



July 1, 2009

## MAKE A BRAND-NEW START OF IT



THIS week's story of B'way and 78th's 100-year-old Apthorp building being redone made me ponder my beloved city. And then a friend gave me Nathan Silver's "Lost New York," a coffee-table pictorial history of what NYC used to be.

The Apthorp, which in leases past housed such as Cyndi Lauper, Al Pacino, Sidney Poitier, Conan O'Brien, Nora Ephron, began life in 1764. Charles Ward Apthorp, a colonial, had a 200-acre farm. Being a lawyer he was loaded, so he built a mansion on it that later became headquarters for Gen. George Washington. This got torn down in 1892 when the newfangled apartment house idea came into being.

Times Square. Originally Longacre Square until 1904 when the Times Tower, 25 stories high, our second-tallest structure, came into being. What is now No. 1 Times Square, on the Great White Way, at the crossroads of the world, instantly recognizable to foreigners the world over, is now just a piece of outdoor advertising. World-famous Times Square has osmosed into Rockaway with camp chairs.

Take the Plaza. Or, rather, shove the Plaza with what it's become today. This one-time grande dame of all hotels presided over what is officially called Grand Army Plaza. Its original hotel began in 1881, was held up eight years in litigation, opened 1890, closed 1905, and was demolished

two years later by our once-glorious Plaza. The fountain came 1916 thanks to Joseph Pulitzer's 50 grand.

Madison Square Garden. Originally on 26th Street in Madison Square's garden. In 1873, it held an arena adapted from railroad sheds, which P.T. Barnum leased. It featured boxing. In 1883, it went classy, housed the National Horse Show, and architect Stanford White rebuilt it of yellow brick and Pompeian white terra cotta (forget today's hotdog stands) to include a theater, restaurant, concert hall, roof garden and tower. Inside was pink with cream-colored arches.

(Think the Knicks.) June 16, 1890, New York's first Madison Square Garden officially opened.

Fifth Avenue. In the early 1900s, 46th to 72nd was a staggering parade of wealth. A mile and a half of chateaux for Goulds, Belmonts, Astors and Vanderbilts. Those fortresses have mostly gone but that staggering parade of wealth marches on. Footmen have been replaced by doormen. Carriages disappeared into Priuses. Top hats are now baseball caps. Spats are sneakers. White tie and tails -- jeans. The nickel subway is \$2.25. Ladies in sleeveless tank tops no longer find a need for elbow-length white kid gloves. And Brooke Astor's bones are being fought over, and Gloria Vanderbilt's just written a dirty book.

Thus civilization evolves, and the cellphone replaces the conference room, which replaced the meeting hall, which replaced the town square, which replaced the town crier. Remember Paul Revere and his "One if by land, two if by sea" thing? The original choice of New York -- first named Nieuw Amsterdam and established on the Manhates River - - was an accident of water. Its geography provided a harbor and natural positions of defense. Some 400-odd years later, our tiny island remains planet Earth's No. 1 city. Listen, even when Horace Greeley uttered those immortal words, "Go west, young man," he still stayed in New York.

In 1660, its 300 houses stopped at Wall Street. The town was divided into 20 block areas. Our layout dictated by two main features: a big broad street, now called Broadway, which ran north, and a canal where Broad Street is today. Slowly, settlements grew. The Bowery, the Village, Manhattanville. Trump Tower.

Central Park. In 1850, back before Tavern on the Green and its bar mitzvahs, 59th to 110th was scrubland, farms, squatters' shacks and reservoirs for Croton aqueduct water. Frederick Olmstead's 800-acre great park was partly built with the availability of relief workers thanks to the 1857 depression. So, New Yorkers, take heart. Although our home turf suffers drops into some huge deep hole every few decades, we always -- despite Albany's Keystone Kops -- manage to dig out of it.

Temple Emanu-El was originally on 43rd's northeast corner. Demolished in 1927, its new home, 65th and Fifth, was dedicated in 1930. St. John's Chapel, built by the vestrymen of Trinity Parish in 1803, remained standing until, widening Varick Street for some reason in 1918, the city destroyed it. Presbyterians had the Old Brick Church, circa 1767, on Beekman and Nassau, then considered the most valuable land in the city. Thanks to our city's edifice complex, it got razed in 1857.

But it's New York. Uptown, downtown, crosstown, Midtown. We got us Rockefeller Center, Lincoln Center, the Diamond Center. We got rinks, we got zoos, we got food, we got booze. New York, New York, you're a helluva town. The costs are up and the services down. But . . . hey . . . it's New York.