“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 instilled 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; 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, 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.

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

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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.

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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, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. 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 peek 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, BB&Grill, Brooklyn Brewery and TotalBeer.com, Chandon Estates, The Event Group, Mark Fahrer Caterer, Marion’s Continental Restaurant & Lounge, Le Crepuscule, 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.