

New York History Walks

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Hell's Hundred Acres

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POSTED BY NYHISTORYWALKS IN MANHATTAN, SOHO

≈ 1 COMMENT

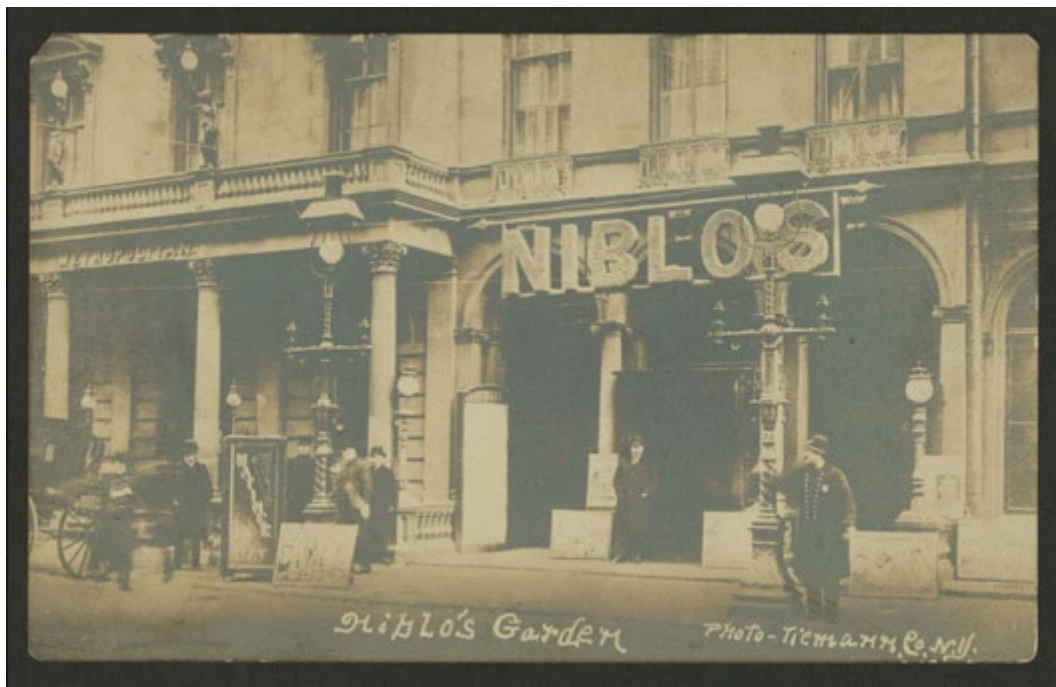
Tags
architecture, culture, Haughwout Building, history, Manhattan, New York City, Soho, travel



Soho has undergone many transformations throughout its history, and was not always the hub of trendy boutiques and chains that it is today. At the end of the Revolutionary War, Soho development earnestly began when Collect Pond was filled and its water diverted to the Hudson River. Middle-class families inhabited Federal-style rowhomes and by the 1800s, Soho had become a popular commercial district with theaters and retailers such as Lord and Taylor, Tiffany & Co., and the long-gone Haughwout Emporium.



Collect Pond looking south towards New York City in 1798. Lower Manhattan's topography was hillier and some of the dirt from Mount Bayard on the left was used to fill in Collect Pond.



Niblo's Garden was a popular 19th-century theater in Soho.

The Haughwout Emporium, owned by Eder V. Haughwout, was opened for business on March 23, 1857 and a manufacturer/purveyor of fine china, cut glass, silverware and chandeliers. The New York Times described it as “the greatest china and porcelain house in the city” in the 1850s. The Haughwout Building also boasted the first commercial elevator designed and installed by Elisha Graves Otis for \$300. The elevator moved at .67 feet per second and had an automatic safety device. The building’s first three floors were designated for retail and the 4th and 5th floors held its manufacturing operations.



The Houghwout Building in 1859. Courtesy of Library of Congress.



Houghwout Emporium's interior



The building stands on land originally bought by John Jacob Astor in 1802. After his death, Astor gave the land to one of his grandsons, Walter Langdon, Jr. His real estate advisor, Abner Ely, correctly predicted its location on Broadway and Broome would soon be part of an important commercial area and proposed a building on the lot years before Soho emerged as the city's center of commerce in the years after the Civil War. While Soho was the place for upper-class New Yorkers to shop during the early 1800s, the area had deteriorated into New York City's first red light district by the time the Haughwout building was built, with brothels mostly found along Houston and Mercer Streets.



Admirers checking out the offerings in the window of a Soho brothel. Illustration from National Police Gazette, 1880.

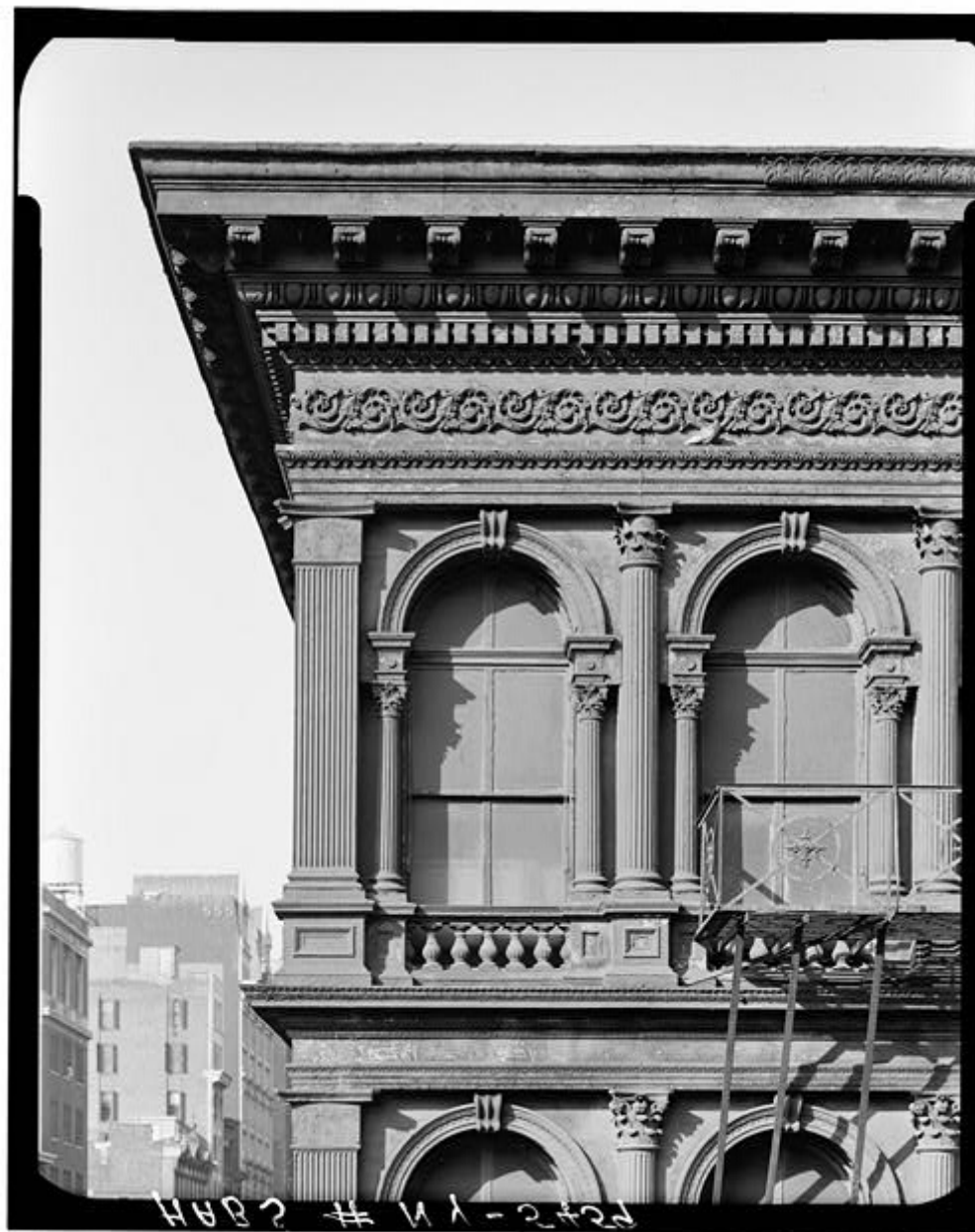
Haughwout's success established a new commercial housewares strip near Broome Street. Its most famous client was Mary Todd Lincoln, wife of Abraham. Dissatisfied with the mismatched and chipped White House china, Mary purchased a new set of serveware with an American eagle design and wide mauve border. One can imagine the husband-and-wife quarrel that ensued over the \$3,000 bill, an amount Abraham thought was exorbitant.





Mary Todd Lincoln

Langdon's estate sold the building in 1895 for \$375,000. A number of textile and notions manufacturers and dealers occupied the building as the neighborhood shifted towards industry. In September of 1936, the Broadway Manufacturers Supply Company signed a lease for the entire building. By the 1950s, the textile industry had moved South and overseas; Soho became home to many printing plants and empty warehouses spaces. Rents were less than 50 cents per square foot and many spaces could be had for less than \$100 per month (!). Around this time, Soho became a depressed commercial slum known as "Hell's Hundred Acres". Artists began to move into the neighborhood to take advantage of the cheap rents and spacious lofts flooded with sunlight.



The cornice of the Haughwout Building in 1967.



Haughwout Building interior entrance

Had Robert Moses had his way, there would have been a downtown ten-lane elevated highway connecting the East River with the Hudson River. Moses' proposal included the leveling of fourteen blocks along Broome Street. 1,972 families and 804 businesses would have been displaced, and the Haughwout Building would not have been spared. Around this time, the Landmarks Preservation Commission began to fight for the Haughwout's designation as a historical landmark. Thankfully, Moses' plans were defeated.



Lower Manhattan could have looked like this if Robert Moses had gotten his way. Credit: Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority

Despite the victory, the Haughwout building was still in need of restoration. The building was sullied with dirt and grime, and many of Soho's cast iron columns had become rusted.



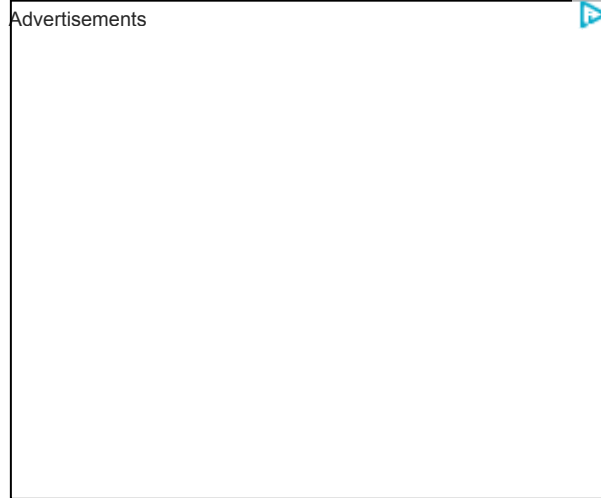
The Haughwout Building ca. 1980s.



The Kaufman family, owners of the building since the 1930s, spent \$175,000 in 1995 for Joseph Pell Lombardi to strip and repaint the building for its new commercial tenant, Staples. A cream color reminiscent of the building's original hue was applied to the cast iron to cover up the black paint that had been used during its industrial days. Haughwout's elevator, replaced in the 1890s, was removed in 2001 and a modern one took its place. The upper stories have been converted to loft space and clothing retailer Bebe moved in during 2011.

The Haughwout Building can be considered one of New York City's finest examples of 19th-century cast-iron construction. Its presence through Soho's phases of growth, depression, and rebirth illustrate its importance as a neighborhood landmark and residents' willingness to preserve a piece of architectural history. If you walk inside today, it can be difficult to picture its past with its renovated interior, but walk across the street and gaze at the building; you can begin to imagine the sights and sounds of a more genteel era in New York City history.



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Where Have All The Germans Gone?

04 Sunday, Mar 2012

POSTED BY NYHISTORYWALKS IN EAST VILLAGE, LOWER EAST SIDE, MANHATTAN, UNCATEGORIZED

≈ 1 COMMENT

Tags
Astor, culture, East Village, General Slocum, German-Americans, Germania Bank Building, history, John
Roebling, Lower East Side, Manhattan, New York City, Oswald Ottendorfer, Puck Building, travel



The Italians, Irish, and Jews are three of the most prominent immigrant groups in the history of late 19th-century New York City. Images of synagogues and churches, pushcarts and crowded tenements come to mind as walkers today stroll along the historic streets of the Lower East Side.



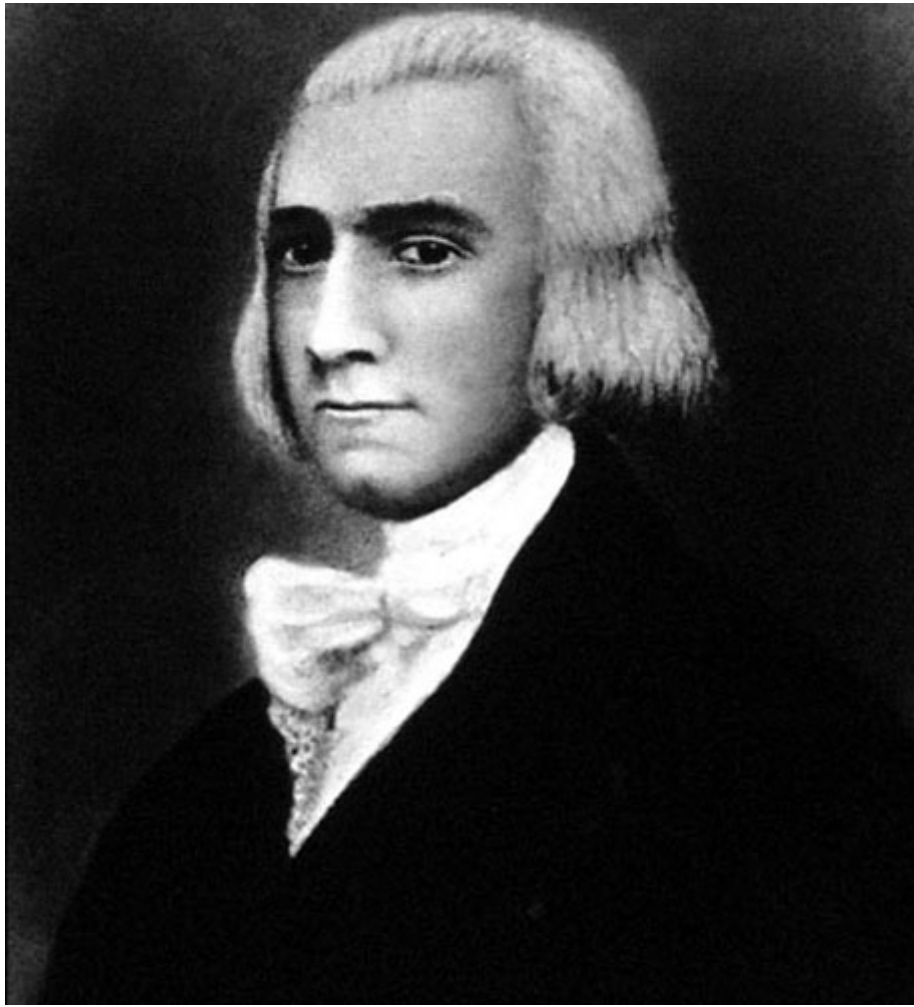
Hester Street in 1903.

These days it is much rarer to find traces of Kleindeutschland, or Little Germany, a neighborhood that predated the mass migration of Eastern European immigrants during the late 1800s and once encompassed much of the Lower East Side and stretched northwards towards today's East Village. If you look carefully, you will still find delightful hints of an era that has disappeared but left an indelible mark on New York City history.

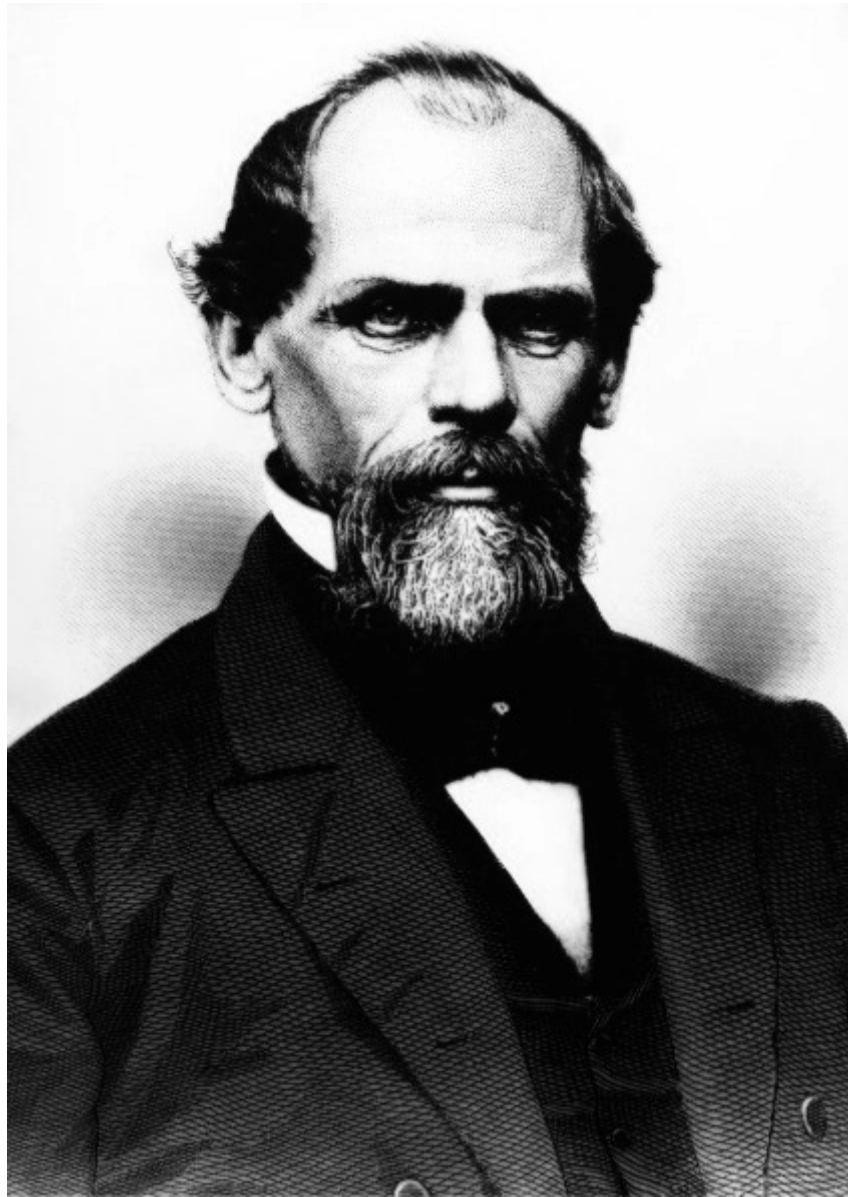


The cornice of 7 Second Avenue and Houston Street in Manhattan.

The German immigrant community began to settle in Manhattan in the 1840s. By 1855, New York City had the third-largest population of Germans in the world after Berlin and Vienna. Most were educated and skilled in crafts; many bakers and cabinet makers at the time were of German descent. John Jacob Astor was born near Heidelberg before he built his multimillion dollar fur trade and real estate empire in America. John Roebling, the engineer behind the Brooklyn Bridge, had his roots in Muhlhausen.



John Jacob Astor



John A. Roebling

The Puck Building on the corner of Houston and Lafayette was home to the J. Ottman Lithographing Company, who supplied printed illustrations for Puck Magazine, also in the same building. Puck was the first American political humor magazine published between 1876 and 1918 in both German and English. It was also the first magazine to employ full-color advertising and lithography but declined in readership as anti-German sentiment grew during World War I.



The Puck Building in 1895



An April 6, 1901 issue of Puck magazine



The Puck Building today with a newly-constructed REI sporting goods store on the ground floor.



A 6-foot gilded figure of Puck, a mischievous and mythological prankster, stands in the corner of the building.

Oswald Ottendorfer was the owner-editor of the *Staats-Zeitung*, once New York City's largest German-American newspaper. As a young man he was a German revolutionary during the mid-1800s and was educated at the Universities of Vienna and Prague. He was fluent in Hebrew, Latin, Greek, and several Slavic languages when he arrived in New York, but did not know English and, like many recently-arrived immigrants, was very poor when he started life in America.



Ottendorfer started out in the counting room of the Staats-Zeitung and took over editorial duties after the death of its proprietor, Jacob Uhl. He eventually married Uhl's widow, Anna.



Oswald and Anna's philanthropic contributions included funding for the Ottendorfer Free Library (left) and the Germany Dispensary (right), now the Ottendorfer branch of the New York Public Library. The Dispensary eventually moved uptown and became Lenox Hill Hospital.

The Germania Bank building on Bowery and Spring *looks* abandoned, but the ENTIRE BUILDING of 72 rooms and 32,000 square feet was purchased by Jay Maisel in 1966 for \$102,000 and his family still lives here today.



Yes, this building houses a family of three.



The Germania Bank Building in 1905. The Third Avenue El ran along the Bowery until it was torn down in the 1950s.

The Germania Bank was opened by a group of local business owners in 1869 when many of the businesses along the Bowery were owned by Germans. Christian Schwarzwaelder, the bank's president, owned a furniture store on 9 East Broadway. Joseph Kunz, the vice-president, owned a brewery at 225 East Houston Street and lived at 167 Bowery. Other founding board members included a butcher, an iron safe and furniture manufacturer, and a cigar maker. In late 1917, the bank's Board of Directors filed a petition to change its name to Commonwealth Bank in response to anti-German sentiment.



The former bank's office spaces now offer exhibition rooms for photographers and artists.



The copper elevator cage of the Germania Bank Building.



Jay Meisel's kitchen is in the area where staff cooked daily meals for Germania Bank officers.



The bank vault re-purposed as storage space for non-monetary objects.

By the beginning of the 20th century, Little Germany was home to 50,000 people. It was called Dutchtown by the Irish and Avenue B was the German Broadway. Avenue A had plenty of beer halls, oyster saloons, and groceries. Sports clubs, libraries, shooting clubs and theaters proliferated. Small factories and workshops operated in the neighborhood and access was through alleyways.

As more Eastern European immigrants moved into the neighborhood, Little Germany's residents began to move north to Yorkville and across the river to Williamsburg, Brooklyn. The German population severely declined with the General Slocum disaster of 1904. Over 1,300 women and children from St. Mark's Evangelical Lutheran Church rented a steam-paddle boat to bring them to a Long Island picnic site to commemorate the ending of the school year.



A fire started in the storage compartment, and although there were life jackets and rowboats on board, they were in disrepair. An estimated 1,021 people died by fire or drowning, many of them members of Little Germany's most distinguished families. The General Slocum disaster caused grieving family members to commit suicide and survivors to squabble over the distribution of a Relief Fund. Many fingers were pointed at people who were thought to have been responsible for the tragedy. The city would not see a greater tragedy until September 11th, 2001.



One of many funeral processions for General Slocum victims.

The German community was never able to fully recover from the tragedy and dispersed as they tried to forge new beginnings for themselves.



The German congregation moved uptown and the building now houses the Sixth Street Community Synagogue.

As German immigrants assimilated into the mainstream folds of “American” life, it became harder to hold onto the past traditions of everyday life, especially under the shadow of Nazism during World War II. Germans in New York City continue to be a people proud of their history and contributions to American society. Although it is more difficult to find tangible reminders of their distinguished past, their story is a familiar one of hard work and striving to fulfill their dreams in a different land.



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