

Merchant's House Museum

Newsletter

Summer 2001

"The Chapman Files" Reveal the History of the Museum's Early Years and Its Founder

When Gertrude Tredwell died in 1933, at the age of 93, her niece, Lillie, the executor of her estate, prepared to sell the house on Fourth Street and its contents at auction.

However, at the last minute, with the furniture tagged for the auctioneer and the old dresses bundled like rags, George Chapman, a distant relative, stepped in and bought the Tredwell House. He then organized a non-profit corporation under New York State law with himself as president and immediately transferred the title of the House to the corporation, which was enjoined to run it as a museum.

To learn more about this visionary to whom the Museum owes its existence, we are able to turn to what we refer to around here as "The Chapman Files," carbon copies of 25 years of correspondence concerning the operation of the Museum during the dark years of the Great Depression and World War II and up until Chapman's death in 1958.

Chapman, a wealthy Manhattan attorney, managed the Fifth Avenue Building at 23rd and Fifth Avenue (also known as the Toy Building). He was raised in New England, educated at St. Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire, and at Harvard. He lived uptown on Park Avenue and had a home in Mt. Kisco.

When he took charge of the Old Merchant's House, as he called it, there was much work to be done before it could be opened to the

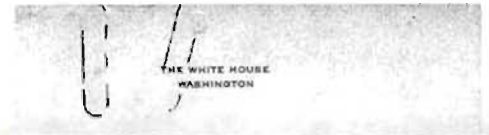
public. Years of neglect had taken their toll. He installed modern plumbing and heating; wired the House for electricity, adapting all the oil lamps and gas fixtures; converted the front room on the ground floor to a caretaker's apartment; created a small modern kitchen out of back-to-back storage closets; restored furniture and paintings; painted the interior (pale yellow!); displayed the costumes in glass-fronted cases on the third floor; rehung draperies that had been stored in trunks; made up new bed hangings from fabric he found in the attic; and cleaned and relaid the parlor carpeting.

It was not a good time to gain support for historic preservation. Not only was it the middle of the Depression, but New York City had a well-deserved reputation for a ruthless disregard of its historical heritage. But to Chapman, nothing could be more important.

When a developer threatened to build a high rise apartment building on the north side of Washington Square, thus blocking light from the Square, Chapman rallied others, including First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt to the cause of protecting this historic public space.

For years he bore the financial burden of restoring and maintaining the House himself. Before he died, he had succeeded in securing contributions for a modest endowment.

Chapman would be amazed to know that today the City of New York has a legal apparatus in place to protect its historic structures,



March 19, 1945

Dear Mr. Chapman:

Thank you for sending me the clippings showing what is being done to protect Washington Square from the encroachment of skyscrapers. I am so glad to hear this.

Sincerely,

A note to George Chapman from Eleanor Roosevelt in 1945, when it cost three cents to mail a letter.

and he would be deeply gratified to see how well the House he worked so hard to save has been maintained. Without this early preservationist, the Museum would have been irretrievably lost. He was our first volunteer.

HOT OFF THE PRESS! CHILDREN'S GUIDE TO HISTORIC HOUSES

An 87-page children's guide to the houses in the Historic House Trust has just been published and is on sale at the Merchant's House. As a member of the Trust, which provides support to 20 historic houses in New York City parks, we are proud to be featured in this illustrated guide. It will be distributed free to school libraries and to teachers of fourth grade classes, where New York City history is included as part of the curriculum. Grown-ups can learn something, too.

YES INDEED! I (We) Want to Become a Member of the Merchant's House Museum

- Good Neighbor—\$50
- Family/Household—\$75
- Protector—\$125
- Cultural Hero—\$250
- Princely Supporter—\$500
- Leading Light—\$1,000
- Paragon of Virtue—\$2,500
- Senior Citizen/Student—\$25

I (We) Want to Stop the Water by Helping to Meet the Fidelity Challenge Grant to Restore the East Wall With a Tax-deductible Donation of \$ _____

Please make checks payable to the Merchant's House Museum or charge your contribution to

- American Express
- Visa
- Master Card

Card No. _____ Expiration Date _____ Signature _____

MATCHING GIFT: You may be able to double your contribution or your membership dues through your company's Matching Gift Program. Check here and enclose the Matching Gift form with your contribution. Mail to Merchant's House Museum, 29 East Fourth Street, NYC 10003.

Name(s) _____

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____ Tel. _____

*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. Visit Thursday through Monday, 1 to 5 p.m. or at www.merchantshouse.com
Merchant's House Museum, 29 East Fourth Street, NYC 10003 • 212-777-1089*

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Thursday, June 28, through August

Exhibition: Bloomers, Bustles, and Bustieres: 19th-Century Undergarments from the Collection

*For reservations, call 212-777-1089
Or e-mail nyc1832@merchantshouse.com*

*Monday, May 21, and Tuesday, May 22
6 to 8 p.m.*

Edith Wharton at the Merchant's House Museum

The first in our 2001 *Great New York Writers in Great New York Places* reading series, which celebrates the literary history of New York City in significant architectural and historical sites. A collaboration with the Historic House Trust of New York City, The Library of America, and the City of New York/Parks & Recreation. Series \$80, each reading \$25. For reservations, call 212-360-1378.

Thursday, May 24, 6:30 p.m.

Lecture: In the Best Light: Visual Coherence in Lighting Classical Interiors

Illustrated slide lecture by Stephen Cannon-Brookes, lighting consultant and lecturer, University College, London. Drawing on recent work completed at the Frick Museum and in the U.K., Cannon-Brookes discusses lighting as a powerful tool in delivering meaning as well as practical success in the appearance of interiors. Reception in the garden follows. A collaboration with Classical America. \$12, members, \$10.

*Sunday, June 3, 10, 17,
Seatings at 2 and 3 p.m.*

June Garden Teas

Traditional high tea served in the Garden. Includes a selection of finger sandwiches, scones with jam and Devonshire cream, and a choice of desserts. A guided tour of the House at 3 and 4 p.m. will follow each seating. \$35 per couple (additional guests \$10 each).

Sunday, June 3, 10, 17, 24

Walking Tour of the 19th-Century Neighborhood

Join our guide for a tour of the formerly exclusive Bond Street area, the City's first suburb. \$10, \$12 (includes a guided tour of the House).

Thursday, June 7, 6:30 p.m.

Lecture: The Musings of a Muralist

Illustrated slide lecture by mural painter Anne Harris. Historic landscape and gardens, and the Italian Renaissance muralist tradition, provide artistic sources for American painter Anne Harris. Her musings on her vision and inspiration will inform a talk on projects in public and private spaces both in Europe and America. Reception in the garden follows. A collaboration with Classical America. \$12, members \$10.

Wednesday, June 27, 7 to 10 p.m.

Sex and the (19th-century) City

Our 8th annual Garden Party Benefit will be an evening of wanton abandon (cocktails, hors d'oeuvres, silent auction and dancing under the stars). Our libertine guests can also take an uncensored peep preview of our summer exhibit (see above and please don't inform the Mayor's Commission on Decency!)

Love potions will be generously provided by Andrea Jane's Catering, BBar&Grill, Brooklyn Brewery and TotalBeer.com, Chandon Estates, The Event Group, Mark Fahrer Caterer, Marion's Continental Restaurant & Lounge, Les Trois Petits Cochons, Puck Fair, Susan Simon, Inc., Swift Hibernian Lounge, Wines of South Africa, Wines of New Zealand, and Wines of Spain. And let us entertain you with the sassy sounds of the Central Park Stompers and a special appearance by *la fille de joie* Jacqueline Jonee. For those not too shy to attend, please call or email for an invitation.

Tuesday, July 17, 6 to 8 p.m.

Sea Writers at the South Street Seaport

The second in the *Great New York Writers in Great New York Places* reading series. \$25. For reservations, call 212-360-1378.

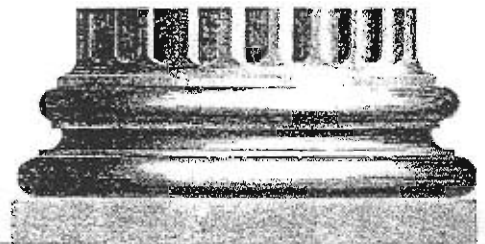


BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Anne Fairfax, *Chair*
Helen Michalis Bonebrake
Frances Eberhart
Margaret Halsey Gardiner
Merrikay S. Hall, esq.
Scott Heyl
Joseph Pell Lombardi
Elizabeth Lugar
Richard F. McKeon
Deborah Spaeder McWilliams
John E. Oden
Kate Burns Ottavino
Richard Franklin Sammons
William Sofield
Karen Treadwell

STAFF

Margaret Halsey Gardiner
Executive Director
Mary Anne Caton
Curator
Joseph Esposito
Program Director



The Museum's public education programs are sponsored in part through the generous support of the Public Service Award program of the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs.



HISTORIC HOUSE TRUST OF NEW YORK CITY



City of New York
Parks & Recreation