

A Brief History of Greenwich Village

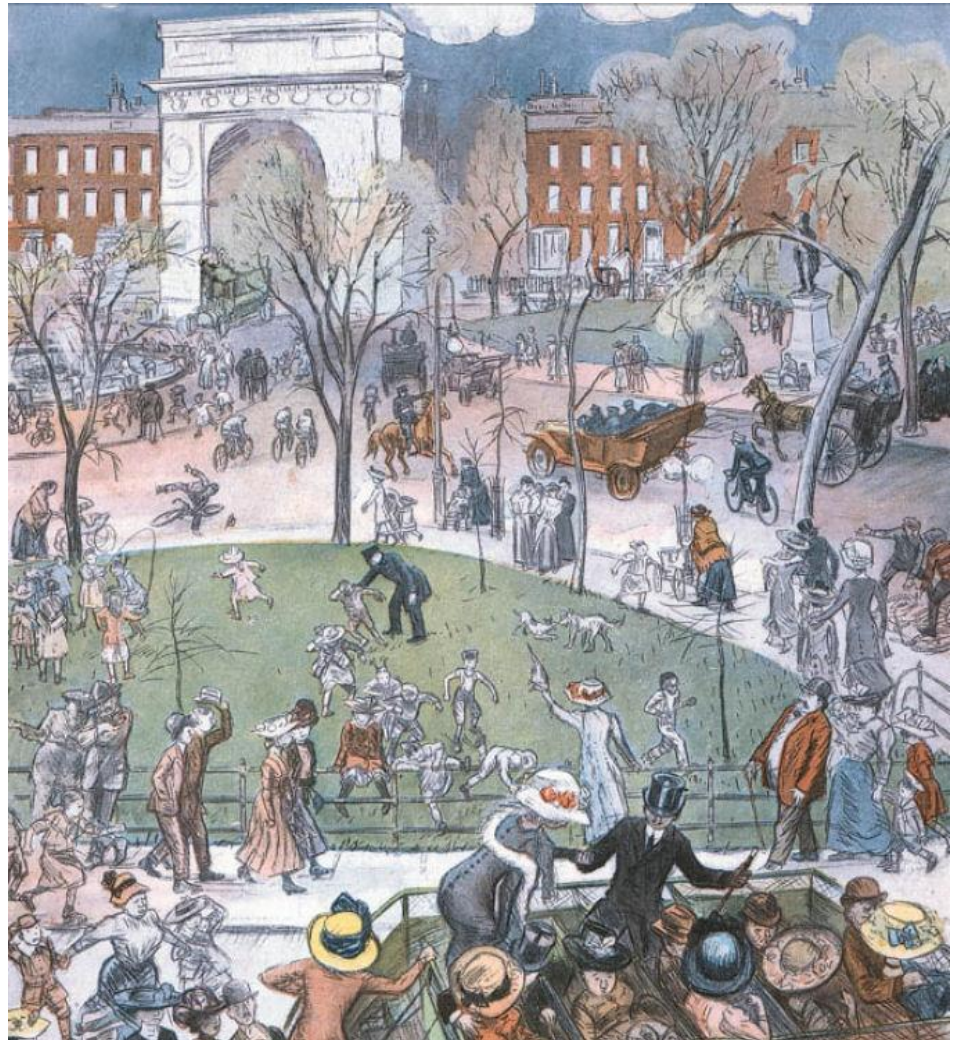
The present-day West Village was called "Sapokanickan" (or "wet fields") by the Indians and "Bossett Bouwerie" (or "farm in the woods") by the Dutch. It remained sparsely populated until the English conquered it in 1664. By 1713 it had evolved into a small village renamed Grin'wich. The area near the Hudson River began to take on a more commercial look after the American Revolution.

About 1800, British Commander Sir Peter Warren bought 300 acres of the Village Tobacco Plantation. He built a huge farmhouse near Perry and West 4th Streets overlooking the Hudson River. He planted an orchard and created farmlands and called the area "Greenwich". His house and grounds became a festive gathering place for the neighborhood residents, and the countryside attracted other wealthy families, who built large homes to show off their social status.

In the 1810's and 20's, Greenwich was a charming English village separate from other settlements.

Then a series of smallpox and yellow-fever epidemics caused families to flee north from the Battery (the southern tip of Manhattan Island) to avoid the diseases, and settle in the area. Schools, banks and shops were built. These historic, brick, Federal style buildings still line the streets. The Washington Square (lower 5th Avenue) area became the place where wealthy merchants built their mansions.

By the 1850's and 60's, Greenwich was surrounded by the growing city of New York and extended from the Hudson River on the west to what is now University Place and West Broadway on the east, and from Fourteenth Street on the north to Houston Street on the south. Industry was huddled to the west, on landfill near the river. Town houses were built, followed by larger apartment houses for the immigrants



Washington Square Park around the turn of the century

who arrived later in the century. Warren's house was demolished in the 1860's to make way for a row of French Second Empire houses.

In 1875, approximately one-third of Villagers were foreign-born, and many others were second generation Americans, from various western European countries. By the end of the 1800's, rich residents started to move uptown, and the residential buildings in the Village were neglected by absentee homeowners. It became a rather shabby, mixed-ethnic district whose quaint old houses, irregular street patterns, and cheap rental properties attracted poets, artists, philosophers, opera singers, actors and actresses to the neighborhood – some famous and some infamous – looking for a freer lifestyle, similar to the way of life in Paris.



NYC Tenements circa 1910

During the 1890's and early 1900's, the Village was populated mostly by Italian, Irish, and German immigrants. Between 1890 and the early 1910s, the neighborhood's foreign-born population increased dramatically. Italian immigrants arrived by the thousands and crowded into the five- and six-story tenement buildings that were rapidly replacing the older one- and two-family homes south of Washington Square. Immigrants sometimes bickered amongst themselves - Irish gangs fought with Italians over territory. At the same time the Village was encroached from the south and east by industrial and commercial establishments. Block after block that had once been exclusively residential was now occupied by factories that produced clothing, boxes, candy, and artificial flowers.

The Village's working-class residents were joined by a swarm of writers and artists who gathered in the rundown bars and by 1916, it became known as "Little Bohemia". By WWI, the Village was known as the symbol of rebellion against traditional values, but it was in reality a place where diverse class and ethnic groups lived in close proximity. On the one hand there were the working- and middle-class blacks and Italians in the south and the Irish in the west neighborhoods; while on the other hand there were the middle-class social workers, artists, and writers and upper-class Protestants in the north around Washington Square. Somehow they all had to learn to get along.

The Bohemian "Villagers" gathered in groups, and sometimes lived in communes to save money, yet most of them were fiercely independent minded and highly individualistic. The radicals among them preached against making money just to make money, and spoke out publicly against bourgeois values and for women's rights. Most immigrants were Catholic, and the Bohemians were mostly Protestant or Jewish. Seventy percent of the Villagers did not attend church and regarded the immigrants as ignorant and medieval lower class foreigners. The immigrants considered these newcomers atheists and heathens. The Italian and Irish Catholics viewed the showgirls, poets and artists as having no morals. The repressed immigrants were shocked to see Village types smoking openly in the streets, and viewed the concepts of free love and homosexuality as taboo subjects. But while the immigrant classes viewed the Villagers as "naughty children", they allowed them to eat in their ethnic restaurants and drink in their Irish bars, and generally gave them their "space". Working immigrant families were in bed early while the Bohemians partied in the Village late. They tolerated a mutual "live and let live" co-existence.

Class and ethnic relations around the turn of the century were strongly influenced by the Progressive movement. Progressivism expressed itself in diverse and sometimes contradictory ways. Progressive reformers reacted conservatively to moral issues raised by prostitution, Sunday consumption of alcoholic beverages, new and more sensual dance styles, and movies that had sexually explicit or

unpatriotic content. Frequently, middle- and upper class (and often Protestant) reformers set out to impose social restrictions on working-class Catholics and Jews, many of them recent immigrants, who engaged in activities that the reformers regarded as vices. However many of these same Progressives also believed that the new century brought opportunities for social peace and economic prosperity if only people would reach out to each other across social classes and ethnic lines.

In Greenwich Village this Progressive ideal led some middle and upper-class Villagers to try to improve the lives of their less privileged neighbors. These campaigns took the form of social settlement reform, feminism, socialism, labor unionism, and housing reform, among others. Even those who did not support these reform initiatives could not avoid the impact of social and economic changes that were transforming American life.

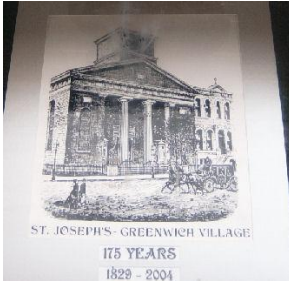
The Villagers of 1898 still lived in the age of the horse, but by the mid-1910s automobiles were a commonplace sight in the neighborhood's streets. Women's suffrage had received almost no public attention from Villagers in the late 1890s, but from 1910 onward pro-suffrage marchers by the thousands regularly launched their votes-for women parades up Fifth Avenue from Washington Square. Few Villagers concerned themselves much with U.S. foreign policy in 1900, despite the recent Spanish-American War, but American participation in World War I, though relatively brief (April 1917–November 1918), touched Villagers more deeply, with some playing notable roles in opposing the war and a larger number supporting it.



Horse Cars in Greenwich Village

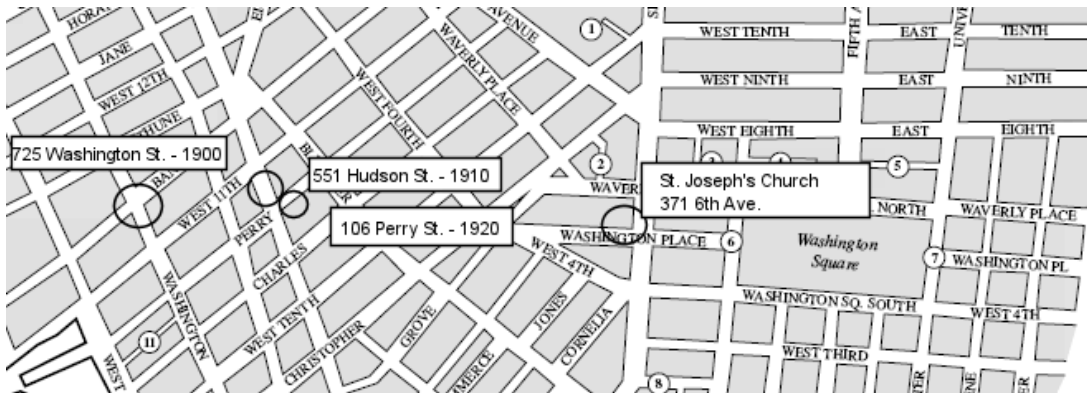
Between 1898 and 1918, ragtime dances replaced the waltz in popularity, the first World Series and the first Rose Bowl game were played, a black boxer became the U.S. heavyweight champion, the Madison Square Roof Garden architect was murdered by the jealous millionaire husband of an actress with whom he had an affair, the Titanic sank while the band played on, the Wright brothers launched their heavier-than-air machine at Kitty Hawk, Theodore Roosevelt used the presidency as a bully pulpit from which to condemn muckraking journalism, a new constitutional amendment authorized the federal income tax, the Socialist Party's candidate won nearly six percent of the vote in a presidential election, and Freudianism and the Cubist art movement both arrived in America. Events such as these had a profound cumulative impact on life inside Greenwich Village.

It was during this era that our Hernan family immigrant ancestors lived in Greenwich Village. Stephen Hernan, age 24, came about 1888 with his widowed mother Margaret and began work as a blacksmith. He reportedly built a shop on some land obtained from an uncle who had briefly lived in NYC before returning to Ireland. The despondent uncle, whose name is not known, left after finally giving up the search for his young son who had disappeared near the docks and was never seen again. Stephen sent for his bride, Mary, age 19, the next year. In 1900 they lived at 725 Washington Street in a large tenement apartment building with their 5 children who were born between 1889 and 1900. Margaret, age 59, lived with them. According to the census notes, they could all speak English. Stephen could read, but not write, Mary could do both, and Margaret could do neither. Rosanna (Hernan) Lowe, Geri Alkire's mother, remembered dancing and playing in Washington Square Park as a little girl. In 1910, they lived at 551 Hudson Street in an area known for Irish immigrants and Margaret was no longer living with them having possibly passed away.



Rosanna also mentioned living on Mulberry Street, but there is no way to know all of the places they may have lived. By 1920, they were in an apartment house at 106 Perry Street (not too far from the location of the old Warren mansion). The three-story brick building built in 1847 contained 6,668 sq ft and at least 6 apartments including those in the basement. Rosanna was living there when she married John Lowe in 1920 at St. Joseph's Catholic Church at 371 6th Avenue. Geri Alkire remembers visiting there as a young child when her grandfather, Stephen, died about 1927.

After Stephen died, Mary Hernan moved to New Jersey to live with her daughter Geraldine. Sometime before that, Stephen had retired from the blacksmith shop and it was turned into a two-engine fire house. The family legend says he was the last blacksmith in the Village.



Map of Hernan Family Locations in Greenwich Village

106 Perry Street had at least two well known tenants, one at the same time the Hernans lived there:

On September 4, 1925, aspiring author, Henry Miller (1891 – 1980), wrote to his ex-wife that his new wife, June, had *“at last secured the Tea Room in the Village”* so he would be able to provide support to their daughter. The “tea room” was really one of many speakeasies found in New York City during the prohibition era. It was one of the ventures he tried to earn money while establishing himself as a writer. The short-lived speakeasy was located in their basement apartment at 106 Perry Street, in Greenwich Village. The illicit booze was acquired by June through an underworld connection, and sometimes from a visit to Allen Street for some Jewish “sacramental wine”. Although the modest club was initially profitable, business fell off soon afterward. Miller would later recall *“those Arabian adventures in the speakeasy on Perry Street”* in Chapter 10 of his book, *Plexus*, the 2nd book in a trilogy known as *The Rosy Crucifixion*.

He wrote, *“To run a speakeasy, which is what we are doing and to live in it at the same time, is one of those fantastic ideas which can only arise in the minds of thoroughly impractical individuals”*. He described a small flat with three rooms, with the kitchen serving as their cramped residence. He remembered that when they retired to bed towards dawn, *“the smell of beer, wine and tobacco was overpowering”*. In the small main room, a ping-pong table was set up, as was a chess board. A third front room was used by June to entertain her paying male guests. Many wealthy professionals frequented the club at first. Henry hid the fact that he was June’s husband and acted as the manager. As he described it in his own words, *“I also wait on tables, fill short orders, empty the garbage, run errands, make the beds, clean house and in*

general make myself as useful as possible". Eventually, the place lapsed into a sort of private drinking club for their "non-paying" friends. They fell into debt, were evicted by the landlord for unpaid rent and by December 1925, were no longer in New York.

Later, around 1925, Dawn Powell (1896 – 1965), an author and playwright moved to the village. She had an unhappy childhood in Ohio and had moved to New York after college graduation. She married playwright, Joseph Gousha, and gave birth to a son who was probably autistic and had to be cared for his entire life and eventually institutionalized. She lived a life of partying with the Bohemians of the day and moved to 106 Perry Street from 1928 – 1931. During this time some of her most well known novels were published - *She Walks in Beauty*, *Bride's House*, and *Dance Night*. Her works, partially based on journals she kept about her life, acquired more acclaim later, but she never quite achieved the recognition she craved during her lifetime.

106 Perry Street, Greenwich Village



As the 1920s and 30s turned into the 1940s and 50s, the Village hit its most active time, as musicians, poets, and especially visual artists began to flock there and the Village provided a home and a forum for the beat generation. The 1960s through the early 1970s marked the arrival of an openly gay community, hippies, antiwar activists, and an assortment of countercultural and underground movements. In 1969, police and gay residents met in a violent confrontation known as the Stonewall Rebellion. The next year members of a radical terrorist group, the Weathermen, blew themselves up while building a bomb in a Greenwich Village townhouse. In the 1980s, the Village became a center for the fight against AIDS. Now revitalized, the Village is a major tourist destination and home to young urban professionals as well as artists, actors, college students and professors. St. Joseph's is now known as the University Parish of St. Joseph and the 6-family residence at 106 Perry was listed with a market value of \$2.5 million in 2011.



Greenwich Village Street



Washington Square Park Arch