

Blackwell's Almanac

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Edward Steichen's famous 1904 nighttime photo of the Flatiron Building. See "The Flatiron Building: From 'Likely to Fall Down' to Historic Landmark," p. 2. Image: Public domain/Wikimedia.

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The Flatiron Building: From “Likely to Fall Down” to Historic Landmark

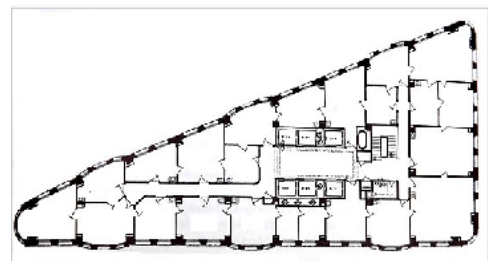
It’s been photographed, painted, filmed and lionized. It has become an almost universally recognized symbol of New York City, used by TV and movie directors to “establish” their story’s Big Apple location. And it polls as one of city residents’ most beloved buildings.

But it wasn’t always that way.

After a succession of investors, the still empty “flatiron” site, as the triangular parcel was known, was purchased in 1901 for \$2 million to situate a new headquarters building for the Fuller Company. The firm, which was operating out of Chicago at the time, was the first true general contractor, meaning that it dealt with all aspects of building construction. What’s more, it specialized in erecting skyscrapers... and, located at the intersection of Fifth Avenue, Broadway and 23rd Street, the company’s planned edifice would in fact be the first skyscraper above 14th Street.

Before an 1892 change in NYC building codes, naturally fire-resistant masonry was the required construction material. A decade later, however, Chicago architect Daniel Burnham was free to take advantage of a newer building technique: steel framing clad with limestone and terra cotta tiling. The steel sections were so precisely cut, the building rose at a stunning rate for that time: about one floor per week. Two unplanned features were added toward the end of the process, as demanded by the Fuller Company’s CEO. To maximize use of the lot and add retail income, he insisted on a cowcatcher-shaped space grafted onto the “prow” of the building. He also specified that a penthouse top the building’s already impressive height to be used as artists’ studios.

When the wedge-shaped structure was completed in June 1902, after only a year’s construction, it met with a wave of derision. Newspapers called it a “monstrosity,” “Burnham’s folly” and “a stingy piece of pie.” The Municipal Art Society insisted it was “unfit to be in the center of the city.” Its generous number of windows was mocked as leaving no wall space for so much as a bookcase or painting. And critics even questioned its safety. Pointing to its 22-story height, narrow footprint—only six and a half feet wide at its point, and the gusty winds known to circulate at that location, they were sure it was going to fall down.



Typical floor of the Flatiron in 1903. The vertex is 6 1/2 feet across and forms a 25° angle. Image: Wikipedia.

Fortunately, structural engineer Croydon Purdy was way ahead of them. Taking into account the winds and the building's triangular shape, he designed the structure to withstand four times the typical wind loads. Proof of concept: the building has soldiered on for over a century, allowing successive generations to ponder and appreciate its artistry. The exquisite detailing of its terra-cotta work and Beaux Arts styling are two of its notable attributes. Another is its seeming dynamism. Viewing it one day in the midst of a snowstorm, photographer Alfred Stieglitz remarked that "...it appeared to be moving toward me like the bow of a monster ocean steamer—a picture of a new America still in the making."

That's not to say that the building wasn't quirky. Originally it had only men's restrooms, one on each floor. Then it turned out that building tenants also employed women. So it became necessary to convert some of the bathrooms, such that, today, men's and women's are on alternate floors.

Really quirky were the hydraulic elevators, run by water pressure. Not only did they flood regularly (requiring not a repairman, but a plumber), they were extremely slow; from the lobby to the 20th floor could take ten minutes. When John Sargent was appointed CEO of major tenant St. Martin's Press in 1996, he was so frustrated with the elevators, he threatened to rappel down the side of the building. His idea was to generate a publicity photo and headline "Editor Desperate to Reach the

Ground Floor" in order to shame the owners into an overhaul. Although he never actually followed through, the elevators, the last hydraulic lifts in the city, were converted to electricity in 1999.

A final oddity: The building inspired a singular sport. Gentlemen would hang about waiting for the unpredictable wind drafts that swirled around the triangular geometry to raise women's skirts, thus allowing the onlookers to glimpse otherwise forbidden ankles and legs. Policemen would shoo the leering men away, giving rise to the phrase "23 skidoo."

Despite its mixed reviews, the new skyscraper was not long in attracting renters. Among its original tenants were publishers, overflow music distributors from 28th Street's Tin Pan Alley, the Imperial Russian Consulate, and the crime syndicate Murder, Inc. Many of the artist inhabitants of the penthouse studios contributed drawings to the magazines created in the offices below. And the retail space was a spectacular success. The "cowcatcher" was occupied by United Cigar Stores, while the vast cellar, which extended way beyond the building's above-ground footprint,

housed the 1,500-seat

Flatiron Restaurant, serving theater and other customers from breakfast through late supper.

Like much of New York City real estate, the Flatiron changed ownership and tenant rosters a number of times over the years. Until very recently, the 21 office floors were occupied entirely by Macmillan Publishers



The Flatiron in a snowstorm by Alfred Stieglitz. Image: The National Gallery.

(the parent company of St. Martin's Press). Indeed, authors meeting their editors at the Flatiron became a legendary rite of passage. But, as of June 2019, that era too came to an end. Macmillan chose to move downtown, and the owners have taken the vacancy as an opportunity to gut-renovate the property. Its rabbit-warren of offices will be razed in favor of an open floor plan, long-overdue central air and heating will be installed, the always drafty windows will be replaced, and once again, the elevators will be upgraded.

In the 118 years since its completion, the Flatiron Building has come to be appreciated as an historic touchstone. It was designated a New York City landmark in 1966, was added to the National Register of Historic

Places in 1979, and was named a National Historic Landmark in 1989. The one thing it never achieved was memorialization of the founder of the Fuller Company, George A. Fuller, who died two years before the building's construction. It was supposed to be called The Fuller Building, but the public had other ideas. The structure was then and forever called "The Flatiron," and the company was forced to erect another commemorative Fuller Building on 57th Street.

Sources:

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I hope that you have been enjoying our six times a week "FROM THE ARCHIVES," which we send out to our members and subscribers. As of this date, we have posted issue #121.

It started as a way to share island history with others during the pandemic. It just kept going. I have covered many subjects, including island history, the families who lived and worked here, the houses of worship, and the different institutions that were on the island. Following these local vignettes, I branched out to the other islands in New York harbor, beaches, the five boroughs, Queens neighborhoods, as well as artists, photographers and celebrated names from Mae West to Austin Corbin. Some were famous, a few infamous.

I cannot say this was all independent research. I depend on many sources on-line such as Wikipedia and college sources. When a topic does not pop into my mind, I just check the great artists on the Smithsonian web sites of American Artists. We respect copyrights and credit them when possible. There is only one New York cultural institution that was upset that we used their images. We apologized.

The "photo of the day" feature is challenging; it must be something known, but not too familiar. A few islanders wake up early in the morning to send me their submissions. I owe them lots of trinkets from the kiosk, which, by the way, has re-opened weekends from 12 noon to 5 p.m. We observe social distancing and provide sanitizing wipes for all guests. (Our dog bowls are filled and offer free water to all pooches.)

We look forward to the day when we can reinstate our very popular library lectures. For the moment, we are planning at least two Zoom presentations in August. Watch for specifics.

**To subscribe to "FROM THE ARCHIVE," just e-mail: rooseveltislandhistory@gmail.com.
To see a complete selection of issues, go to: rihs.us.**

Send me your suggestions.

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An Automat in Manhattan at 977 8th Avenue, 1936. New York Public Library's Digital Library: digitalgallery.nypl.org → digitalcollections.nypl.org.

What Ever Happened to the Automat?

Do you remember the iconic Horn & Hardart eatery? If not, is your imagination capable of conjuring it?

Envision a beautifully designed, spacious hall featuring mirrors, marble and marquetry. First stop is the cashier, housed in a windowed booth at the center of the hall. Hand her a dollar bill (they were usually women) and rubber-tipped, seemingly magic fingers instantaneously fan out 20 nickels—no counting involved. Then you pick up a tray and utensils and head for the wall of glass-doored compartments containing today's fare.

What are you in the mood for? The wall is divided into such categories as Hot Food, Sandwiches, Salads, Cakes, Pies, Coffee, with pleasing signage to direct you. You insert the

appropriate number of nickels into the slot, turn the knob and the glass door opens upward on its topside hinges so that you can extract your meatloaf, frankfurter and beans, apple pie or hundreds of other menu items. When the door is closed, the compartment revolves out of sight and a new compartment comes into view with another serving of the exact same food.

The food was good, very inexpensive and there was no need to tip. In addition, the famous 5-cent cup of coffee (known as the best in town) was, by company mandate, brewed fresh every 20 minutes. Those features in and of themselves were a potent draw. But, there's no getting away from it: the "high-tech" presentation—no waiters, no one behind the counter—was irresistible, to the point that, in the restaurant's 1950s heyday, New York City alone supported some 40 locations, with another ten or so in Philadelphia. And those locations collectively served 800,000 people and sold 90 million cups of coffee a year. Somewhat surprisingly, the crush of customers at lunch and dinner was as democratic as you could get. Everyone loved the Automat, from children to pensioners, from hardscrabble menial workers to successful business men and



Part of a postcard depicting how the Automat works. Image: en.wikipedia.org.



The precise amount of coffee gushed from the mouth of a chrome dolphin's head (copied from a Pompeian fountain) at an exactly calibrated temperature. Image: en.wikipedia.org.

executives, from out-of-work actors and songwriters to the likes of Irving Berlin and Walter Winchell—and they could sometimes even be found sitting together at communal tables!

The Automat is often thought of as a quintessentially American development. But we had a little help. The first such restaurant actually appeared in Berlin, Germany, in 1895, inspired by a company that manufactured food-vending machinery. Some

proliferated, food preparation, selection and handling became an enormous undertaking. Cooking was moved to immense offsite locations that could occupy up to a full city block. Preparation began in the wee hours and continued throughout the day so that every restaurant had a continuous supply of hot, fresh food. And the founders didn't rest on their laurels; they directed their executive chefs to constantly innovate new dishes, which they judged at what they called the "sample table." To ensure that Automat food was always fresh, they ordered any food left over at close of business to be sent to discount, "day-old" outlets. To ensure that it was also sanitary, they circulated a leather-bound tome that taught workers the proper cooking and handling of every one of the nearly 400 items on offer.

Despite the men's attention to detail, their blockbuster concept inevitably began to fade in popularity. The 1970s, in particular, dealt it a crushing blow. The rise of fast-food, limited-menu chains such as McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken not only caught the imagination of the dining public, their relatively modest food and labor costs undercut Horn & Hardart's pricing. The middle-class exodus to the suburbs also took its toll, eroding the restaurant's dinner and weekend business. And then there was inflation. Who would have thought that this country-wide economic phenomenon would hurt only one specific restaurant chain? But as the price of menu items increased, the use

sources suggest that, after finding success in other Northern European countries, the German restaurateur provided Americans Joseph Horn and Frank Hardart with its patented equipment. Another source claims that the two luncheonette operators found the German machinery convoluted, subsequently perfecting and manufacturing machinery on their own. Whatever the truth, they proceeded to open the first U.S. Automat in Philadelphia in 1902. Ten years later, the Horn & Hardart Automat made its first appearance in New York and ultimately became (before McDonald's) the largest restaurant chain in the country.

In one respect, though, the "automation" was a hoax. Behind the scenes, the operation required scores of employees. They refilled the cubbies with menu items, dashed out to bus tables, washed dishes, served food from tureens in those Automats that had steam tables, cleaned the premises and, of course, brewed the coffee and cooked. And as the restaurants



Postcard of a typical, marble-adorned Automat dining room. Image: <https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/the-automat/>.

of just coins to buy one's food became untenable.

The Automat lingered through another decade. Then, finally, its last outpost on Third Avenue and 42nd Street closed in 1991 —“grandfather's fast food” had passed into history. If you are interested, a 35-foot section of the original 1902 restaurant can still be seen in the Smithsonian Institution. Also, the great granddaughter of co-founder Frank Hardart, Marianne Hardart, has co-authored a definitive chronicle titled “The

Automat: The History, Recipes, and Allure of Horn & Hardart's Masterpiece.”

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Face It. You Were Breaking the Law!

No. I'm not referring to your last speeding ticket. Nor to the time you brazenly jaywalked across a busy thoroughfare. Nevertheless, between mid-February and the end of May 2020, all the evidence points to your having violated New York State Penal Law.

How? Bear with me.

In 1715, King George I granted a 160,000 acre tract of land in the Hudson Valley to one Robert Livingston. Known thereafter as Livingston Manor (now most of Columbia County), it was inherited by successive generations, all of whom lived off their tenant farmers. These and other Hudson Valley farmers paid rent to their landlords in the form of livestock or crops in amounts unilaterally decided by the Livingston family and other property owners. Sometimes in drought years, those amounts exceeded the farmers' ability to pay. That's why in 1844, a number of them, fed up with their semi-feudal servitude, went on a rent strike.

The powerful Livingstons complained to Columbia County Sheriff Henry Miller, who was authorized by the County to seize and auction off the striking farmers' livestock and crops. As Miller set out for Sweet's Tavern in Copake with the authorizing papers, strike leader Smith Boughton and a band of supporters sought to intercede. Disguising their identities, they called themselves the "Calico Indians" and wore masks and bizarre costumes. At the tavern, Boughton seized the legal papers and threw them into a fire.

Of course, Boughton and others were arrested. But more importantly, the unrest led to the passage, in 1845, of Penal Law 240.35 (4), which made it a criminal violation for groups of individuals to wear masks in public. Still on the books in 2020, the law stipulated that violators —yes, you!— were vulnerable to a 15-day jail sentence!

Fortunately, New York State Attorney General Letitia James became aware of the anti-mask ordinance's existence. In mid-May, she contacted Governor Cuomo and the legislative leadership and urged that the anti-mask law be suspended or repealed, advice they quickly followed. So you are absolved. You can now follow the dictates of science and Governor Cuomo and wear a mask with impunity.

Adapted from: *Masks: When Two Legalities Collided*, by Copake Town Historian Howard Blue, in “Copake Connection,” July Edition 2020.

100 Years of Votes For Women

On three weekends in July, the Copake Grange hall in Copake, NY, in collaboration with the Roeliff Jansen Historical Society in Copake Falls, NY, presented an exhibition commemorating the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage on the federal level. (New York State had actually granted women the vote three years earlier in 1917.) Following is a brief photographic summary of the display.



Tracking Ratification: The 19th Amendment was first introduced in Congress in 1878. Congress passed it for the third time on June 4, 1919, but it then required ratification by 3/4 of the states (36 out of 48 at the time). A star was added to the suffragists' official banner with each state's ratification.

Women's Suffrage Banners:
(Bottom left:) New York State was the first eastern state to fully enfranchise women. The actions of New York State heralded a gigantic legal, social and political shift throughout the country, ultimately leading to ratification of the 19th Amendment.
(Bottom right:) The word "suffrage" comes from the Latin "suffragium," meaning the right or privilege to vote. "Suffragist" was anyone, male or female, who vigorously supported women having the vote. "Suffragette" was an originally derisive British term that, in America, came to mean those using more disruptive and militant tactics.



Suffrage Demonstration, 1919: "Stars and Ballot Box" fund raiser to support lobbying state officials in order to ensure state approval. "If you want to put a vote in in 1920, put a (\$.10, \$1.00, \$10.00) in NOW."

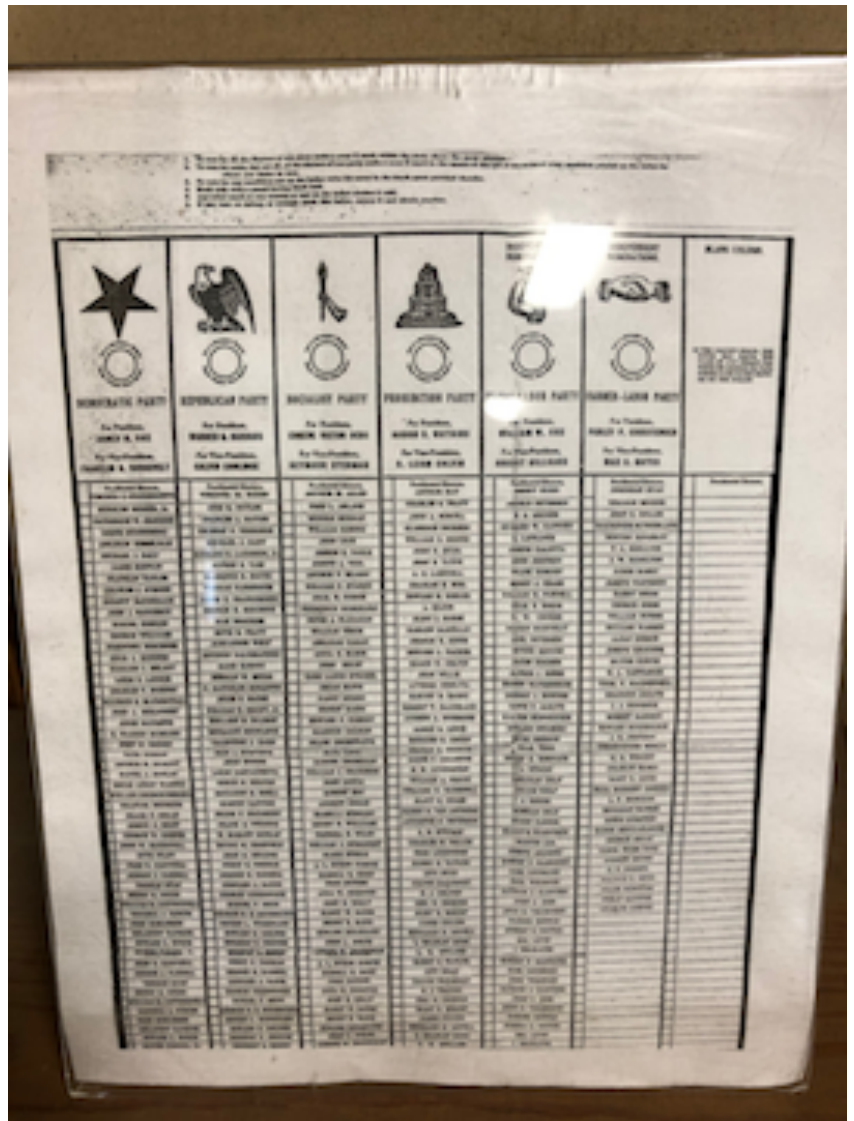
AMENDMENT XIX

Passed by Congress June 4, 1919,
Ratified August 18, 1920

The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.

Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

Success! Tennessee was the 36th state to ratify and the 19th Amendment was adopted.



1920 Ballot: In addition to voting for president and vice-president, citizens voted for electors (the column of names listed under each party's candidates).



A 1920 Voting Booth: It folded up so that it could be stored flat, and it didn't cost thousands of dollars.

A 1920 Ballot Box: Women participated in their first federal election and helped elect President Warren Harding and Vice-President Calvin Coolidge.

