

Thirty-sixth Year of Publication

Fall 2003

# THE BROWNSTONER

A PUBLICATION OF THE BROWNSTONE REVIVAL COALITION  
FOUNDED 1968

718.222.1473

P.O. Box 40-0055, Brooklyn, NY 11240-0055

## FORESIGHT SAGAS: HOW EARLY BROWNSTONERS BECAME MILLIONAIRES

A man we know, call him Charlie, got this birthday greeting from some friends he had lured to Brooklyn in the early days, maybe 35 years ago, of the Brownstone Craze:

Happy Birthday to Charlie, our friend;  
We'd follow him right to the end.  
If you take his advice,  
Your lives will be nice  
And you'll all have a fortune to spend.

As he climbs up his four flights of stairs  
Who can blame him for putting on airs?  
He says with a grin,  
With a hand on his chin,  
"I've made you all millionaires!"

So we're gathered here this night  
To pay the respect that's his right;  
Instead of No-Hoppers,  
We're now rich Park Slopers  
Because Charlie showed us the light.

The bargains didn't come cheap for the very early brownstoners. Take the case of the young, typical New York couple—public-relations man, writer, and six-year-old daughter—who bought a brownstone in 1960 on West 84th Street not far from the park—an area described in the *New York Post* as the “worst block in the City” but officially known as the Upper West Side Urban Renewal District. Price: \$17,000. On the first week they were there, bullets flew through the front window, and the family spent the evening on the parlor floor.

Those were the days when the federal government subsidized the demolition of brownstones, paying the city about \$5,000 apiece. The City's Demolition Department maintained long lists of brownstones scheduled to be turned into empty lots. Many, many of the brownstones, poorly maintained, were scheduled for demolition. It was an unstoppable process. Not only was it considered good for the city to get rid of those old structures (remember President Johnson's Model Cities program?), but demolishing them represented jobs and a kind of training for minority members. The Brownstone Revival Committee (BRC's name at the time) had a friend at the Demo Dept. who gave BRC advance

notice of demolitions in areas where there was a hope of saving some houses. In most cases the effort was wasted. BRC even went to court a couple of times to stop a pending demolition—without success.

Anyway, in those days in the early '60's, there were few buyers (other than slumlords) in the city's older neighborhoods. Many would-be buyers were scared away by sociologists, who wrote scholarly studies predicting the end of the city as a place to live. Down payments were high. Mortgages were always difficult and sometimes impossible to get—even for men and women with good salaries and good records. Those were the same people who could buy a house in New Jersey or Long Island or Westchester for \$500 down or even nothing. Mortgage? No problem. The city exported thousands of young people to the suburbs who would have preferred to stay in the city

And the old neighborhoods were not the lively places they are today. Walk down Amsterdam Avenue or Seventh Avenue in Park Slope back then. Empty stores. Bars. Working-class people. Even worse: non-working class.

And the houses were unfashionable at the time. Victorian—Yuk. Lots of woodwork—Yuk. High ceilings—Yuk.

Who would buy a house in those places? A Haitian couple—a janitor-handyman and his wife—did. They bought three houses on the Upper West Side. Worth \$3,000,000 each today. Maybe more. He just turned down three million for one of them.

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 2)

## THIRTY-ONE YEARS LATER: A NEW EDITION OF THE CLASSIC “BRICKS AND BROWNSTONES”

With copies of Charles Lockwood's 1971 “Bricks and Brownstone: The New York Rowhouse, 1783-1929” selling, it has been reported, for as much as \$300 on the internet, brownstoners will be happy to know that a new edition has just appeared and will be available in bookstores. It has been updated and furnished with new illustrations. The publisher is Rizzoli.

Lockwood, a recent graduate of Princeton when he wrote the book, put together a complete and accurate account of the New York brownstone world. It appeared at an ideal time, when the brownstone fever was at its hottest heat and there were still rowhouses for sale at, by today's lights, bargain prices.

# THE "BROWNSTONER"

Newsletter of the  
Brownstone Revival Coalition

THIRTY-SIXTH YEAR  
OF PUBLICATION

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"FORESIGHT SAGAS" CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Then there's the artist who bought a bunch of houses in Park Slope some 35 or 40 years ago and rented them out. Talk about sitting pretty today! Or the school teacher who bought a clutch of brownstones, also in Park Slope, and is so rich today he doesn't have to live there. He's up in Vermont now. He says the schools are better for his kids. He comes back to the Slope every now and then to get a decent meal.

Then there's the architect and his artist wife with a house on East 9th Street near Avenue A. So dangerous that when you visited them, they'd look down from a third-story window to see who was there before they'd even go down to the street to look. They missed the Lower East Side revival, before it had morphed into the fashionable East Village, sold out for a puny \$14,000. Still, they didn't suffer too much. They bought a Victorian mansion on Staten Island in time to catch that revival.

Or take all those nice liberal couples who bought houses with rent-controlled tenants. That beautiful parlor, occupied when they bought the house by a jolly old man who had nailed dart boards to the mahogany pocket doors. He must be a thousand years old; he'll just disappear, they thought as they signed the mortgage papers. What parties we can have there! Hah! Ask about that parlor twenty years later. Who's still living there? Ask about the tenants who closed the drain and opened the spigots of their bathtub—right over Jane and Mark's beautiful dining room—and let them run-run-run one long weekend while Jane and Mark were away. Just because—what? Because Mark mentioned casually one day that they should put their garbage in the right barrel? Or how about the building inspector who searched and searched until he found 13 minute violations in Jane and Mark's house? Do they still believe in not paying off?

Then there's the artist who was so poor back in 1970 that he couldn't afford to buy a house or even an apartment. So he had to settle for a floor in an old cast-iron building downtown. Price: \$10,000.

But all is not roses for those wealthy pioneers. There's a problem that they share today: "I could be a millionaire in a minute if I sold my house," they say. "But where would I go?"

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## DO YOU NEED A PERMIT FOR WORK ON YOUR LANDMARK?

For ordinary maintenance and touch-ups, the Landmarks Preservation Commission says, no permit is required. For example:

- ❖ Painting doors and door frames the same color, or refinishing already stained or varnished doors and frames.
- ❖ Simple puttying repairs to doors and frames.
- ❖ Replacing or installing locks or door hardware.
- ❖ Replacing broken glass.
- ❖ Weather stripping.

For other work, check with the Commission. For application forms, call 212.669.7700.

## A ROWHOUSE ON A LONDON SQUARE

By John C. Muir

[John Muir is a native New Yorker and a member of the Board of the Brownstone Revival Coalition. Some of the material in this story appeared earlier in *CityGreen*, the newsletter of the Brooklyn Center for the Urban Environment [BCUE], an organization that Mr. Muir founded in 1978 and led until his retirement not long ago.]

A four-month sabbatical leave in 2001 allowed me and my wife Barbara to live in London, and to get to know and love Saint Georges Square in Pimlico and the row house on the Square where we rented a flat. It was very like our row house in Park Slope, Brooklyn and very different.

Saint Georges Square is on the Thames north bank, about a mile upriver from Big Ben, and just around the corner from London Underground's Pimlico station. It presents a row-house or terrace-house streetscape typical of many central London squares, and in many respects is unlike anything in New York. It is not square, of course, but very long. About 1500 feet in length, it is narrow at the ends with a garden in the middle. The square is equivalent to two long New York City blocks joined end to end, but--most importantly -- turned inside out.

From our front windows we did not see another row of houses facing us from across the street, as would be typical in New York, but instead we looked upon a carefully planted and groomed greensward, a fenced-in "private gar-



den" or commons of several acres that fills the Square's center. We could see over 40 huge old trees, lawns, a fountain, benches, exotic shrubs, and extensive planting beds full of daffodils and swelling rosebushes. A darkly mysterious middle-aged woman came to sit every day rain or shine, with her cat, the terror of the birds of the Square. On sunny days it filled with children from the adjacent houses, and we threw the tall windows wide open to the late- afternoon sun.

The trade-off for this wonderful open space-amenity,

now owned and operated by the Westminster Council, is that private open space was sacrificed -- there are no back yards or rear gardens to the Square's houses. The Square, houses and garden and all, was so conceived, and built all at once, by a wealthy aristocrat developer/speculator, Thomas Cubitt, in the 1840s. His work is so revered in Pimlico that a modern full-scale bronze statue in his likeness stands a few streets away. Perhaps grateful New Yorkers will one day raise a statue to Donald Trump, but I don't think so.

By contrast with London's wealthy 19th century developers, those in New York were usually middle-class builders with smaller pocketbooks who could afford only to build a handful of houses at a time, and on speculation. In the adjacent lots, another American builder might build a set of houses in a different or contrary architectural style, material, height, or set-back from the street. The result was the visual row-house hodgepodge that survives face-to-face along miles of some New York streets. I love the New York brownstones, and God didn't make enough of them. But in London, where the row-house form flowered, one realizes that they could have been better. To my eyes, Saint George's Square is a nearly perfect urban landscape.

Built originally as a one-family house for the middle class, "our" London house had in recent years been converted into apartments. Our flat was what New Yorkers call a floor-through, two flights up on the second floor. The house was narrower than the typical New York brownstone, about 17 feet, and the large front room stretched across that span between the party walls shared with the adjacent houses.

[Incidentally, we never heard the neighbors]. The rear bedroom looked out on the street behind us. We had about 700 square feet of usable space, a good deal less than we were used to. But it just felt good to live there, civilized somehow, and we swelled with what I imagine was a kind of civic pride when we turned the corner onto the Square where we lived, turned the latchkey, and ascended to our humble flat.

The house was in the middle of the row on the east side of the Square, and its dignified façade was exactly duplicated by those on either side, and so on down the row nearly ad infinitum. We had to look up at the house numbers to be certain we were home. Each house had an "English front", with the entrance to the ground floor two steps up, and a columned portico over the low "stoop" [a New York term, derived from the Dutch, and not known in London]. This was a stoop we were never tempted to sit on -- not with the garden beckoning just a few steps away. Two bays of wide windows reached four stories to the roof, with a low balustrade serving as a cornice. The basement apartment was almost completely below the grade of the sidewalk, down a flight of steps to the left of the front entrance, in what would have been originally the servants' entrance.

At its heart, every New York brownstone is a brick house behind the

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 4)

“ROW HOUSE” CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

stone façade, with wood crossbeams holding up the floors and flat roof, and this is also true of the London house. We call ours “brownstones,” regardless of what veneer—sometimes even wood— they are faced with. But in London nearly all row houses are faced with a smooth coat of stucco under a uniform coat of white paint. The square is within a registered “conservation district,” similar to a New York “landmark district” designation, but unlike New York the conservation district requires uniformity of paint color. The effect to the eye, no doubt intended by the builder, is of one continuous façade, a terrace stretching hundreds of feet, no doubt inspired by the Regency palaces built by the royals of the time. Perhaps it was that regal inspiration that we felt when we returned home after a day on the town.

As modern times and fate would have it, there was a blot on the landscape of Saint Georges Square, and it was directly opposite us, visible until the trees of the public garden leafed out in April and provided blessed relief. About twenty terrace houses, no doubt each just like ours, had been demolished to make room for the narrow end of a huge comprehensive school. This is a truly ugly building, a product of the 1970s or 80s when London architects perpetrated the worst excesses of the Brutalist style. So thoroughly had we been acculturated by the amenities and civilization of Saint Georges Square that we found it hard to imagine how such public vandalism could have been allowed in our lifetime

FALL LECTURES AT THE  
BAY RIDGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

**November 18:** Marlene Hochman of the Doll and Toy Museum of New York City will talk on “Playthings of Yesteryear”—the toys that kept youngsters busy long ago. At this centennial year of aviation she will emphasize those toys with a flying theme.

**December 17:** A hundred years ago, 1853, New York City authorized the creation of a “central park” in the middle of Manhattan Island. (In that same year Yellow Hook became Bay Ridge.) Sara Cedar Miller, Official Park Historian and Photographer, will present a slide lecture about the famous natural oasis in the big city.

Programs, sponsored by the Bay Ridge Historical Society (P. O. Box 090483, Brooklyn, NY 11209-0011), begin at 7:45 pm at the Community Room of the Shore Towers, 91st Street and Shore Road. Lectures are free and open to the public. Light refreshments will follow the meetings.

AL AND TIPPER GORE  
COMMENT ON URBAN LIVING

“A family that lives in a neighborhood with sidewalks, playgrounds and pleasant stores within walking distance has a very different relationship to the community than a family that must drive to purchase even the most basic amenity.”

“Joined at the Heart,” 2003, by Al and Tipper Gore



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## A BROWNSTONER'S JOURNAL 2

The first thing we did after closing on our house in September, 1996 was to break-into it. This was a fitting end to a bumpy summer-long negotiation process in which the seller went into contract with another buyer the day after we saw the house. I remember saying to the real-estate agent, "But we'll make a higher offer!" and her telling me that they were happy with the lower bid, and weren't interested in any other offers. I swore I'd never speak to her again, but six weeks later when the first deal fell through, I spoke to her alright, and our offer was accepted.

All of this was forgotten weeks later as we approached the house which was finally ours. Then a funny thing happened. The keys we were given at the closing wouldn't open the doors of the house. Try as we might, we couldn't get in. In a last-ditch effort, I crawled out onto an aluminum awning and was able to get in through a parlor-floor window. (This didn't give me great confidence in our security if I could get in so easily.) I believe there are photographs of this, but I've never seen them. Our lawyer, who was also a close friend, had brought a camera along to record the first moments in our new home. He's had the good sense not to share these images of my hindquarters disappearing into an open window.

Once inside (with the right keys) we were able to begin poking behind fake paneling, above suspended ceilings and beneath wall-to-wall carpeting. Our friends who had already restored houses were very eager to get their hands on ours. They encouraged us to rip up, pull down, and pry off on sight. In fact, they were eager to help. Our new home, which had been tacky and dirty but perfectly inhabitable when we bought it, was soon transformed into a large dark wreck. Fluorescent light fixtures became bare incandescent. The removal of some horrible paneling, which covered much of the interior, revealed discolored 1940's wall-paper and black glue, and tired floor coverings yielded up secret holes, one of which threatened to swallow a claw-foot tub. (I think that hole, with a bathtub teetering over it, three legs on solid ground and one in empty space, left a lasting impression on anyone who saw it. Years later people still say: "Oh, is this the bathroom that had THE HOLE?")

It was at this time that we experienced the First Parental Review, by my parents who came for Thanksgiving Dinner. All was going as well as could be expected when, the night before their arrival, I got home from work and noticed an ominous puddle lurking in the corner of the stair hall. I got up on a chair and poked at the ceiling. My finger, then hand, and finally arm, went right through the damp plaster! I can laugh about this now, mostly because this episode pales in comparison to other events.

It turned out that when I removed the 1960's tile walls from the oak wainscot of the main bathroom, I cracked the (illegal?) PVC drain pipe. More, the faucet on the claw-foot tub, which we discovered wearing the costume of a modern built-in shower stall, was dripping and couldn't be

shut off. So there was a constant supply of water to the cracked drain.

My parents, incredibly, gave their stamp of approval even though the house was big, old, and inefficient. They had both grown up in new houses and had sought out a modern single-level ranch when setting up their household. My mother always appreciates a challenge, no matter how daunting. I think my father was most impressed by the investment potential of the house, feeling it would increase in value as we repaired it. He was right! In fact the house began increasing in value even before we did much to it, thanks to the Brooklyn real-estate market. I wish I could claim that we studied the market, waited until the time was perfect and purchased the house just before the prices began to rise, but I can't. It recently appraised for three times what we paid for it six years ago.

After Thanksgiving Dinner among the packing boxes, we had about two weeks to get ready for the Second Parental Review by Bob's mother. This was to be combined with the official housewarming party. We were able to strip paneling and wallpaper off all the parlor-floor walls and paint them in

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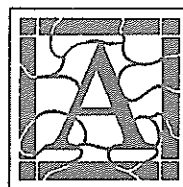
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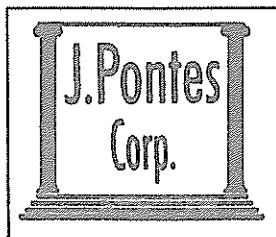
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**"BROWNSTONER'S JOURNAL" CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5**

the colors of the wonderful wallpaper we'd picked out, but that's about all. We invited about 100 people to see the house about six weeks after we moved in. This was foolish. It led to at least one grumpy party (Bob) and one crazy party (me) putting down linoleum at 5 AM. I've since learned to try not to put as much pressure on myself to accomplish so much at once. I say this now, six years into a ten-year restoration project. Check back with me at the ten-year mark. I'm sure we will have agreed to open the house for a house tour or something equally impossible and I will be putting down linoleum at 5 a.m. the day of the tour.

Bob's mother is interested in design and aesthetics. She is also a fan of new construction. At the time she did not love the house. She is a good sport, however, and launched into scrubbing and sweeping in an effort to help us save face.

I wanted to call Martha Stewart (who had a radio call-in show then). "Martha," I would say, "I have 100 people coming on Sunday expecting to see a human habitation and I have holes in the walls and ceilings you could fit your head through. What should I do?" I imagined her hemming and hawing and finally admitting that even she, the ultimate party giver, could not accomplish this task.

I underestimated our ability to get the place ready for an opening party in six weeks. I also underestimated the kindness of our friends.

The party was a success, and it marked the moment when our friends began telling us the horror stories of their own renovations. They'd been suspiciously silent on this topic during our search. Apparently our house was in incredibly good shape compared to how bad their houses had been. According to one so called friend, the fact that our staircase actually functioned and we didn't need to climb a rope to our top floor disqualified us from being true urban pioneers. Another told us how much fun we would have as we cleaned and polished all our doorknobs, as everything else was in such good shape (compared to how their house looked when they bought it) that we would probably start right in with those tarnished knobs. It has been six years since then, and I have yet to polish one of our 44 door-knobs.

One guest wondered why he smelled gas on the top-floor landing, far away from any kitchen or furnace. After sniffing around a bit, I discovered that the smell was coming from the wall sconce. The reason, of course, was that the gas-lighting system was live when we moved in. In fact, I had had visions of a great gasolier hissing away above the dining-room table. These visions evaporated as we discovered the walls of our house were filled with leaky gas pipes. Luckily it wasn't difficult to have a plumber disconnect the lighting system while keeping the stove, dryer, and boiler functioning.

These memories of early renovations, visits, and parties are now part of the history of our house. My parents' visit has become a Thanksgiving tradition. Our early-December housewarming party became an annual holiday

open house the next year, and Bob's mother has acted as hostess for each of them. We've accomplished a great deal since those early days, and there is an equal amount of work ahead, but we're enjoying the ride.

(“A BROWNSTONER'S JOURNAL” WILL BE CONTINUED IN A FUTURE ISSUE OF THE BROWNSTONER.)

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## BRC'S “OFFSPRING,” PRESERVATION VOLUNTEERS, REPORTS A SUCCESSFUL SUMMER

As members of the Brownstone Revival Coalition will recall, Preservation Volunteers, Inc. is an offspring of the BRC, formed three years ago and modeled after the French preservation association, REMPART. It is a not-for-profit tax-exempt corporation. REMPART oversees some 150 preservation sites in France, plus others in Italy and England. Here in the United States, Preservation Volunteers has had two small, but very successful, summers of operation.

Last year, 2002, PV volunteers worked in Brooklyn, at the historic Green-Wood Cemetery, and in Gunnison, Colorado, restoring a historic one-room schoolhouse. All of the volunteers were French, brought here with the cooperation of REMPART.

In 2003, between July 19 and August 2, PV had two preservation projects: one in New York City, the other in Nantucket, Mass. Americans as well as French volunteers worked on these projects:

■ **THE LEFFERTS HOMESTEAD IN PROSPECT PARK, BROOKLYN.** Through the New York Historic House Trust, which has supervision over some 20 historic structures, and working with personnel of the New York City Parks Department, PV had six volunteers at work on this 1788 Dutch farmhouse. The building is used by the Prospect Park Conservancy, a privately funded organization, to demonstrate, mostly to young people, what life was like in 18th-century Brooklyn. It badly needed painting. In two five-day weeks, working from nine to four, PV volunteers painted most of the interior of this sizeable house and scrubbed or painted much of the exterior. Their supervisor could scarcely find words to express her delight with the quality of the work. Five of the six volunteers were French. They were all well educated and spoke, at the least, a passable English.

■ Volunteers were lodged in the homes of local residents—all in the Park Slope historic district. They received no money. All were delighted with the experience. There were frequent parties and special events for the volunteers.

■ Volunteers paid a \$100 registration fee to Preservation Volunteers. Each received two one-week Metro cards, permitting unlimited use of all New York subway lines and buses. PV continued the practice of the previous year of meeting volunteers at the airport and delivering them at the end of the period. PV found that it did not have to worry about entertaining its volunteers. They spent their off hours

taking advantage of Brooklyn's proximity to Manhattan, touring New York's famous districts and visiting its museums.

■ **THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH, NANTUCKET, MASS.** This 1833 building has suffered, particularly in recent years, from lack of maintenance. In 1995 residents of Nantucket formed the Two Centre Street Restoration Project to save and restore the historic building, the only wood-frame structure to survive Nantucket's disastrous fire of 1846, and the oldest such structure in downtown Nantucket. It has become a center of cultural, educational, and charitable activities.

The five volunteers—three French, two American, ages 18-24—all arrived on time. They were lodged for the two-week period in a fine mansion with a private swimming pool. Not bad! Work hours were flexible, mostly nine to three, sometimes longer depending on momentum and task. Volunteers were given time in the afternoons to take advantage of Nantucket's beaches, historical structures, museum, and exchanges with students at PIN (The Preservation Institute).

The work for the first week consisted of laborious “dirty” cleaning, involving the balconies, which had become depositories for unwanted artifacts of every kind (including copies of ancient—1800's—newspapers, church bulletins, old hymnals, even old hardware). On the second week, volunteers worked on the shutters, which were once used on the windows of the sanctuary. The volunteers' Nantucket hosts could not have been happier, in every way, with their visiting workers.

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## NEW HELP FOR THE HOMEOWNER: CONSERVANCY'S BROWNSTONE GUIDE

Trouble with your facade? Just in time is the New York Landmark Conservancy's revised “Brownstone Guide.” It's designed to help owners of brownstone-clad structures understand the nature of the ubiquitous sandstone and its decay. It also provides an introduction to the various methods and materials for sandstone repair and restoration. The eight-page illustrated brochure is available for a \$3 postage and handling fee by calling 212/995-5260.

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## RARE NEW YORK PAINTINGS AT MAS

Bascope's paintings of New York's most beloved bridges have graced the walls of the Museum of the City of New York, the Muse of Cherbourg, and even the subway. Original paintings and sketches will be on view at the Municipal Art Society, 457 Madison Avenue, until December 1.

Beginning in December, the original 32-foot drawing of the perimeter structures of Central Park, by artist and architect Matteo Pericoli. Observed from the park, the city seems to rise from a cloud of trees, and buildings seem to float upon a green cloud.

## JOHN STEINBECK'S TRIBUTE TO NEW YORK

"New York is an ugly city, a dirty city. Its climate is a scandal, its politics are used to frighten children, its traffic is madness, its competition is murderous. But there is one thing about it—once you have lived in New York and it has become your home, no place else is good enough. All of everything is concentrated here, population, theater, art, writing, publishing, importing, business, murder, mugging, luxury, poverty. It is all of everything. It goes all night. It is tireless and its air is charged with energy."

John Steinbeck, "New York Times," 1953

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## WHEN TO PLANT A TREE? NOW

The ideal time to plant a tree is during the dormant season—fall after leafdrop or spring before budbreak. This period of cool weather allows plants to establish roots in their new location before spring rains and summer heat stimulate new growth.

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## A VOICE FROM THE 19TH CENTURY COMMENTS ON BROWNSTONES

"But these were honest structures of brick and stone [Greek Revival], and if they were not attractive structures, they were not offensive. Would that we could say as much or as little of their successor, the brownstone front. Who was the malefactor who first discovered the practicality of that scandalous edifice?"

"It could come to no good. For more than a generation it was the regulation place of abode of the best-to-do Manhattanese. In the middle Sixties, the number of such Manhattanese whose houses had been built for them could almost be counted on the fingers of one hand. Practically everybody lived in 'an habilitation enforced.' Everybody, whether he bought his house or rented it, lived in a house built for someone else, or rather, for nobody else, but for the average man, being a mere statistical abstraction. There was, to be, sure, an average of income enjoyed by the class for which the brownstone house front was built and crowned with its umbrageous and outrageous cornice of sheet metal painted and perhaps sanded to look like veneer, which to the discomfiture of the speculative builder, and the joy of the surly moralist, it never succeeded in doing. But of allowance for individual taste there was none at all."

--Montgomery Schuyler, "The Small City House in New York," *Architectural Record*, April, 1899

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## CARING FOR STAINED-GLASS WINDOWS

1. If your stained glass is covered by storm windows or protective glazing, on inside or out, get them vented. Protective glazing can be damaging. Trapped moisture can attack the lead came (the metal strips that hold the glass pieces together) and corrode wood frames and corrode lead. Solution: drill

one-inch holes at 4"-6" intervals across the top and bottom of each unit.

2. Make annual checkups. Look at the glass, the paint, the framing. Check for bowing. If the glass is more than 70 years old, have an expert look at it.

3. Check the qualifications of anyone you hire to repair your stained glass. There are a lot of people around with limited experience.

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## THE BIG DITCH THAT MADE NEW YORK THE EMPIRE STATE

The success of the Erie Canal, which opened in 1825, spurred the first great migration to the rich lands and resources west of the Appalachian Mountains and made New York State truly the Empire State. It also opened the farmlands of the Midwest to Europe and vastly increased the importance of the port of New York City.

On Wednesday, December 3, at 6:30 pm, Dr. Gary Hermalyn will give an illustrated talk on the subject, "Erie Canal Expedition," at the Kingsbridge Public Library, 280 West 231st Street, the Bronx. The talk is sponsored by the New York Public Library. Attendance is free.

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## LEST WE FORGET: WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO BROOKLYN'S BROWNSTONE DADDY - THE BROOKLYN UNION GAS COMPANY?

It's possible that hardly a man now alive remembers the critical role that the Brooklyn Union Gas Company played in the revival of the Brooklyn brownstone communities and in the city- and even nation-wide appreciation of those then-unfashionable century-old row houses.

In recent years, Brooklyn Union has morphed into Keyspan Energy, and its current executives exhibit a generational ignorance of the company's history and of the actions of the executives that preceded them. Starting with a house, and then a community, then a borough, and finally, steadily enlarging its message, the company focused on the restoration and revival of the old centers of American cities.

The house was in Park Slope. In 1966 or thereabouts, Brooklyn Union was searching for a house that could be converted into a demonstration exhibit for gas appliances. The company bought a house for that purpose in Prospect Heights, but ran into a problem: the neighborhood objected to a commercial intrusion and the possibility of crowds of visitors. Brooklyn Union might have given up on the idea, but some people in Park Slope heard about it and called their attention to a problem house on Berkeley Place. It was a broken-window, pigeon-riddled eyesore of a house, long the subject of litigation, long abandoned. Brooklyn Union would be welcome there. The company bought the house for \$13,000.

They did a marvelous job of restoring and furnishing the house. For six months (CONTINUED ON PAGE 11)

## 200 YEARS AGO IN NEW YORK CITY

"Our city has received greater damage this year than in any former season of Yellow Fever; the wealthy early abandoned the city, and the poor are daily falling victim to its ravages. The corporation early opened Bellevue, erected commodious sheds four miles from the city, to accommodate the poor who were still free from the disease, and appointed four physicians to attend the sick poor of the city....Better than one half of the citizens have removed to the country."

--Letter from a New York doctor, "Aurora Daily Advertiser," September 29, 1803

*Marble or stone? The Building Committee for the new City Hall ponders the question of whether the difference is worth the extra cost:*

"When it is considered that the City of New York from its inviting situation and increasing opulence stands unrivalled, when we reflect that as a commercial city we claim a superior standing, our imports and exports exceeding that of any other in the United States, we certainly ought in this pleasing state of things to possess at least one public edifice which shall vie with the many now erected in Philadelphia and elsewhere. It should be remembered that this Building is intended to endure for ages, that it is to be narrowly inspected not only by the scrutinizing eyes of our own Citizens, but of every scientific stranger, and in an architectural point of view it in fact is to give a character to our City. The additional expense of marble will be fully counterbalanced when we recollect that from the Elegance and situation of this Building the public property on the Broadway and Collect will much increase in value, and that the same influence will be extended to property far beyond these limits, and that in the course of a very few Years it is destined to be in the center of the wealth and population of this City; a Building so constructed will do honor to its founders and be commensurate with our flourishing situation. Under these impressions the Building Committee strongly recommend that the front and two end views of the new hall be built with marble."

--Wynant Van Zandt, Jr., September 30, 1803

"A large bell to supply the place of that which fell and broke in St. Paul's Chapel last winter has been received by the Jupiter, from London, and suspended in the steeple of that Church during the last week. It is from the celebrated foundry of Thomas Mears, White Chapel, London, and weighs 2500 pounds."

--New York Herald, October 19, 1803

*Should grocers as well as tavern owners be granted license to sell spirituous liquors?*

"The practice of granting to the same person at the same time the excise or license to retail strong or spirituous liquors under five gallons to be drank out of the House of the vendor and a license as a Tavern keeper or to retail

Liquors to be drank in the House of the vendor is attended with evil consequences;...as thereby the small grocers become dram shops where servants and the lower order of the community are supplied with strong drink at a cheap rate and they are brought into habits of intoxication and their morals corrupted. And the practice is considered by the respectable grocers of this City who retail under five gallons to be drank out of their houses as improper and degrading to their characters."...It is recommended that the law "prevent any person at the same time from having a license to retail strong or spirituous liquors under five gallons to be drank out of the house of the vendor and to keep a tavern or to retail strong or spirituous liquors to be drank in the house of the vendor."

--Common Council, November 21, 1803

*Aaron Burr writes to his daughter Theodosia Burr Allen about acquiring Roger Morris's estate, at today's Edgcombe Avenue near 160th Street, in exchange for Richmond Hill, in today's Chelsea.*

--November 22, 1803

"Roger Morris's place, the large handsome house on the height beyond Mrs. Watkins, is for sale. I can get it for Richmond Hill with four acres. Shall I exchange? R.M.'s has one hundred and thirty acres."

*Theodosia replies:*

"Richmond Hill will, for a few years to come, be more valuable than Morris's, and to you, who are so fond of town, a place so far from it would be useless. So much for my reasoning on one side; now for the other. Richmond Hill has lost many of its beauties, and is daily losing more. If you mean it for a residence, what avails its intrinsic value? If you sell part, you deprive it of every beauty save the mere view. Morris's has the most commanding view on the island.... It is reputed to be indescribably beautiful. The grounds are pretty. How many delightful walks can be made on one hundred and thirty acres! How much of your taste displayed! In ten or twenty years hence, one hundred and thirty acres on New York Island will be a principality; and there is to me something

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 10)

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stylish, elegant and respectable and suitable to you in having a handsome country-seat. So, upon the whole, I vote for Morris's."

## 150 YEARS AGO IN NEW YORK CITY

*The Crystal Palace, at Sixth Avenue and 42nd Street, in the space now occupied by Bryant Park, is opened on July 14, 1853 with the first World's Fair. There are guests from all parts of Europe and South America. The ceremonies include prayer by Bishop Wainwright, a chorale by the New York Harmonic Society and a speech by President Franklin Pierce. Some 6,000 people are present.*

"It is probably well known that the only essential materials which enter into the construction of the edifice are iron and glass...The ground plan of the building is in the form of a Greek cross, the diameter of which is three hundred and sixty-five feet and five inches. There are three entrances into the main building. These entrances are on Sixth Avenue, on Fortieth and Forty-second streets....The arch of the nave is semi-circular, and has a fan-light forty-one feet in width and twenty-one feet in height....The crowning feature of the whole edifice is the dome. It is in diameter one hundred feet. The angles made by the cross-form, on the exterior of the building, are filled with triangular additions, which rise twenty-four feet in height, and they give the shape of an octagon to the building.... A tower of the same shape rises at each angle....The dome is lighted through the lantern which surmounts it...The structure occupies on the ground a space of 111,000 square feet....The amount of iron consumed in the building will not vary far from twelve hundred and fifty tons....The glass used is equal to thirty-nine thousand square feet."

--"Illustrated News." July 14, 1853

*The construction of Cooper Institute is progressing rapidly: Peter Cooper, Esq., the well-known merchant, is the donor, and we understand has chosen as the title of the institution—"The Union, for the Moral, Mental and Physical Improvement of the Youth of this City, of the State, and the World." The site chosen for The edifice is opposite the new Bible House, at the corner of Astor place and Fourth avenue....The building will occupy the entire block bounded by Fourth avenue, Astor place, Third avenue and Seventh street....To become a member and a student of this institution requires no other credentials than a good moral character."*

--"Illustrated News," October 11, 1853

*An elevated railroad is proposed for Broadway:*

"This railway, when adopted, is to be erected on arms branching out from strong single pillars. The locomotive is to run on the rails, and carry a suspended car, which shall pass between the spaces of the supporting arms. Elevated stations will be erected at different cross-streets to let out and take in passengers. The road is to be high enough to be out of reach of all vehicles below, and thus give no

annoyance. The posts can be erected near the curb stone, so as to allow the track to occupy the least used portion of the street."

--Ibid., November 1, 1853

## 100 YEARS AGO IN NEW YORK CITY

"The Board of Estimate and Apportionment unanimously adopted a resolution in favor of purchasing the block bounded by 160th and 161st Sts., Edgecombe Ave., and Jumel Terrace, including the Roger Morris or Jumel Mansion."  
[May 29, 1903]

--Annual Report, American Scenic & Historic Preservation Society

"All is nearly ready now at Madison Square Garden for the arrival of the Salvation Host of Elijah the Restorer, otherwise John Alexander Dowie, who are moving on this city 4,000 strong from several points of the compass in a great crusade against the unredeemed of New York. By the time early rising residents of the city are getting through their breakfasts this morning eight trainloads of crusaders fresh from Zion will have been deposited at almost as many stations and will crowd the streetcars on their way to the Garden rendezvous."

--"New York Times," October 16, 1903

"Mr. [Seth] Low's administration is conceded by all fair-minded persons acquainted with the city's history to have been the best that the city has known. Every department has been bettered and several have been revolutionized. The organized lawlessness that prevailed in the Police Department, and to a lesser extent in every other department, under Tammany control, has given place to order and efficiency. In the Police Department there are now left but four of the twelve inspectors, and four of the thirty-five Captains of the old regime.. 'Grafting' has been well nigh destroyed, and the former alliance between crime and the police has been broken. The Health Department has eliminated small-pox, and reduced the death rate from 20 to a fraction above 18....In the Charities Department the chronic embezzlement of funds belonging to widows, orphans and the needy has been stopped; while, instead of the stale bread and other unfit food given to the city's dependents, whole and nourishing food is now provided, and with saving in cost.... Tunnels and bridges are being constructed...and a municipal ferry will soon be installed for travel between Staten Island and Manhattan."

--Statement by the City Club, October 22, 1903

"The Park Department has formally assumed possession of the Roger Morris property, and opened it as a public park."

--New York "Tribune," December 19, 2003

*And some other noteworthy events of the period:*

July 20: Joseph Pulitzer agreed to give \$1 million to Columbia University to establish a school of journalism.

November 23: Enrico Caruso made his American debut at the Metropolitan Opera House as the Duke in "Rigoletto."

December 16: Employment of women as ushers by the Majestic Theatre was described as "a brand-new job for women."

December 19: The Williamsburg Bridge, extending across the East River from Clinton and Delancey streets in Manhattan to Roebling and South Fifth Street in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, was opened for traffic.

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## WALKING TOURS IN HISTORIC GREEN-WOOD CEMETERY

It's not too late in the season for a walking tour of historic Green-Wood Cemetery. All tours are at 1:00 pm and start at the Landmark Gothic Archway, inside the Fifth Avenue and 25th Street entrance, Brooklyn. \$10. Tours take about 2 hours. For information call 718/768-7300. Or try [www.green-woodcemetery.org](http://www.green-woodcemetery.org)

November 9 & November 16 with John Cashman

November 23 with John Cashman but at Fort Hamilton Parkway gate.

December 6 Big Onion Walking Tour.

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"BROOKLYN UNION GAS" CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8  
it drew crowds of visitors -- selling not only gas heating, but brownstone living. It won the American Gas Association's national prize for the best gas-utility public relations program in the United States. Obviously the company was on to a good thing. They started major promotions of brownstone communities and brownstone living. As Fred Rider, head of public relations and a shrewd and imaginative promoter, saw it, what was good for Brooklyn was good for Brooklyn Union: "We can't pick up our pipes and run."

The house sold for \$54,000. By that time, 1968, there was already in process a major revival movement in Park Slope that went back to 1960. That was when Bob Makla -- perhaps the true George Washington of Park Slope -- changed the name of an existing community association (South Brooklyn Board of Trade) to the Park Slope Civic Council and launched, in 1962, the first promotional house tour. Around 1965, the Park Slope Betterment Committee -- a hard-nosed professional group of promoters who owned houses on the Slope -- was formed and started a succession of tours and lectures and other promotional events that drew hordes of would-be home buyers to the community.

By the time Brooklyn Union entered Park Slope, the revival of the community had gained considerable momentum. But the money and resources and imagination of a major corporation added a powerful new dimension to the community's promotions. Guided by Fred Rider, newspaper advertisements in all the New York newspapers (even a full-page ad in *The New York Times*) and commercials on many radio stations began to promote Park Slope events. Soon the company made a movie about the Berkeley Place restoration

that appeared in all the local theaters, and even some in Manhattan: "Cinderella of Berkeley Place."

Soon after that -- perhaps around 1971 -- there began an extraordinary series of promotional events sponsored by Brooklyn Union: the huge Brownstone Fairs, which occupied the company's entire ground floor, from Montague Street to Pierrepont Street. With some 80 booths, built and installed by Brooklyn Union's own designers and carpenters, the Fair was able to promote all of the brownstone neighborhoods in Brooklyn, with their community organizations and their schools, plus room for representatives of the Fire and Police departments and a miscellany of environmental and other causes. During those weekends visitors could choose among bus tours that carried them to any of a half dozen Brooklyn communities. For seven years, the annual Brownstone Fair flourished, drawing as many as 25,000 visitors in two days. When Fred Rider retired, the fairs ceased. But they had done a magnificent job of drawing the attention of Manhattanites in search of quality housing at reasonable prices to Brooklyn.

During those years, the company produced at least two other films: "Cinderella of Prospect Place" -- the story of how Brooklyn Union turned a mattress-in-the-street block around -- and "The Brownstones of Brooklyn," a superb promotional piece that was shown in a number of cities around the country at preservation conferences. They also produced a beautiful film on "The Battle of Brooklyn" in 1976, the bicentennial of that Revolutionary War event.

In 1972, the Brownstone Revival Coalition [then the Brownstone Revival Committee] launched, with the help of Brooklyn Union, a new organization, Back to the City. Starting with a conference at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel that drew 250 persons from 82 cities around the United States, Back to the City sponsored national conferences -- one a year -- in 13 different cities: Washington, D.C., St. Paul, Hartford, Milwaukee, Miami, etc. Brooklyn Union helped out, financially and with promotion. The company's films were shown at every conference -- first-class promotion for Brooklyn and New York City and of course for old-house living.

Under its new name, Keyspan Energy, the old Brooklyn Union, has gone national and its good deeds are largely forgotten. But they live on in the beautiful houses and neighborhoods they helped to restore. A lot of those houses even burn gas for heating.

### IN MEMORIAM

The Brownstone Revival Coalition lost a long-time friend with the death of Maryann Ondovcsik, a devoted supporter of preservationist causes. She was always to be seen at Brownstone Revival Coalition functions. She traveled with us in the days when BRC, through its spinoff organization, Back to the City, sponsored conferences in various cities throughout the USA. She is missed.

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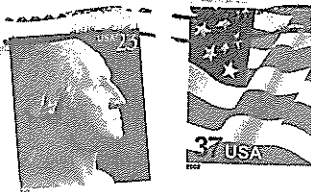
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