



Old Merchant's House

Newsletter

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The Old Merchant's House Sets A Stage For James and Wharton

by Scott Marshall

Although neither Henry James nor Edith Wharton ever visited 29 East Fourth Street or knew its occupants — Eliza and Seabury Tredwell and their eight children — in reading their fiction it would certainly seem otherwise. The Old Merchant's House, New York's only 19th century rowhouse to survive intact with all of its furnishings and personal family possessions, could easily be a stage setting for Wharton's and James' old New York — albeit a completely authentic one — where characters from the two authors' memorable stories and novels might suddenly appear.

James and Wharton shared a New York City upbringing and each extensively used the burgeoning 19th century metropolis in their fiction, as well as in their autobiographical writings. At the core of their old New York was the Washington Square area in Greenwich Village, referred to at the time as "lower Fifth Avenue," or simply "Washington Square."

James was born only a few blocks from the Old Merchant's House, on Washington Place in 1843, just three years after the Tredwells' youngest daughter, Gertrude, was born. His birthplace (demolished in 1894) was a brick rowhouse, probably quite similar in plan and decor to 29 East Fourth Street. As a young boy who ventured all over the expanding city, James often walked on Broadway nearby the Tredwell home. An avid theater-goer, he may have attended some of the plays that members of the Tredwell family also saw.

Edith Wharton (nee Edith Jones) was born in 1862 — only a few years before Seabury Tredwell died — a mile or so further uptown, on then-fashionable West 23rd Street. Like James, Wharton also attended the theater, as well as the opera, and went to the New York Society Library, at that time on University Place, to borrow books.

The one-mile distance between the authors' birthplaces dramatically illustrates New York's rapid expansion northward

during the mid-19th century. As families followed the dictates of fashion in their flight uptown, once-elegant private residences in the neighborhood of the Old Merchant's House began to be adapted as boarding-houses and for commercial purposes. Both Wharton and James — who commented on these changes in their fiction and their autobiographies — no doubt expressed the feelings of the Tredwells, who watched as the world passed by.



Edith Wharton, C. 1905

Perhaps James' best-known evocation of old New York is his novella, *Washington Square*, the story of a young heiress, the man of dubious morals and few finances that she loves, and her disapproving and overly protective father. James' description of the mid-1840's "handsome, modern, wide-fronted house" of Dr. Sloper and his daughter, Catherine, is quite evocative of the Old Merchant's House. The author's description of the setting, Washington Square, could well be the Lafayette Street and Astor Place neighborhood of 1835, when the Tredwells moved to East Fourth Street. As James wrote, the area "has a kind of established repose which is not of frequent occurrence in other quarters of the long shrill city; it has a riper, richer, more honorable look. . . the look of having had something of a social history."

Visitors to the Old Merchant's House often comment about the similarities between the fictional Catherine Sloper in *Washington*

Square and Gertrude Tredwell, both of whom never married. Was Seabury Tredwell a dominating father who, like Dr. Sloper, broke off a presumed engagement? Unfortunately, we will probably never know — and it would be inaccurate to draw such parallels. Still, it is another example of the extraordinary vividness of these two authors' fiction. The story seems to merge with and be colored by real people, expanding the dimensions of fiction.

The Old Merchant's House also comes to mind often when reading Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, the 1920 Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel about the old New York of the author's youth in the 1870's and 1880's. In one passage, Wharton wrote of houses that were "purest 1830, with a grim harmony of cabbage-rose-garlanded carpets, rosewood consoles, round-arched fireplaces. . . and immense glazed bookcases of mahogany," a description that clearly evokes the 1832 Old Merchant's House, redecorated in a similar style by Mrs. Eliza Tredwell in the mid-1860's.

Perhaps it is precisely because the Tredwells left us so much — their house, furniture, personal possessions and articles of clothing — yet left us so little of themselves (no letters or diaries have survived) that the fictional voices of the characters in James and Wharton so easily seem to speak for the past residents of East Fourth Street.

Towards the end of their lives, both authors published autobiographies (James, *A Small Boy and Others*, in 1913, and Wharton, *A*

The Old Merchant's House is New York City's only family home preserved intact from the 19th century and Greenwich Village's only historic house museum. A rowhouse built in 1832, it is among the finest surviving examples of late Federal and Greek Revival architecture of the period. Home to prosperous merchant Seabury Tredwell and family from 1835 to 1933, the landmark house, which has been a museum open to the public since 1936, reflects in its original textiles, furniture, and decorative arts the lifestyle of a typical New York City upper-middle-class family of the last century.

Hours:

Sundays, 1 to 4 p.m.

Wednesdays, 12:15 to 2 p.m., during June and July.

Group tours by appointment.

