

# Blackwell's Almanac

A Publication of the Roosevelt Island Historical Society



*Today's Ukrainian Institute of America is housed in the French Gothic Fletcher-Sinclair Mansion, one of the Gilded Age's many palatial homes that lined Fifth Avenue. See "Old New York: Part V—The Gilded Age," p. 2. Image credit: Ukrainian Institute of America.*

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**Blackwell’s  
Almanac**

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## Old New York: Part V—The Gilded Age

The immediate post-Civil War years began badly for New York City. Its war-based economy wound down when the war itself wound down. A brief but severe recession followed. Money and jobs were scarce. Yet, the city was swamped with former soldiers from everywhere unsuccessfully looking for work. Reduced to begging and living on the streets, they were a blight the strapped city was incapable of managing. But time worked its wonders. By the 1870s, the city had regained its financial footing and entered the decades-long, economic, social and cultural expansion known as the Gilded Age. At least it was gilded for part of the population.

### Industry

A few statistics tell the story: In 1884, nearly 70% of imports for the entire country came through the Port of New York. Between 1888 and 1908, the city’s bank receipts grew 250% compared to the national increase of 26%. And over the course of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup>, Manhattan’s land and buildings rose in value from \$1.7 billion to \$6.7 billion.

Much of this growth came from the development of light industry and the era’s own brand of technology. Factories in Brooklyn and Long Island City fed Manhattan’s garment industry, as well as an insatiable demand for pianos and sewing machines, typewriters and cash registers. The city was an important center for hard rubber products, and petroleum and chemical goods. And perhaps, most notably, it was the site of the first commercial electric system.

Thomas Edison may have invented the incandescent light bulb in Menlo Park, New Jersey. But his ultimate goal of creating a practical distribution system for the sustained and clean illumination provided by his invention was implemented on Pearl Street in Lower Manhattan. When the Pearl Street Station was first switched on in 1882, it lit up homes and businesses—banks, the stock exchange, factories, the *New York Times*, the *New York Herald*—and launched the electrification of the entire country.



*This 19th century Steinway & Sons piano was crafted in the Astoria factory that still operates today. Image: antiquepianoshop.com.*



*The Tower Building at 50–52 Broadway was the first building in New York City to use a steel skeleton. It was completed in 1889 and was 11 stories high. Image: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tower\\_Building](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tower_Building).*

Other contributors to the city's business wealth are equally legendary. New York-based tycoons such as Cornelius Vanderbilt (shipping and railroads), Jay Gould (railroads), J.P. Morgan (finance) and John D. Rockefeller (oil) amassed fortunes measured in the hundreds of billions of dollars in

today's money. These sums, which would actually dwarf the net-worth of our current billionaires, were pumped into the city's economy by way of investments and philanthropy. And, no doubt, by the simple act of shopping.

### A City of Stores

Thanks to the dramatic appearance of department stores, New York became a regional and national shopping destination. A. T. Stewart's, an eight-story, white marble-clad emporium occupying the entire block between 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Streets and Fourth Avenue and Broadway, offered dress goods, fabric, carpets, glass and china, toys and sports equipment. It also offered important operational innovations: modest mark-ups and low prices; a one-price policy eliminating the need for haggling; merchandise returns and cash refunds; lounge/waiting rooms for customers; and free delivery.

R. H. Macy's, which had earlier been founded as a small dry goods store on Lower Sixth Avenue, increased its variety of merchandise year by year to include such novelties as kitchen utensils, furniture, furs, books and a

soda fountain. It also took the lead in aggressive advertising and underselling the competition. By the time it moved to its current location on Herald Square, it was the city's dominant and most diversified department store. Its rivals included Altman's, Lord & Taylor, Bonwit's, McCreery's, Ohrbach's, and Arnold Constable—all of which reshaped shopping habits and the notion of service and luxury.

### Engineering Feats

For most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the city's residential buildings consisted of no more than five stories, while its taller commercial buildings might reach to eight. But the high cost of land in the city drove thoughts of building up. And two technological advances made this possible. One was the passenger elevator, the other, structural steel.

With refinements in the elevator—Otis's safety brake ensuring that the passenger car wouldn't crash if a cable broke, as well as steam and electric propulsion—the middle class abandoned their unaffordable private homes for new, lavish apartment buildings. The pioneering Stuyvesant Apartments on



*The pioneering A.T. Stewart's department store occupied an entire square block just south of Grace Church. Image: [barrons.com](http://barrons.com)*

East 18<sup>th</sup> Street and the later Dakota on West 72<sup>nd</sup> Street established a residential trend that, many decades later, would almost eliminate the private house altogether from Manhattan.

Beginning around 1880, advent of the steel skeleton also transformed the face of New York. As a substitute for brick and stone masonry, which required ever-thicker walls the higher a building rose, it fueled the emergence of the skyscraper. A dizzying cycle of demolition and construction followed, culminating in New York's iconic skyline.



*The Brooklyn Bridge was perhaps the premier engineering triumph of the Gilded Age. Image: en.wikipedia.org.*

Finally, there was the other iconic structure of the Gilded Age: the Brooklyn Bridge. Opening in 1883, it galvanized people's belief and pride in the wonders of civil engineering and design. With solid granite towers rising 275 feet above the mean water level, and a length of over 6,000 feet (then the longest suspension bridge in the world), no other bridge has been so often painted, etched, lithographed, photographed and written about. In the words of French writer Paul Bourget, "...this bridge astounds you...walk across it, feel the quivering of the monstrous trellis of iron and steel...and you will feel that the engineer is the great artist of our epoch."

### High Society

The premier image of the Gilded Age is exquisitely dressed men and women, living in elegant mansions, riding in ornate carriages and attending opulent balls. And it was all true. The wealthy of New York considered themselves royalty. In fact, they often wielded more power in the city than the politicians. They were

called "The Four Hundred," although various published lists of the 400 most prominent individuals often differed. Led by Caroline Schermerhorn Astor (*the Mrs. Astor*), they codified proper behavior and etiquette, determined who was acceptable in society, funded parks,

hospitals, charitable, educational and cultural institutions, and patronized the arts.

Indeed, New York became the cultural capital of the U.S. largely through the efforts of the economic elite to equal or surpass the great capital cities of Europe. And their legacy remains the cultural backbone of New York City today (see sidebar).

From the Natural History Museum's Gothic and Romanesque Revival style to the Library's consummate Beaux-Arts design, this new breed of public institution demonstrated a new grandeur in American architecture. So too did the style and scale of the homes of New York's super-rich. Fifth

Avenue, which previously had been lined with comfortable brownstones, became a showcase of seismic ostentation and magnificence. Palatial piles featured Romanesque towers and other architectural extravaganzas on the outside, as well as ballrooms, theaters and art galleries on the inside. Among the most talked about was the chateau-like fantasy designed by noted architect Richard Morris Hunt for Cornelius Vanderbilt II at Fifth Avenue and 52<sup>nd</sup> St. (see p. 5).

### Gilded Age New Yorkers' Cultural Legacy

**1869, the American Museum of Natural History established; moved to its present location in 1877**

**1870, the Metropolitan Museum of Art founded for the public benefit**

**1870s-1880s, private art collections opened to select audiences, prefiguring today's gallery scene**

**1883, the 39th Street Metropolitan Opera House founded along with today's Metropolitan Opera Company**

**1895, the Astor reference library and Lenox rare book collection combined with ex-governor Samuel J. Tilden's Trust to form the New York Public Library; later branch libraries funded by steel magnate Andrew Carnegie**

### The Other Half

It must be said that the Gilded Age also had its sinister side. Greedy industrialists, bankers and politicians exploited workers, who had very few, if any, protections. The development of industrial machinery minimized the need for skilled craftsmen. The greatest demand was for unskilled labor, making workers interchangeable and expendable, with little control over their working conditions or wages. As a result, most of this underclass toiled long hours in dangerous circumstances and lived in poverty.



*A rendering of the “chateau” designed by Richard Morris Hunt for Cornelius Vanderbilt II. Image: thedailybeast.com.*

This situation was aggravated by the flood of immigrants that passed through Ellis Island. Numbering in the millions, most of them stayed or spent extended time in New York City, adding to the unskilled labor pool and depressing wages even further. All these lower-class families—some of them with six, eight, ten children—were crowded into small tenement apartments with minimum air circulation or sunlight. Many of them lacked indoor toilets, running water and steady garbage removal.

Between 1885–1888, there was a fledgling attempt at collective action through unions in order to improve the workers’ lot. Predictably it failed. The government and upper classes, hostile to unionism, brutally crushed the movement in its infancy. Even so, some reform did materialize—partially inspired by “How the Other Half Lives,” Jacob Riis’s seminal 1890 photographic exposé of workers’ squalid conditions and lives. Legislation established factory inspectors, a maximum workday of 12 hours, a minimum age (13) for child labor, mandates for arbitration to settle employer-employee disputes, and improvements in housing.

### The End

There is no real agreement as to exactly when the Gilded Age ended. Some mark its

demise at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the administration of Teddy Roosevelt and his trust-busting policies. Others say 1910, by which time some further reforms advocated by the Progressive movement had taken hold. Whichever date you favor, one thing is certain: World War I shifted the focus of the country; while many of the tycoons and their families remained wealthy for generations, the dazzling extravagance of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was dimmed forever.

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## Island Icons:

### Mae West— Welfare Island's Bawdiest Workhouse Inmate Returns

*A few years ago, the RIHS gave a Sunday tea fundraiser featuring the notorious Mae West in person (use your imagination). Blond, buxom Mae was scheduled to talk at length. As it turned out, time constraints required her to shorten her presentation. Which was too bad, because she is known for her clever wit and pithy one-liners. Here, now, is the unabridged version of her talk, some of it in her own historically documented sayings (in blue).*

(Seductively) Good afternoon. I hope you are in the mood for a little naughtiness.

If you must know, afternoons are not my best time of day. [The reason I am so knowledgeable about men is because I spent so much time in night school.](#) No matter. I predict we are going to have great fun anyway.

Remember vaudeville? No? Well, you babes in arms don't know what you missed. That's where I got my start...at the tender age of 5...way back in 1898. I loved being on stage and I used to practice signing my autograph for when I became famous. I changed the spelling of my name from M-a-y to M-a-e because I didn't like that "y" hanging down below the line. I just don't like things that hang down.

Of course, I didn't become a famous star until (suggestively) I filled out. As I always say, [the curve is mightier than the sword.](#)

Truth to tell, though, it was more than my (provocatively shaking bosom) Mae Wests that got me where I got to. I started writing my own sketches and dialogue when I was only 18. I'd regularly add lines to the parts I was given—a little funny business here, a little innuendo there.

Then post-World War I happened. Things were changing. Women got the vote in 1920. Prohibition, also passed in 1920, shattered many of the country's inhibitions and stodginess. Banning liquor actually made it more enticing. Women smoked. People talked more openly about sex. And I became fascinated by two men.

(A whispered aside) [I do believe in saving a boyfriend for a rainy day—and another, just in case it doesn't rain.](#) But no, these two men were not what you think. Their names were Jung and Freud...and I was fascinated by their ideas about the conscious and unconscious importance of sex. I actually wanted to use these ideas in a



“legitimate” [air quotes] drama. So I wrote it. You could say, a fateful decision.

The title was, what else?, “Sex”—the perfect vehicle for my talents and experience. After all, I’ve known so many men, the FBI ought to come to me first to compare fingerprints.

The play opened in 1926...to a disappointingly sparse audience. Most of them were sitting in the balcony as though they were afraid of the subject matter. I actually considered closing after that first night. Good thing I didn’t.

When I arrived at the theater the next day, there was a line of more sailors than I had ever seen in my life. The word had gotten around. A testament to my language skills. I speak two of them: Body and English.

After that we played to standing-room-only for 42 weeks. Then, while Mayor Jimmy Walker was out of town, the acting mayor Joseph McKee ordered the police to raid us. I was arrested and tried and found guilty of producing an immoral theatrical performance. The irony is that there really wasn’t anything obscene about the play. It was risqué but not dirty. There was no nudity. There was less foul language than in many plays on Broadway. In fact, it was ahead of its time. I think what the authorities objected to was my point: that it’s not just prostitutes who give sex for money. Women of all stripes marry for money or use sex to gain some other material benefit. Anyway, I was sentenced to a \$500 fine or 10 days in the Workhouse on Welfare Island.

So, what did I do? I could have paid the fine. But between two evils, I always pick the one I never tried before. Seriously, no one was going to deprive me of that adventure. I saw those as ten valuable days, material for my writing, a working vacation.

When I arrived at the Workhouse, I was mostly treated like a celebrity. I was assigned to a private concrete room. The warden, who was a real gentleman, allowed me to wear my silk lingerie under my prison outfit. Eventually I was domiciled in his residence with the other inmates who worked there. My job was to dust his law books. He also let me walk the corridors of the Workhouse; all the girls admired me and wanted to talk to me. There was just one way in which the guards made me feel like a prisoner.

You know, one of my hard and fast principles is that I dress for women and undress for men. Only men.

Well, before issuing me my prison garb, those hags made me strip. Buck naked. I could feel them gaping at me and they made me stand there for quite a long time. Maybe they were making comparisons. If that’s what they were doing, they got the punishment they deserved.



I really felt bad for the girls in the Workhouse...and most of them were only girls. Each one had a story. Most of them had fallen into prostitution because it was the only thing they knew how to do. Without money for decent clothes and some previous experience, their chances of getting legitimate work were nil to none. My time there made me appreciate my life and how lucky I had been to have a good start in life.

The experience also changed my life in a different way. The whole time I was there, the press were pushing and shoving to get to interview me and take my photo. I got a million dollars’ worth of publicity, in the days when a million was still really a million. I believe fervently in censorship. I made a fortune out of it!

With the wind of celebrity in my sails, I continued writing plays...one about

homosexuality, which I defended; another about bathing beauties and the redeeming power of love; another about a user of women who comes to a bad end. Of course, they were all racy. [Virtue may have its own rewards, but it doesn't have sales at the box office.](#) In fact, most of my plays were critical failures, but wildly successful with audiences.

The most successful of all was a little gem you may have heard of: It was called "Diamond Lil." She was a totally amoral operator who ran the illicit businesses of a corrupt ward boss...until she fell in love with a Salvation Army officer. Lots of people confused the character with me. Because, for sure, [gold-digging was never my thing; I took diamonds! I knew we'd be off the gold standard some day.](#) What's more, after Lil became a household name, I liked to say that [we climbed the ladder of success together, wrong by wrong.](#)

That was the image I cultivated. And there were lots of people who thought I used men. But, you know, it wasn't true. Anything I did I did because they wanted to, and then they wanted to again. Really, I enjoyed men. When I was a girl, it was generally believed that sex was a man's thing. I beg to differ. [Sex with love may be the greatest thing in life. But sex without love--that's not so bad either.](#) Sex is the best exercise for developing everything. It's good for the complexion and circulation. Keeps it all moving along. Besides, I never saw anything wrong with two people giving each other pleasure. As long as we weren't hurting anybody. To my knowledge I never took up with a married man. And I was responsible. I always had my men use those little rubber thingies.

The truth is I did a lot of good in my life. By making my way in a man's world, I showed women that you didn't necessarily have to depend on a man for your livelihood and happiness. Don't get me wrong: [Marriage is a great institution; but I wasn't ready for an institution.](#) Just because you're legally wed doesn't guarantee that you are going to love someone all your life...and vice versa.

I also helped a few of my lovers advance their acting careers. George Raft was just a

good-looking driver for the mob, until I encouraged him to go on stage. Even more to my credit, I plucked Cary Grant out of obscurity for the lead in "She Done Him Wrong," his most important role up to that time. That voice! That body! And the rest of him measured up too. I wasn't acting when I said, ["Why don't you come up and see me sometime."](#)

And then there was the in-con-tro-vert-ible fact that I saved Paramount Pictures. You heard me right. In 1933 the film company was going down the drain. And my films brought in the box office receipts Paramount needed.

Obviously I wasn't as well known in Hollywood as I was in New York. So Paramount thought it would bury me in a bit part in my first film, "Night After Night," just to see how I did. Ha! The joke was on them. My character enters a nightclub and the hatcheck girl exclaims, ["Goodness! What beautiful diamonds."](#) To which I reply with what turned out to be one of my most celebrated lines: ["Goodness had nothing to do with it, dearie."](#)

That was my introduction to movie audiences, after which they clamored to see me in such films as "She Done Him Wrong," "I'm No Angel," "Belle of the Nineties," "Go West, Young Man" and "My Little Chickadee." As usual I created a stir. William Randolph Hearst said, "Isn't it time Congress did something about Mae West?" More to the point, though, I single-handedly precipitated the establishment of the Motion Picture Code. Imagine censors that wouldn't let you sit on a man's lap! [Why I've been on more laps than a napkin.](#) People said censorship was my enemy. But once again, I think it was my best friend. You can't get famous for breaking the rules unless you've got some rules to break.

Just to round out my story, you should know that I went on to perform in New York again and in London, I did radio and television, I appeared in Las Vegas, and I wrote several books.



However, that's not the most important thing you should know about me. When I was a girl, I understood right away that there was a double-standard for men and women. A man's world was one of freedom, a woman's one of limitations. Most women's lives were defined by the man or men around them. I wanted to define my own life. And I did. I used my brains and my talent. Women have told me I inspired them to stand up and walk on their own two feet, not just lie on their backs. When I began my career, doors were opened for women. When I finished my career, doors were opened to women. They'd gotten their Bill of Rights. But that's nowhere near enough. Now what women need is—a Bill of Wrongs.

Thank you.





Roosevelt Island Library

**FREE PROGRAMS**

# In the Footsteps of Nellie Bly

## RIHS Lecture



**Tuesday, February 15, 6:30 PM**



The RI Library and the RIHS are proud to host Rosemary J Brown as we celebrate the life and legacy of Nellie Bly - journalist, adventurer and humanitarian - on the centennial of her death in 1922. For the book *Following Nellie Bly*, Rosemary re-enacted her 1890 record-breaking race around the world declared 'the most remarkable of all feats of circumnavigation ever performed by a human being' by The New York World.

**Online Registration Required**  
This event will take place online via Zoom  
<https://www.nypl.org/events/programs/2022/02/15/clone-rihs-lecture-footsteps-nellie-bly>

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## Snow Carnivals of Yesteryear



*Central Park in the 1860s.*

There's no doubt winters were colder and snowier in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. But that didn't keep New Yorkers indoors. On the contrary, the piles of white were an excuse to show off the family sleigh and joyride over city streets and 'round the parks.

In the 1700s, sleigh riding was probably more an individual pursuit—"dashing through the snow, on a one-horse open sleigh, o'er the fields we go, laughing all the way." City dwellers might journey many miles well beyond the city limits. And invariably they'd meet friends and other acquaintances doing the same.

But several decades into the 1800s, the sleighing carnival became an established "urban" event.

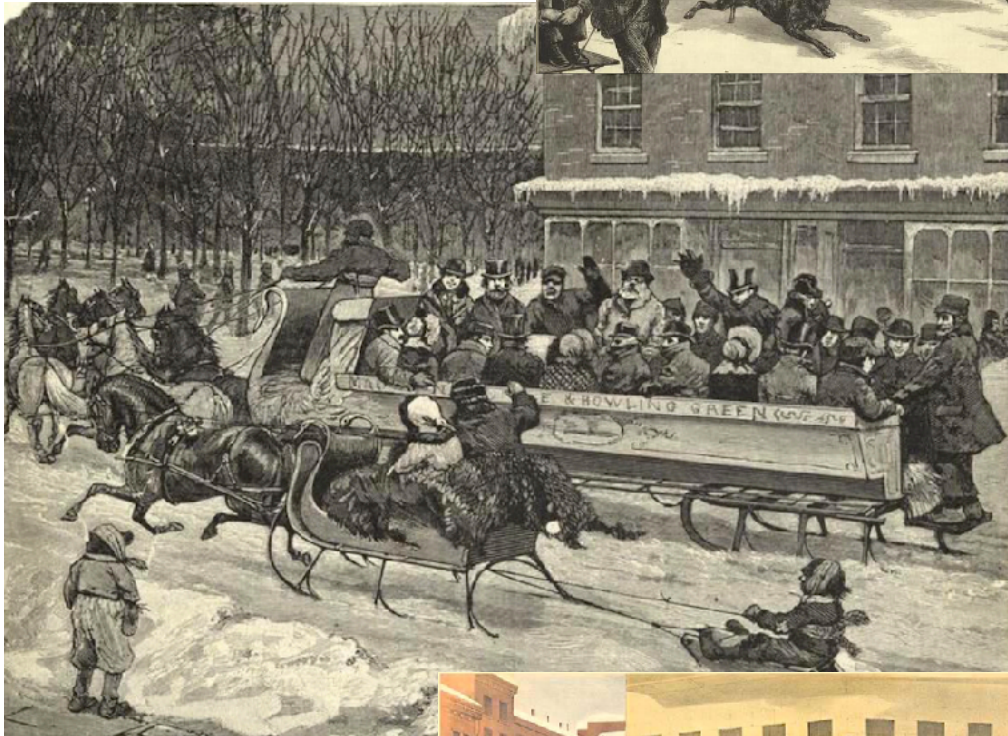
The development of "super-light" sleighs promoted high-speed, if not break-neck, drives in the frigid air, with both men and women passengers. On well-packed snow, the runnered vehicles could go as fast as 10–12 miles an hour, to the delight and thrill of participants and onlookers alike.



*View from Trinity Church looking down Wall St.*

Between 3:00 and 5:00 pm, the favorite hours, literally thousands of sleighs of every kind could be seen...on Broadway, on Wall Street and, in the latter half of the century, in Central Park. The custom lasted until about 1900.

(Images: <https://ephemeralnewyork.wordpress.com> and NYPL at <https://www.6sqft.com>)



(Top) Sleighing in Harlem in 1833.  
(Middle) Sleighing on Broadway in a public conveyance, circa 1860.  
(Bottom) Sleigh-jam in front of the famous P.T. Barnum's American Museum on the corner of Broadway and Park Row.



## RIHS Calendar

**FREE Roosevelt Island Historical Society Lecture Series presented in collaboration with the New York Public Library. Attend in person at the NYPL Branch, 504 Main St., or on Zoom.**

**Tuesday, February 15, 6:30 pm**

### **In the Footsteps of Nellie Bly**

Commemorating the centennial of journalist Nellie Bly's death in 1922, Rosemary J. Brown, author of "Following Nellie Bly," recounts her re-enactment of Bly's 1890 record-breaking race around the world. Register at: <https://www.nypl.org/events/programs/2022/02/15/clone-rihs-lecture-footsteps-nellie-bly>

**Tuesday, March 15, 6:30 pm**

### **Workshop: Improving RI Wikipedia Pages**

In this virtual and hands-on workshop, RI resident and Wikimedia Foundation Principal Designer Jess Klein shows us how to contribute to Wikimedia and tell the real story of Roosevelt Island to the world. The workshop will look at an article on Wikipedia, then identify and discuss areas for improving and editing it. Register at: <https://www.nypl.org/events/programs/2022/03/15/rihs-workshop-improving-roosevelt-island-wikipedia-pages>

**Tuesday, April 19, 6:30 pm**

### **Remembering the Fulton Fish Market**

Bob Singleton, Executive Director of the Greater Astoria Historical Society, takes us through the streets of South Street Seaport, evoking the old fish market neighborhood: Sweet's and Sloppy Louie's restaurants; the Paris Bar and Grill at South Street and Peck's Slip; and the Bridge Café at Water and Dover Streets. Register at: <https://www.nypl.org/events/programs/2022/04/19/rihs-lecture-south-street-seaport-presented-bob-singleton>

**Tuesday, May 17, 6:30 pm**

### **Discovering the Wild Side of RI**

Rossana Ceruzzi, founder of the island's Wildlife Freedom Foundation, describes our rich wildlife population and how the organization cares for these creatures, rescuing, healing and sheltering the injured and vulnerable. Register at: <https://www.nypl.org/events/programs/2022/05/17/rihs-lecture-discovering-wild-side-ri>

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