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WEEKEND EXPLORER

## In the Mansion Land of the 'Fifth Avenoodles'

By JOHN STRAUSBAUGH

Corrections Appended

THIS time of year one of Manhattan's signature pleasures is a stroll up Fifth Avenue from 59th Street on a crisp, clear weekend morning. To your left, the trees of Central Park stubbornly clutch fistfuls of green and yellow leaves. To your right, doormen in long coats and matching caps stamp their feet at the discreet entrances to the city's most exclusive residential buildings. And strung like pearls all up the avenue are fine mansions built by captains of industry and robber barons around the turn of the 20th century.

One of the grandest houses of all stood at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 65th Street from 1895 until the mid-1920s. It was built by the wealthy businessman John Jacob Astor IV as a home for his family, with his aging mother, Caroline Webster Schermerhorn Astor, in her own vast wing.

An interesting character, Astor served as an officer in the Spanish American War, built his Astoria Hotel next door to his cousin William Astor's Waldorf to create the original Waldorf-Astoria (demolished to make room for the [Empire State Building](#) in 1929), invented a turbine engine and a rainmaking machine, befriended the equally idiosyncratic inventor Nikola Tesla, wrote a science fiction novel ("A Journey in Other Worlds," published in 1894, about a trip to Jupiter and Saturn in the year 2000), created a scandal when he divorced his first wife to marry a much younger woman and went down with the Titanic in 1912. His wife, pregnant at the time, survived.

His mother, meanwhile, was seeking to preserve the city's old-money elite — known variously as the Knickerbockers (from the family created by [Washington Irving](#)), Fifth Avenoodles and “the 400” (as in people she would invite to her Patriarch's balls) — against infiltration by the nouveaux riches and outsiders. To her those undesirables included J. P. Morgan, the Vanderbilts and Rockefellers, and wealthy Catholics and Jews. By 1928 the Astor mansion had been knocked down to make way for Temple Emanu-El, the Romanesque synagogue that now soars majestically on the corner, built by those wealthy Jews Mrs. Astor had shunned.

Down Fifth Avenue, the corner of 60th Street is dominated by the baronial white marble palazzo of the sumptuous Metropolitan Club. Designed by the star architect [Stanford White](#) and completed in 1894, it was financed by Morgan and the Vanderbilts as a retort to being snubbed by the old money's Union Club.

The Upper East Side (from 59th to 96th Streets and Fifth Avenue to the East River) contains the city's most exclusive residences, private schools and social clubs. Madison Avenue is lined with fashionable shops, and Fifth Avenue with prestigious museums.

But it has never been quite as socially exclusive as some Fifth Avenoodles might have liked. By the time [Brooke Astor](#), widow of Caroline's grandson Vincent, died this year at the age of 105, the area had been home to generations of poor immigrants, and to the likes of [Andy Warhol](#) (57 East 66th Street, between Madison and Park Avenues); the con artist David Hampton (who claimed to be [Sidney Poitier](#)'s son and was the subject of [John Guare](#)'s play “Six Degrees of Separation”); the ghetto-fabulous fashion designer [Tommy Hilfiger](#) (820 Fifth Avenue, at 63rd Street); the drug-addicted twins Stewart and Cyril Marcus (who did everything together, including committing suicide in their apartment at 450 East 63rd Street, near York Avenue, and were the subjects of the movie “Dead Ringers”); [Spike Lee](#) and Gypsy Rose Lee (who both lived in the stern-looking town house at 153 East 63rd Street; [Jasper Johns](#) also lived there for a time); the mother-son crime team

Sante and Kenny Kimes (who murdered a wealthy widow and assumed possession of her 65th Street mansion in 1998); the Penthouse publisher [Bob Guccione](#) (on a block of 67th Street that has been home to Rothschilds and Bloomingdales); [Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis](#) (1040 Fifth Avenue, at 85th Street); and the actress Pia Zadora (born Pia Schipani in Hoboken). Caroline Astor would have plotzed.

When you walk from Fifth Avenue to the caverns formed by giant high-rises along its eastern avenues, it's hard to imagine that until the end of the Civil War almost no one lived on the Upper East Side. It was a lonely expanse of open land and a few farms far north of the inhabited city. [Martin Scorsese](#)'s film adaptation of [Edith Wharton](#)'s novel "The Age of Innocence," set in the 1870s, depicts the adventurous Mrs. Mingott's mansion standing alone near Central Park (opened in 1859) at a desolate intersection of the still-unpaved street grid.

In the 18th century wealthy folks built wood-frame summer homes above the East River, where they could enjoy sweeping views from the Bronx to Brooklyn. The last remaining one, built by the merchant Archibald Gracie in 1799, stands at the end of East 88th Street in Carl Schurz Park. It has come to be known as Gracie Mansion, though, like Graceland, the simple frame house is rather grander in repute than in appearance.

"This location was five miles north of the city," Susan Danilow, director of the Gracie Mansion Conservancy, said on the broad back lawn on a bracingly chilly morning recently. "The only way to get here was by boat. There were absolutely no roads uptown."

Washington Irving spent a summer here with the Gracies, whose guests also included [Alexander Hamilton](#) and Joseph Bonaparte, crowned the king of Spain by his brother [Napoleon](#). They held dances and parties, and feasted on the oysters then plentiful in the river.

Financial reverses forced Gracie to sell the house. His son, also Archibald, would be killed while serving as a Confederate general in 1864, and his grandson Archibald would sail on the Titanic with John

Jacob Astor, but live and write the popular book “Titanic: A Survivor’s Story.”

Later owners fared no better than Gracie. By 1896, Ms. Danilow said, “there were so many liens on the property for nonpayment of taxes that the city took over the house.”

In the early 20th century the mansion was reduced to serving as the park’s toolshed and ice cream stand, and housing pay toilets. (The charge was a nickel.) In the 1930s the parks commissioner, [Robert Moses](#), who was tunneling a length of the F.D.R. Drive under the back lawn, had the house designated the official mayor’s residence, and in 1942 [Fiorello H. La Guardia](#) moved in. Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#) prefers to stay in his town house on East 79th Street, near Fifth Avenue, and today Gracie Mansion is used for meetings and public functions.

You see few signs of it now, but when you walk west from Carl Schurz Park along 86th Street, you’re entering the heart of what was once a bustling multiethnic community, from 79th to 96th Street between Third Avenue and the river. After the Civil War streetcars and the Second and Third Avenue Elms opened this area to developers, who filled it with working-class tenements and middle-class town houses. It became home to a teeming population of Germans, Irish, Austrians, Jews, Hungarians, Czechs, Poles, Russians and others. Breweries, cigar-rolling factories and slaughterhouses made the air pungent.

It’s called Yorkville, and historians believe it was named for the Duke of York (later King James II), as were New York City and State. The neighborhood was also known as Germantown; 86th Street from Lexington to Second Avenue was known as Sauerkraut Boulevard and the German Broadway.

Kathy Jolowicz, a neighborhood historian, has lived in Yorkville all her life. She remembers Germantown in its heyday of the 1940s and ’50s.

“When I was a girl, it was fantasyland for me,” she said. “You still had a lot of the Old Country here. Your shopkeepers were your neighbors.

Doorknobs were polished. Sidewalks were swept. You could still see people wearing their dirndls and lederhosen.”

Ms. Jolowicz said she remembered brownstones housing brauhauses, cafes, theaters, ballrooms and restaurants, all demolished now for newer buildings.

The [Marx Brothers](#) grew up in the plain five-story brownstone still standing at 179 East 93rd Street, and reputedly filched apples from the backyard orchard of Jacob Ruppert, a beer baron down the block.

In the 1930s, 178 East 85th Street was the national headquarters of Fritz Kuhn’s pro-Nazi German American Bund. Kuhn drew 22,000 to Madison Square Garden on Feb. 20, 1939, to hear him rail against “Franklin D. Rosenfelt” and his “Jew Deal.” Among Kuhn’s several female companions was a Florence Camp, whom press wags called “Mein Camp.”

With the dismantling of the Els in the 1940s and 1950s developers took new interest in Yorkville.

“They started tearing down all the dwellings of the Yorkvillites and all the foreigners who lived here,” Ms. Jolowicz said. “Germantown just started to fade away.”

Today Heidelberg Restaurant (1648 Second Avenue, between 85th and 86th Streets) and its neighbor, the Schaller & Weber butcher shop, founded in 1930s, are the last visible vestiges. They stand surrounded by new construction.

On the Upper East Side even the tenements were sometimes luxurious. Seri Worden, executive director of the preservationist organization Friends of the Upper East Side Historic Districts, showed me the East River Homes, at the end of 77th and 78th Streets across from John Jay Park. Now known as the Cherokee Apartments, the beautiful yellow brick complex was a model tenement financed by Mrs. William K. Vanderbilt and opened in 1912.

“Model tenements were a response to the growing problem of overcrowded, dark, dank, dangerous buildings that were all over the city,” Ms. Worden explained.

They were also meant to help alleviate the epidemic levels of tuberculosis.

“If you were a person of means in New York City and you came down with TB, the cure was to go upstate, go to the Adirondacks, eat well, rest and relax,” Ms. Worden said. “If you were a working family, you probably weren’t able to do that. So this building was an urban response to the taking of fresh air.”

Thus the sunny courtyards, triple-sash windows, a balcony for every apartment, and even rooftop terraces with spectacular river views.

The rich and powerful were slow to follow Mrs. Mingott to upper Fifth Avenue and environs; but when they did, they adorned it with the city’s finest mansions. In 1898 the banker and art collector Isaac D. Fletcher (who bequeathed Rembrandts, a Rubens, a Rodin and more to the nearby [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#)) built the fairy-tale palace in an ornate French Renaissance style at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 79th Street. Since the 1950s it has housed the Ukrainian Institute of America.

The Pittsburgh steel magnate [Andrew Carnegie](#), one of Mrs. Astor’s undesirables, bought property on Prospect Hill, after which it came to be known as Carnegie Hill (86th to 96th Streets, Fifth to Third Avenues). In 1902 he retired there to the enormous Georgian-style home and garden he built at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 91st Street. Since 1976 it has been the home of the [Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum](#).

[Woody Allen](#) (born Allan Konigsberg in the Bronx), a longtime Carnegie Hill resident, calls the Upper East Side “the Zone,” and has shot exterior and interior locations for many movies there. A sampling of scenes includes Alvy Singer and Annie Hall meeting outside the Beekman Theater at Second Avenue and 65th Street (demolished in 2005), the

opening scene of “Manhattan” in Elaine’s (1703 Second Avenue, between 88th and 89th Streets) and the dancing dead of “Everybody Says I Love You,” shot at the Frank E. Campbell Funeral Chapel (1076 Madison Avenue, and 81st Street). This is also where John Jacob Astor’s friend Tesla was laid out in 1943.

In 2004 Mr. Allen sold his Carnegie Hill home for a reported \$24.5 million and in 2006 bought 118 East 70th Street, a Georgian-style town house on the exceptionally handsome block between Lexington and Park Avenues.

A few blocks away the nondescript town house at 142 East 65th Street was briefly [Richard Nixon](#)’s home. After Watergate, Nixon was rejected by the boards of two exclusive cooperative apartment buildings and settled for buying this house. Perhaps haunted by the spirit of a former owner, the liberal judge Learned Hand, for whom [Archibald Cox](#), the Watergate special prosecutor, had served as a law clerk, Nixon soon decamped for Saddle River, N.J.

From [Tom Wolfe](#)’s Masters of the Universe cavorting through the go-go 1980s to the oceans of new money pouring into its mammoth glass-and-steel high-rises today, the Upper East Side has changed a lot since Caroline Astor’s reign. Though it’s still a place of wealth and prestige, the rich and powerful are as likely to live in TriBeCa or SoHo now. In that sense Brooke Astor’s death signaled not just the end of the family dynasty, but of an era.

Correction: December 15, 2007

The Weekend Explorer column on Friday, about the Upper East Side, referred imprecisely to the architectural style of the mansion Andrew Carnegie built at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 91st Street and of the town house Woody Allen bought on East 70th Street between Lexington and Park Avenues. They were built after the death of the last King George of Britain in 1830, and thus are Georgian style, not Georgian. The column also misstated the year Carnegie moved into the mansion. It was 1902, not 1901.

Correction: December 18, 2007

The Weekend Explorer column on Friday, about the Upper East Side, referred imprecisely to the architectural style of the mansion Andrew Carnegie built at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 91st Street and of the town house Woody Allen bought on East 70th Street between Lexington and Park Avenues. They are Georgian style, not Georgian. A correction in this space on Saturday referred incorrectly to the King George of Britain who died in 1830. The king, George IV, was the last King George in the period that gave the architectural style its name, not the last King George of Britain. (George V and George VI reigned in the 20th century.)

Correction: January 10, 2008

The Weekend Explorer column on Dec. 14, about the Upper East Side, misstated the history of the name of the Yorkville area. Historians believe it was named for the Duke of York (later King James II), as were New York City and State. It was not named for Sgt. Alvin C. York, the World War I hero. (York Avenue was named for him.) The column also misidentified the borough in which Woody Allen, a longtime Upper East Side resident, was born. It was the Bronx — not Brooklyn, the borough in which he grew up.