals, and eventually being an editor of a medical journal before later pursuing a career in freelance journalism.

Hilda moved in the 1970s to Chelsea, the now tony Manhattan neighborhood, at a time when it was very much up and coming. As president of the Council of Chelsea Block Associations in 1973, Hilda led community opposition against a large federal project that would have disturbed the historic residential enclave, which had been designated a historic district in 1970. After residing in a basement apartment,





she purchased the 1846–1847 rowhouse at 325 West 22nd Street that had long been divided into multiple housing units, eventually moving into residence at the double parlor level and then painstakingly restoring the paint-decorated wall surfaces that she discovered under layers of later paint. This continued as neighboring properties flipped through LLCs in the gentrified neighborhood, new owners cleared out old tenants, gutted properties, and constructed large additions. After a neighboring construction mishap that landed a girder through the wall and one of her parlor chimneypieces in 2014, Hilda resumed restoring the space, eventually finding a new matching chimneypiece, and always proudly showing off her restoration work to various groups, including a last time in August 2021 to Victorian Society friends where with great effort she showed a concealed paneled storage niche for dining table extension leaves. Hilda delighted in hosting envelope-stuffing parties on her dining room table or in rear garden where she had planted a white dogwood.

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Images: *above, left:* In the garden behind 325 West 22nd Street. Credit: James Russiello • *above, right,* Hilda Mae Regier (1934–1926). Courtesy, Chelsea Community Church











Hilda attended local community boards and events for decades, and was a strong force for historic preservation in the city. She was a longtime director of the local preservation group, Save Chelsea!, and was term-limited twice after two ten-year stints on the board of the Metropolitan Chapter of the Victorian Society in America (Victorian Society New York), organizing many tours, lectures, mailings, and newsletters, last serving as the chapter president from 2014 to 2017. She was also a founding member of the Chelsea Community Church in 1975, still located within the landmarked St. Peter's Episcopal Church on West 20th Street. She was buried at the Tabor Mennonite Church in Newton, Kansas, on February 23, 2026.

A memorial was held on Sunday, April 19, 2026, at the Chelsea Community Church in New York City. The church posted an obituary and photo slideshow.

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Images: *above left:* Hilda holding up dining table leaf extensions from a concealed niche, August 2021. Credit: James Russiello • *at right, from the top:* Margot Gayle, Joyce Mendelsohn, and Hilda Regier, May 2006. Courtesy, VSNY • Kathleen Bennet, Bill Dane, Hilda Regier, and Elizabeth Broman, April 2013 at the Forbes Gallery. Courtesy, Pauline Metcalf • Kathleen Bennett and Hilda Regier, September 2017. Credit: James Russiello • Richard Guy Wilson, Hilda Regier, and James Russiello. Courtesy, Pauline Metcalf

A Remembrance: Mary M. Cope • James Russiello, Board of Directors, VSA

Mary M. Cope (October 11, 1928–May 5, 2026), a long-time member and supporter of VSNY, died in her sleep at age 97. Born in Washington, DC, and raised in Illinois, Indiana, and other states, Cope served for many years as Art Librarian at the City College Library where she had earlier received her bachelor's degree in art history. She also held an MLS degree from Columbia University's School of Library Service and studied independently at the Art Students League. She was a world traveler, having visited locations as varied as Iran, Egypt, and nearly all of the countries within the European Union. An early member of the Victorian Society in America through her Columbia and many librarian connections, she wrote for this newsletter about the transfer of the Society's early membership records—which were on index cards in shoeboxes—to the Athenaeum of Philadelphia prior to the official creation of the New York chapter of the Society. She attended the 1983 London Summer School and frequently attended VSA annual meetings and study tours, as well as every New York chapter bus tour and function. She served several continuous Board terms, often stepping down after the ten-year limit, lastly serving as the Recording Secretary. She frequently helped with tours, hospitality, the annual meeting, and always the archive committees. For many years after leaving the board, she went by the name Polly and provided quarters for the VSNY archives at her residence on Riverside Drive until they were donated in 2019 to New York Historical. She was a lifetime member of



The Association for Gravestone Studies (AGS) and attended all of their meetings and study tours. Her related collection of notes, programs, books, and some index cards were able to be preserved. (She had memory issues in her last years and relocated to an assisted living home in 2024.)





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Images: *left:* Mary Cope and James Russiello at the Annual Meeting, 2017. Courtesy, James Russiello • *top, right:* Mary as a young woman. Courtesy, James Russiello • *above, right:* Cope in front of the Codman House in Lincoln, MA, during the 2014 VSA Annual Meeting. Courtesy, James Russiello



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Images: *clockwise from top left:* A view inside "The Morgue" at *The New York Times* on the June 23, 2026 VSNY tour, with Jeff Roth highlighting one of the thousands of photographs in the collection, along with thousands of clippings. • Jeff holding up a photo from the files of Albert Bard, longtime advocate for preservation and civic beauty. • One of hundreds of file cabinet drawers overflowing with clippings with folders marked "Chita Rivera" and "Eartha Kitt" among others. • Another stunning photograph, of a now long-forgotten starlet. Credits: Winslow Cavanaugh, Matthew Kennedy, and Aleya Lehmann

2025–26: Past Programs

The New York Times "Morgue" Tour • Tuesday, June 23, 2026 @ 3:00–5:00 p.m.

Annual Meeting & Awards Ceremony • Thursday, June 11, 2026 @ 7:00–9:00 p.m.

Lightning Beneath the Sea: The Thrilling Race to Wire the World • Wednesday, June 10, 2026 @ 6:00–7:00 p.m.

Emerging Scholars: Session II • May 5, 2026 @ 6:00–8:00 p.m.

Emerging Scholars: Session I • April 28, 2026 @ 6:00–8:00 p.m.

Margot Gayle Benefit Tour • April 17, 2026 @ 6:30–8:30 p.m.

"At the Tredwells' Table" Culinary Tour • April 12, 2026 @ 11:00 a.m.–1:00 p.m.

Museum Tour and Irish Heritage at Lockwood-Mathews Mansion • March 21, 2026 @ 10:00 a.m.–12:00 p.m.

Love and Loss After Wounded Knee: Two Star-Crossed Lovers and the Event that Changed Everything • February 26, 2026 @ 6:30–8:00 p.m.

Carving History • February 19, 2026 @ 6:30–8:00 p.m.

America's Greatest Unknown Author: Rediscovering George Templeton Strong • February 9, 2026 @ 6:30–8:00 p.m.

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 p.m.

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.

2026–27: Upcoming Programs

New York's Fabulous Fountains: A Walking Tour • Saturday, September 12, 2026 @ 1:00–3:00 p.m. • Join author Stephanie Azzarone for an in-depth tour, starting at **Bryant Park**

Unfolded Ornament: Fans from the Collection of the Van Cortlandt House Museum • Stay tuned for date and time! **NSCDNY Headquarters House Museum** • Join Van Cortlandt House Museum director Margaret Holmes for a private tour

Undercut: Cut Glass in Working-Class Life During the Long Gilded Age • Thursday, October 22, 2026 @ 6:00–8:00 p.m. **Arader Galleries** • Join author Joseph Larnerd who will speak about his new publication

Soho Before and After: A Walking Tour • Saturday morning, November 8, 2026 @ 11:00 a.m.–12:30 p.m. • Join architectural historian Tony Robins for a walking tour of **Soho** highlighting landmarking in this neighborhood

NEW! VSNY's first Victorian Parlor Games Night! • Stay tuned for details!

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Panorama Contributors

Most sincere thanks to the following contributors to this issue of our quarterly newsletter: John Carini, Margaret Holmes, and Joie Anderson for their interview about the discovery of the fans • Jeremy Woodoff for the Olmsted Project update • Emerging Scholars Deborah Wolfson and Sam Simons for their wonderful essays • John Graham for news from the Landmarks Preservation Commission hearings • Bruce M. White for his Annual Meeting & Awards Ceremony photo essay • James Russiello for the appreciations of Hilda Regier and Mary Cope • and Jeremy Woodoff for kind permission to reprint the notes from his Annual Meeting presentation

Editorial Committee

Winslow Cavanaugh, Matthew J. Kennedy, Aleya Lehmann, and Erin O'Connor

JOIN US! Please join us 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!

Contact Info

Victorian Society New York
c/o Village Alliance
8 East 8th Street
New York, NY 10003
info@vicsocny.org
membership@vicsocny.org
vicsocny.org

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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

Image: The original logo of the Victorian Society in America, in use until c. 2015. Courtesy of VSA