

MURRAY HILL



Mansions With Pedigrees From the Age of Innocence

By

**CATHRYN
JAKOBSON**

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FROM THE MID-1800s INTO THE FIRST COUPLE OF decades of this century, quiet Murray Hill, now nestled at the foot of midtown, drew the big money in Manhattan. It was home to people who had made fortunes in banking and trade. A Murray Hill address had cachet; even if you didn't have a pedigree, it made clear that you had arrived.

In 1892, the names of 100 Murray Hill families were in the Social Register. Pierpont Morgan and his son, J.P., built their mansions in Murray Hill and left a wonderful library of riches as their legacy. Mrs. Astor's mansion is long gone from Fifth Avenue and 34th Street, but the tales of her legendary ballroom live on. Edith Wharton never lived in Murray Hill, but when she came down from her estate in Newport, she stayed with her very social friend Egerton Winthrop at his brownstone at 114 East 39th Street. Her impressions—and her cynicism about manners at the turn of the century—are recorded in *The Age of Innocence*, a novel worth reading before you set out on your walk, which will cover the blocks between Madison and Third Avenues, from 39th to 34th Street.

You might begin the tour after stuffing yourself with blintzes at Christine's Polish restaurant at 344 Lexington Avenue, between 39th and 40th. There's nothing particularly elegant about

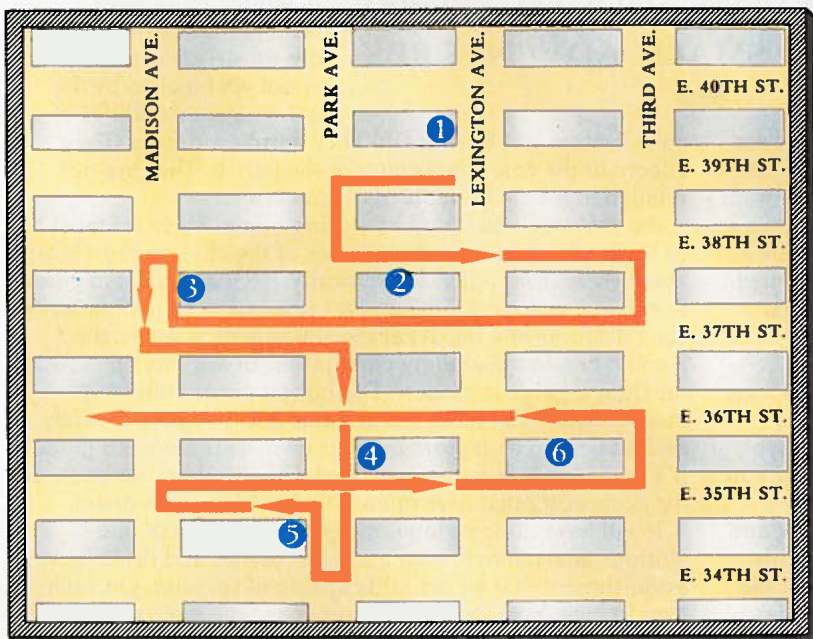
this place, but it does serve three kinds of borscht, and the food is good, and cheap. After you eat, walk over to 144 East 39th for a look at the Egerton Winthrop house. Winthrop shook the innocence out of Edith Wharton by introducing her to the ideas of Darwin, Herbert Spencer, and Aldous Huxley.

Now walk down to 38th Street and Park and head east. This is a typical Murray Hill block of mansions and more-modest brownstones. Around 1898, just about every house on the street belonged to someone of social importance. At Nos. 122–124, you'll find the twin houses that Abraham Lincoln's son built for his daughters; they're identical except for the design of the entrances. One has a semi-circular gable, the other a fanlight and a pitched gable. These distinctions were meant to keep potted husbands from wandering into the wrong bedrooms.

Cross Lexington Avenue and continue east on 38th Street. Halfway down the block, you'll see No. 149, a carriage house built in 1902 whose façade is decorated with the carved heads of bulldogs, horses, and angels. It's modeled after a Dutch townhouse, with a tile roof, stepped gables, and a pattern of white granite trim against Flemish brickwork. Across the street, at No. 152, is a Federal-style house built in 1857, set back from the sidewalk against the rear property line. It once belonged to Harper & Row publisher Cass Canfield. Note the dolphins over the front gate, the ivy, and the twin espaliered fruit trees.

Head south on Third Avenue, and turn right on 37th Street. On the north side, Nos. 147 and 151 recently had face-lifts; their chipped brownstone façades were entirely removed, down to the brick, and replaced, just as they were when the houses were first built. Cross Lexington, heading west. No. 124 is the James Fargo house; he was one of the founders of the Wells, Fargo and Company, which became American Express. As you cross Park Avenue, take a look at the plaque dedicated to Mary Lindley Murray. She and her husband, Robert, a Quaker merchant, built a house near that spot in 1750. Read the plaque: It tells you how Mary Murray and her daughters fooled the British general, Sir William Howe.

On the southwest corner of Park, at No. 38, you'll find the Union League Club of America, founded at the time of the Civil War to combat the secession sentiment then rampant in the city. During Theodore Roosevelt's Bull Moose insur-



gency, the club made known its displeasure by removing Teddy's portrait from the library. After his defeat, they hung it again.

On the northeast corner of 37th, at 233 Madison, is one of Murray Hill's most frivolous bonbons: the DeLamar mansion. This Beaux-Arts relic is now the Consulate General of the Polish People's Republic and has photos of Warsaw hanging on the walls, but in its day it was very glamorous. It was built for a Dutch sea captain who later became a stockbroker; the story is that Mr. DeLamar wanted to rub elbows with J. P. Morgan, but that Morgan would have nothing to do with him. To get back at Morgan, DeLamar built a bigger and far more ostentatious house across the street from the banker. DeLamar went out of his way to make Morgan jealous; he installed an interior elevator by which he could lower his carriages and horses to a stable in the basement.



BEAUX-ARTS ANGELS HOVER OVER CAPTAIN DELAMAR'S DOORWAY.

WE'LL RETURN TO MORGAN'S HOUSE in a moment, but first, go north on Madison, past the hotel called Morgans, owned by Steve Rubell, and then east on 38th Street. At No. 31 is a house that belonged, at the turn of the century, to William R. Grace, the founder of the W. R. Grace shipping empire and the first Roman Catholic mayor of New York.

Backtrack to J. P. Morgan's house, where he lived from 1904 until his death in 1943, long after his neighbors, annoyed by the influx of commerce into the area, moved to the Upper East Side. The Lutheran Church moved into the house in 1945. Our next stop is the Pierpont Morgan Library, open from 10:30 A.M. to 5 P.M. on Saturday, from 1 to 5 P.M. on Sunday. It's closed on holidays, on Sundays in July, and during August. If you've never been here before, you'll want to stay for several hours; perhaps your best bet now is to take a quick stroll through the lavish rooms and plan to come back later. The library is commemorating Pierpont Morgan's 150th birthday with a show of European decorative arts, as well as an exhibit of some of its finest manuscripts and bookbindings.

By now, you could use a cup of coffee. Walk to Park Avenue and head south, pausing for a moment to look at the J. Hampton Robb Mansion, on the northeast corner of 35th Street. Stanford White built this monument to the Italian Renaissance in 1898 for Mr. Robb, who was one of New York's first parks commissioners. It was home to the Advertising Club for several decades. Now it is divided into enviable apartments.

Head one more block south. On the west side of Park, if the weather's warm, you'll see tables on the sidewalk; that's Dolci on Park Caffé. Settle in for something delicious; these desserts are also delivered to the tables of Tommy Tang's and Girafe. At Dolci, you are in a good position to use your imagination, which is necessary in Murray Hill; a lot of the best stuff is gone forever. Half a block from where you are sitting, on the southeast corner of 34th and Park, stood Murray Hill's most visible landmark, the Victorian 71st Regiment Armory, built in 1891, when every fashionable community had its own regiment. Also on 34th Street, next door to the armory, lived Mrs. Robert Bacon, a lady who liked her address—Number One Park—so much that she refused to change it when Park Avenue was extended two blocks farther south. A couple of blocks away, at 34th and Fifth, was Mrs. Astor's mansion. Ward McAllister, a dear pal of Mrs. Astor's until she dropped him cold, established the New York Four Hundred. Mrs. Astor was grateful for the list; just 400 gentlemen and their families could fit into her ballroom.

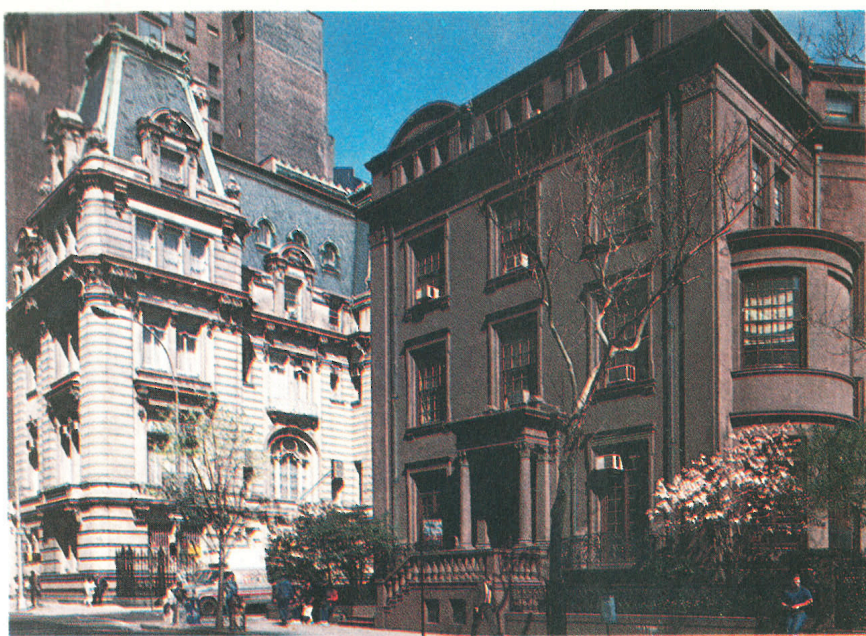
If a detour of six blocks won't do you in, walk down to the Church of the Transfiguration, better known as the "little church around the corner," on 29th between Fifth and Madison. It looks as if it belongs in the country, and that's where it was when it was built in 1849. Towers, dormers, guildhall, and Gothic Revival rectory are set in an English garden. Leave the church and walk north on Madison to 35th Street. On the southeast corner, there's the Complete Traveller, open from 10 A.M. to



WHITE GRANITE SETS OFF THE FLEMISH BRICKWORK ON A 1902 HOUSE.

AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY, A MANSION HERE MEANT PRESTIGE.





THE DELAMAR MANSION, BUILT TO OUTSHINE J. P. MORGAN'S.



A GREEN SANCTUARY: THE LITTLE CHURCH AROUND THE CORNER.



A HOUSE ONCE OWNED BY ONE OF LINCOLN'S GRANDDAUGHTERS.

5 P.M. on Saturday, and noon to 5 P.M. on Sunday. This little store has 15,000 travel books, including some great old volumes. Ask to see the collection of Baedekers from the turn of the century. Take a look at *Morocco From a Motor*. On the northwest corner of 35th is the furniture store Roche-Bobois at Maurice Villency. If you're interested in contemporary European furniture, much of it in leather, it's worth a look. It's open from 10 A.M. to 6 P.M. on Saturday and noon to 5 P.M. on Sunday. The salespeople don't hassle you; in fact, they offer coffee and cookies and a soft seat.

On the northeast corner of Madison and 35th, you'll find the Church of the Incarnation. Pick up a pink folder at the entrance; it's a good guide to the place. Don't miss the Tiffany work; the company, which for years had its workrooms on Fifth Avenue, just on the edge of Murray Hill, executed four of the stained-glass windows, a large picture frame, and a set of doors.

Backtrack briefly to the intersection of Madison and 35th and head toward Park Avenue. Every year, the Murray Hill Committee (the neighborhood association) holds a block party on 35th Street between Madison and Lexington. This year, the date is June 6, the theme, oddly, is "Caribbean Carnival," and about 15,000 people will attend.

On the south side of the street, No. 22, the Collectors Club, belongs to stamp collectors. At No. 28 is the John Haynes Holmes Community House, and two doors down is the Community Church. The church, which owns its long brick building and four adjoining brownstones, has been in the neighborhood for 117 years. Since it started, it has been involved in social action; it was instrumental in founding the American Civil Liberties Union and the NAACP. Six years ago, the church needed more space and decided to find a partner to develop its property. The original plan called for a 45- to 55-story tower that would house a new church, offices, and luxury apartments. The neighbors—more than a few of whom are members of the congregation—would have none of it. There were already towers on several of their corners. They were determined not to have one in mid-block. The plans were

scaled down, but residents fought back again, and got support from the City Planning Commission and the Board of Estimate. The newest church plans call for a structure eighteen stories high.

Cross Park Avenue and continue east on 35th Street. The north side of this block is the only contiguous row of houses in Murray Hill; these buildings are basically in their original state. No. 123 is one of the best houses in Murray Hill; built in 1903, in the Beaux-Arts style of the day, it has a flirtatious façade of limestone and brick, and Corinthian columns in relief. The house belonged to John Lanier, an international banker and investor in mines, who used it as a pied-à-terre. Recently, it was sold; workmen go in and out all day. But even the people who live next door don't know who's moving in. There is talk of oil money, of an embassy, of six rich singles. But nobody really knows.

ACROSS THE STREET FROM THE LANIER house is the New Church, built in 1859 for the followers of Emanuel Swedenborg. It is stark and white, and it looks strangely out of place on this city street. Walk over to Third Avenue and head north to 36th Street. The most charming aspect of Murray Hill is just around the corner. Turn west on 36th Street. On the south side of the street is Sniffen Court. Here, ten brick stables were built in the 1850s by John Sniffen. During the 1920s, they were converted into townhouses by World War I vets who were looking for apartments to share with their war brides. The girls must have felt right at home; Sniffen Court is a little bit of Bayswater in New York. Sculptor Malvina Hoffman, who died in 1966, had her studio at the end of this cul-de-sac. A celebrity in the 1920s and 1930s, she was given a commission by the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago to do 110 bronze studies for a project called "Races of Mankind." She traveled all over the world in pursuit of her subjects and sent reports to the tabloids of encounters with headhunters and Bushmen. At home in Sniffen Court, she entertained Pavlova, Nijinsky, and Gertrude Stein. Her sculptures are in the collection of the Met and the Brooklyn Museum. The first building in Sniffen Court—the one with the red door—is a 100-year-old institution known as the Amateur Comedy Club. Here, members put on plays several times a year, just for the amusement of other members.

Continue on 36th Street, across Lexington. Heading west, you'll come to No. 125, the very narrow house that F.D.R. and Eleanor shared right after they were married. His mother, Sara Delano, chose it for them, and Eleanor, to her irritation, found that she was required to dine with her mother-in-law every day while Franklin studied at Columbia law school.

By now, you're footsore. If it's Saturday night, you might try dinner at Bienvenue, a restaurant plucked from the back streets of Montparnasse and set down in Murray Hill, just west of Madison on the north side of 36th Street. If it's Sunday, you'll find Bienvenue closed, but you'll like the Milan-bistro-style food at Fagiolini, a small restaurant with postmodern décor, on the northwest corner of 39th and Lexington.