



# THE RECESSION ISSUE

*"Dedicated to Those Who Are Not Ashamed of Economy"*

For Christmas, Advisory Council member, architectural historian, and our good friend Charles Lockwood (author of the rowhouse bible, *Bricks & Brownstone: The New York Row House, 1783-1929*) gave us a copy of Lydia Maria Child's *The American Frugal Housewife, Dedicated to Those Who Are Not Ashamed of Economy*. Wildly popular in its day, the book was published following the depression of the 1820s, considered by some economists to be our country's first – though clearly not last – bust after a boom.

In the 1830s, when the Tredwell family moved to 29 East Fourth Street, Child was likely the best-known woman writer in America (and made a living from it, to boot). Not only a noted author, she was an early advocate of women's rights, a scholar, and an abolitionist.

## "Time Is Money," ca. 1829

*The Frugal Housewife*, which was first published in 1829 and went through an astonishing 35 printings by 1850, was no innocuous household advice book for the wealthy, celebrating the "cult of domesticity." The book mirrored the changing realities of the country's increasingly mercantile and industrial society.

In the Introductory Chapter, Child states flat out, "time is money," and goes on to decry the source of the country's economic problems as, ahem, the "extravagance" of people "living beyond their income." Its practical recipes, remedies, and household hints were "suited to the wants of the middling class." To Child, America was "a land of precarious fortunes" and she spoke aptly of "the many and bitter lessons to prove how suddenly riches may take to themselves wings."

We can be sure Eliza Tredwell and her daughters made good use of *The Frugal Housewife* during the many economic ups and downs they survived on East Fourth Street.

The Panics of 1837, 1857, and 1866 came and went, as did the Long Depression of the 1870s (long because it lasted six years, and some say even longer). Gertrude Tredwell, who died in 1933, even saw the beginning of the Great Depression.

## Life in the Past Lane

"Wall Street continues in feverish, nervous malaise. Its pulse keeps going up to 120 under hourly rumors of defalcation in this or that corporation ... Faith in financial agents is gone. Every treasurer and cashier is 'suspect.' And no wonder after the recent epidemic of fraud."

So wrote New York diarist George Templeton Strong — in 1873.

## 19th Century Investor Seabury Tredwell Bullish on Utilities, Transportation, and Real Estate

Seabury Tredwell certainly kept a watchful eye on the markets – he spent the last 30 years of his life investing the capital he made as a hardware merchant. Popular stocks of the time reflected America's growing industries and natural resources, as they do today (think Google).

In 1863, two years before he died, Tredwell was heavily invested in the railroads, owning shares in the New-York Central, Erie, Hartford & New Haven, and Michigan Central companies. He also held strong positions in the Citizens Gas Light Company in Brooklyn (1,000 shares worth \$20,000 in 1863 dollars), the New York Gas Company, and the Manhattan Gas Company, which supplied illuminating gas to Fourth Street.

His real estate holdings were substantial,

including five lots in Harlem, a large farm in Rumson, New Jersey, a house and lot on Pearl Street, a lot on 53rd Street, lots in Brooklyn, a factory on Front Street, and of course the house on East Fourth Street.

## We're Not Ashamed to Ask

As we face the dark economic realities of the coming year, the Museum is taking steps to be "frugal," even more so than we already are. To save printing costs, with this issue we will produce the Newsletter in-house and sort it ourselves for bulk mailing. Mrs. Child minces no words in her book: "It is wise to keep an exact account of all you expend – even of a paper of pins."

We will scrimp, we will save, but we have important work to do, work which cannot be compromised.

The ceiling in Seabury Tredwell's study fell in late last fall and needs repair; until then, the room must remain closed to visitors. We are about to begin implementation of the Museum's first-ever Historic Furnishing Plan, which will focus our authentic interiors (last restored in the 1970s) on the mid-19th century, the period when New York was the center of U.S. commerce and its merchants were prospering.

We have also begun conservation work on our original 1840s Nunns and Fischer piano and harmonium, but need additional funding to complete the work. The very non-historic chain-link fencing on the rear wall of the garden has begun to fail and must be replaced.

The list goes on.

We hope you will consider becoming a Member, if you aren't already, or making a contribution to our 2009 Recession Fund, in whatever amount you possibly can. With your help, we are sure to weather the latest economic storm here on East Fourth Street.

*Yes, I (We) Will Help the Merchant's House Museum Weather the Economic Storm.*

2009 Recession Fund \$\_\_\_\_\_ (Thank You!)     Good Neighbor \$60     Family/Household \$80     Senior/Student \$30  
 Protector \$125     Cultural Hero \$250     Princely Supporter \$500     Leading Light \$1,000     Paragon of Virtue \$2,500

Please make checks payable to the Merchant's House Museum and mail with this form to 29 East Fourth Street, New York, NY 10003-7003, or charge your contribution to:  American Express  Visa  Master Card

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# CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Reservations and prepayment are required unless otherwise noted. Call 212-777-1089.

Saturday, January 31, 7 p.m., Channel 13

## The Merchant's House on "This Old House": "A Perfectly Preserved Rowhouse"

Architectural historian Charles Lockwood shows off the house on PBS.

Friday, February 13, 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.

## Abraham Lincoln's Big 2-0-0

On February 27, 1860, dark-horse presidential candidate Abraham Lincoln gave his triumphant 'right makes might' speech around the corner at Cooper Union. Said an eyewitness, "Forgetting myself, I was on my feet like the rest, yelling . . . cheering this wonderful man." Please join us for readings and foods that Lincoln loved, a birthday cake, and a toast to the original president of "change" on his Big 2-0-0. 19th-century party dress welcome; Lincoln beards and stovepipe hats encouraged. \$30, \$15 Members.

Saturday, February 14, 12 to 5 p.m.

## 19th-Century Love Speak: St. Valentine's Day Open House

From romantic poetry and lacy valentine cards to tussie-mussies and flirtatious fans — learn how 19th-century lovers spoke volumes without exchanging a single word.

Included with regular admission, reservations not required.

Tuesday, March 17, 4 to 8 p.m.

## Celebrating St. Patrick's Day with Bridget Murphy

Meet the Tredwells' cook, Bridget Murphy, and her fellow Irish servants for a look back-stairs. You'll see the fourth floor garrets where they lived (normally off limits to visitors) and taste some of the delicacies that Bridget cooked up for the family, including her famous 'green' tea punch. \$30, \$15 Members.

Saturday & Sunday, April 18 & 19, 12 to 5 p.m.

## Irish Servants' Quarters Tours – Part of NYC's Immigrant Heritage Week

Climb the narrow staircase to see the fourth floor servants' quarters. You'll also hear about the daily chores and general hardship of a life 'in service'.

Included with regular admission, reservations not required.



Servant Call Bells  
Illustration by Robert Van Nutt

## 'The Big Read' Honors

### Henry James's 'Washington Square'

In April, the Merchant's House will be participating in *The Big Read*, an annual program sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts.

Since 2007, communities across the country have hosted a *Big Read* of a single book of classic literature. This year, the selection in New York is Henry James's novel, *Washington Square*, which is, of course, a very big read here on East Fourth Street.

The 1850s story, which concerns the ill-fated romance of Catherine Sloper, parallels the real life story of our Gertrude Tredwell. The fictional Catherine and her physician father lived on the north side of Washington Square in a house very similar to that of the flesh-and-blood Tredwells.

According to family legend, Gertrude, like Catherine, was denied permission to marry the love of her life. Not surprisingly, it has been

rumored by many over the years that Gertrude was Henry James's inspiration for the character of Catherine Sloper. Not so. According to James himself, the plot was suggested to him by a bit of after-dinner gossip about an English heiress and her conniving suitor.

The month-long program of events will be organized by the Mercantile Library. The Merchant's House is pleased to be collaborating with the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation. On April 21, the Museum will hold a screening of the *The Heiress*, the haunting 1949 film based on *Washington Square*. The Hollywood set faithfully duplicates the interior of the Merchant's House. In addition, we have invited author and James fan John Berendt (*Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* and *The City of Falling Angels*), to read selections from the novel (date to be determined). GVSHP will sponsor a walking tour of Henry James's New York on April 5 and 26. The Mercantile Library will soon publish a complete listing of all events.

## MERCHANT'S HOUSE MUSEUM

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.

### Board of Directors

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*The Merchant's House Museum is owned by the City of New York, operated by Old Merchants House of New York, Inc., and is a member of the Historic House Trust.*

### Visit the Museum

Hours Thursday through Monday,  
12 to 5 p.m., self-guided tours  
Groups by appointment  
Admission Members Free  
Adults \$8, Students & Seniors \$5

29 East Fourth Street, NYC 10003  
Tel 212-777-1089 Fax 212-777-1104  
[www.merchantshouse.org](http://www.merchantshouse.org)

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