

Merchant's House Museum

Newsletter

Winter 1998



New Year's Day Reception in New York City — Harper's Weekly, January 4, 1858

New Year's Day in Old New York — When the Gentlemen Came Calling

In the 19th century, the gentlemen of New York City sallied forth on New Year's Day to make calls on friends, family, and acquaintances. The ladies stayed home to receive the guests and preside over a sumptuous buffet and a punch bowl liberally laced with alcohol. After the third or fourth visit, the January chill was usually vanquished.

One of New York's most

distinguished citizens, Philip Hone, who was a neighbor of the Tredwells (he lived at the corner of Great Jones and Broadway) and at one time the mayor of New York City, described his participation in this festive tradition in his diary.

In 1843, Hone left his home at noon and made an astonishing forty-odd calls before five p.m.—on average, a visit every seven and a half minutes. It was

snowing, and he travelled from house to house by sleigh. He wrote, "The ladies smiled and looked beautiful, the fires sparkled and looked warm, the furniture shone and looked comfortable, the whiskey-toddy smoked and looked strong, and everything was gay . . ."

The following year, he noted that "Broadway, from one end to the other, was alive with private carriages, and lines of pedestrians fringed the carriageways. I was out more than five hours, and my girls tell me they received one hundred and sixty-nine visits."

Unfortunately, the Tredwells left no diaries or letters describing their holidays. However, it is probably safe to assume that in 1843 the six daughters, from twenty-one-year-old Elizabeth to two-year-old Gertrude, entertained callers with their mother while the two sons of the family, Horace, 19, and Samuel, 16, made the rounds with their father. Their first stop was no doubt at the home of Seabury Tredwell's cousin just a few doors down the block.

As for us, we look forward to continuing this 19th-century New York City tradition on January 1. We think it's a delightful way to start the New Year, and we hope you'll come calling—ladies and gentlemen alike.

19th-Century Holiday Party

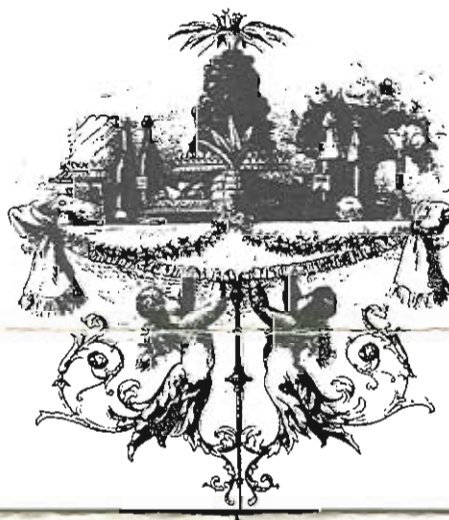
Wednesday, December 9
6 to 8 p.m.

The House will be alive with music and holiday spirit. Please join us for candlelight tours of the House and holiday savorys and potables.

"The best 19th-century holiday party in town"
The New York Times

\$20, members free.
Reservations (212) 777-1089

'Tis the Season. . .



New Year's Day Reception

Friday, January 1
3 to 6 p.m.

Our celebration continues the 19th-century social custom of calling on your friends and family on New Year's Day.

Tours of the House, informal talks on the etiquette of calling, and a display of 19th-century calling cards. Bring your 20th-century calling card (personal or business) for our prize drawing. Punch and confectionery.

\$15, members \$5.
Reservations (212) 777-1089

Saturday, December 5, 12 to 4 p.m.

Winter Greenery For the Holidays

We provide the materials for making swags, wreaths, and Mayapple trees for gifts or for your home. Bring a pair of cloth gloves. Refreshments. \$17 donation benefits the Garden Fund. Reservations (212) 777-1089.

Sunday, December 13, 4 p.m.

A Dickens Celebration

Gregory St. John reads Charles Dickens's 1843 holiday classic, "A Christmas Carol," in the parlor by the decorated tree. Reception featuring port wine and our own "figgy pudding" follows at 5:30 p.m. \$15, members \$10. Reservations (212) 777-1089

Sunday, December 20, 2 and 3 p.m.

"A Visit from St. Nicholas"

Curator Mimi Sherman gathers children of all ages around the tree for her annual reading of Clement Clark Moore's 1823 classic, written as a present for his children. Cookies and hot cocoa. \$6, members \$3. Reservations (212) 777-1089.

The Merchant's House Museum is New York City's only family home preserved intact—inside and out—from the 19th century. A National Historic and New York City landmark, the house was built in 1832 and was home to a prosperous merchant family for 100 years.

Open Sunday through Thursday, 1 to 4 p.m.

From the Director —

The 166-year history of the Merchant's House is in large part a story of its champions—those few individuals without whose vision, coupled with an extraordinary measure of determination and dedication, the House quite literally would not have survived.

Carol Roberto, who we are saddened to report died on September 11, was one such champion. For 20 years, during the 1970s and 1980s, she and her husband, architect Joseph Roberto, fought to preserve the Merchant's House.

No mean task. New Yorkers had witnessed the destruction of Penn Station in 1963, and the Landmarks Preservation Act, passed in 1965, was only five years old when the Robertos began their stewardship.

The Merchant's House had been honored as one of the first 20 structures to be landmarked under the new law, but by 1970 it was headed for collapse.

Carol and Joe made appeal after appeal for funds to support a thorough restoration. Once the structure was stable, they turned to the interior. An interior designer by profession, Carol found her greatest joy in watching the craftsman and artisans at work as they restored plasterwork, furniture, and paintings.

Thankfully for us and for generations to come, the Robertos prevailed, and we will be forever grateful. Today the Merchant's House stands alone, an authentic, irreplaceable, and visible link to the past, to life in New York City in the 19th century.

Brendan Gill once wrote: "Ancient buildings . . . nourish us as our families and friends are blessedly able to do, simply by their presence. These artifacts—the stored-up treasures . . . the immense shadowy attic of the past—serve to soften the hard fact of our temporariness. As the 20th century races to an end, listen—a song of thanksgiving rises out of all the things we have rescued and cherished and handed on . . ."

Thank you, Carol.



Margaret Halsey Gardiner
Executive Director



THE HISTORIC HOUSE TRUST OF NEW YORK CITY

28,000 Oysters Later —

Again this October, Fourth Street was a sea of people, overflowing with New Yorkers who had come to our second annual Oyster Festival. They came for the love of oysters—and Guinness—and the bands (Black 47!)—and the fun. Not to mention the very pleasurable way to support a good cause.

A bushel of thanks to our generous sponsors for making this year's celebration such a grand success:

Guinness Import Company, Triarc Companies, Inc., Bloomberg News, New York Council for the Humanities, the Estate of Sol Goldman, Preserv, Inc., New York Press, Gotham Seafood, Bowsprit Productions, Gertrude's, Beehive Beer Distributing, the Irish Georgian Society, City of New York Parks & Recreation, and The Historic House Trust of New York City.

And thanks to our NoHo neighborhood sponsors: Community Board No. 2, N.Y.C. Police Department 9th Precinct, New York University Community Fund, Swift Hibernian Lounge, BBar & Grill, Fleet Bank, The NOHO Star, Plantworks, The Pop Shop, Dollhouse, Kinko's, 1950, TIME Cafe, Republic National Bank, Studio Sofield, and Draw The Line,

And to the cadre of tireless volunteers who sold the tickets, the T-shirts, the Snapple and Mystic Water, who checked I.D.'s, answered questions, showed slides, and swept the street (in the pouring rain) thanks, 28,000 times over.



Life in the Past Lane

When the ball drops in Times Square signaling the beginning of the New Year, New Yorkers will be watching a remnant of a practice that took place on a daily basis in urban areas in the 19th century.

The raising and dropping of a metal ball from a tall pole situated on top of a tall building each day at noon gave citizens a common standard by which to set their pocket watches.

New Yorkers could also consult the numerous large cast-iron sidewalk clocks, eight of which are still standing. To the first reader who mails (snail, no e-) in the correct locations of the existing clocks, a prize!

Merchant's House Museum is the newsletter of the Museum.

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Making Our List, Checking It Twice

Here's what we hope to find under our tree:

Office furniture: desks, chairs, lamps, two-drawer filing cabinets.

A powerhouse PC for Pi.

One pink camellia shrub and two holly bushes for our garden.

Paper for our newsletter.

A banner for our building.

And don't forget: we welcome donations to our resale shop. The value of your gifts is tax-deductible, of course.

If you have any of the above and would care to donate to the Museum, please call (212) 777-1089.

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