

Cocktails in the Catacombs
Presentation by Jack Intrator
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Good evening.

I would like to tell you a little bit about the building we're in. Let me start off by saying that it is very special—upon completion in 1877, *The New York Times* described it as “a jewel in a swine’s snout” (or to put it in contemporary terms, a really beautiful building in a very crummy neighborhood); in 1885 it was voted the fifth most beautiful building in America in a poll conducted by *The American Architect and Building News*; in 1969 it was designated a NYC Landmark; in 1972 it was added to the National Register of Historic Places, and in 1977 it was listed as a National Historic Landmark.

How the building got to where it is today is a fascinating story. It opened in 1877 as the Third Judicial District Courthouse. It was designed by Frederick Clarke Withers and Calvert Vaux, the well-known architect who partnered with Frederick Law Olmsted to create Central Park. The courthouse was part of a unified civil complex that also included a fire tower, jail (completed in 1878) and market building (completed in 1883). This complex took the place of a hodgepodge of structures, some dating back to the 1830s and 1840s, that served similar purposes. “The new complex was considered one of the country's best planned urban renewal projects of its time.” (Partners in Preservation)

The newly-built courthouse consisted of a Police Court on the first floor, a Civil Court on the second floor and, here where we are standing, a holding area for prisoners on their way to trial or jail. The holding cells would also serve to reduce the time between a person’s arrest and arraignment.

Apart from being described as a “swine’s snout,” what was this neighborhood like then? In a word, “BUSY!”

At the time, transportation was being modernized - In the year before the courthouse opened, a crosstown streetcar line was constructed on Eighth Street. In 1878, the year following the opening of the courthouse, the elevated railroad was completed on Sixth Avenue with a stop at Eighth Street; the el ran from Rector Street in lower Manhattan to just about Central Park.

Entertainment was nearby - By the 1870s, the terms "Broadway" and "theatre" were becoming synonymous, and the Union Square area near Broadway at 14th

Street had become New York City's main theatre district. It was called the Rialto after the commercial district in Venice.

Shopping was good - Macy's was already in business on Sixth Avenue and 14th Street (1858), A. T. Stewart was on Broadway and 9th Street (1862) and Tiffany's was at Union Square (1870). New department stores were sprouting up along Sixth Avenue and Broadway spurred by easy accessibility afforded by elevated train. This area would become known as Ladies Mile.

This area would also become known as the Tenderloin, a term that would describe an area notorious for vice and graft. The term "Tenderloin" was derived from a statement by police captain Alexander S. "Clubber" Williams, when he was transferred in 1876 to the 29th Precinct at West 13th Street. "Referring to the increased amount of bribes he would receive for police protection of both legitimate and illegitimate businesses there – especially the many brothels – Williams said, 'I've been having chuck steak ever since I've been on the force, and now I'm going to have a bit of tenderloin.'" "By the 1880s, the Tenderloin encompassed the largest number of nightclubs, saloons, bordellos, gambling casinos, dance halls, and 'clip joints' in New York City." "Reformers referred to the area as 'Satan's Circus.'" (*Wikipedia; Encyclopedia of the City of New York; The WPA Guide to New York City*)

And the Jefferson Market Courthouse had jurisdiction for this area of Manhattan.

So busy was the area that the first night court in America was established here in 1907. Night court's purpose was to allow those arrested after court hours to appear in court without spending a night in jail. This is from a magazine article of the time: "Between December, 1908, and December, 1909, no less than 5,000 of them (women) passed through the guarded door, under the blaze of the electric lights. There is never an hour, from nine at night until three in the morning, when the prisoners' bench in Jefferson Market Court is without its full quota of women." ("The Prodigal Daughter" by Rita Childe Dorr, *Hampton's Magazine*)

Some notable people who appeared in court here include:

Stephen Crane (author of the recently-published *Red Badge of Courage*) who testified here in 1896 in defense of a prostitute he felt was unjustly arrested for prostitution. Crane said that he had seen the girl in the dicey Tenderloin District while he was there "studying human nature," as he put it.

Harry K. Thaw who murdered the architect Stanford White of McKim, Mead & White in 1906 over White's affair with Thaw's wife, actress Evelyn Nesbit. The murder took place at the rooftop restaurant of Madison Square Garden, then

located at Madison Avenue and 26th Street. Thaw was formally charged at the Jefferson Market Courthouse in January 1907, and tried in the New York Supreme Court on Centre Street. The event was memorialized in the 1955 movie *The Girl in the Red Velvet Swing* with Ray Milland, Joan Collins and Farley Granger; and, of course, in the book *Ragtime* by E. L. Doctorow. The famous “red velvet swing” was in White's home at 22 West 24th Street.

Also here were women belonging to the International Ladies Garment Workers Union who struck the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in 1909 demanding, among other things, better working conditions. Two years later on March 29, 1911, a fire in the factory killed 146 garment workers; 123 females and 23 men. The building, located at the corner of Greene Street and Washington Place, was then known as the Asch Building; it is now the Brown Building, a part of New York University.

And Mae West was here. She was arrested in 1927 for “contributing a common nuisance” and “obscene exhibition” for her Broadway play *Sex*. “The thirty-four year old native Brooklynite and her cast found themselves hauled off to the Jefferson Market Jail The five foot tall West, best known for her sassy wit and her double entendres, sat in her holding cell and laughed still more at the hypocrisy. Her show had been hugely popular for almost a year before the NYPD raided them. 325,000 people, including top cops and their wives, had already seen the play.” (Examiner.com) She was sentenced to 10 days at the workhouse on Welfare Island and after wining and dining with the warden, got two days off for good behavior. “The publicity made West a celebrity.” (*All Around the Town: Amazing Manhattan Facts and Curiosities*, Patrick Bunyon).

In the mid 1940s the district court system was overhauled. By 1947, the building was no longer being used as a courthouse. Various municipal agencies that were in need of cheap, temporary shelter occupied space. These included various Civil Defense organizations, a health insurance program (HIP) and the Police Academy which used the interiors supposedly for riot training. By the late 1950s, the building, in shabby and neglected condition, was abandoned. Its future was uncertain, and it was in danger of being demolished.

A group of community preservationists led by Margot Gayle and including E. E. Cummings, Lewis Mumford, Ruth and Philip Wittenberg, Jane Jacobs and others campaigned to save the building. The group first focused on the tower clock which was stuck for many years at twenty minutes after three o'clock. (I'm not sure if that was AM or PM!) The committee was called the “Committee of Neighbors to Get the Clock on Jefferson Market Courthouse Started”. They succeeded! Then in 1961, Mayor Robert F. Wagner agreed to a subsequent plan (which was the main goal of the Committee) to convert the building into a library branch. It is noteworthy that the building was saved before the New York City

Landmarks Preservation Commission was established in 1965. Architect Giorgio Cavaglieri was named to restore the exterior and redesign the building's interior for its new use, and the library opened in 1967. So what was the Police Court on the first floor is now the Children's Room, the Civil Court on the second floor is now the Adult Reading Room, and the holding area where we are standing, is now the Reference Room. The courthouse is considered to be an excellent example of adaptive reuse.

We did lose the Women's House of Detention, which opened in 1932 replacing the jail that was built in 1877. It was torn down in 1973 and that was a good thing; over time the House of Detention had become abusive to inmates and to the neighborhood in general, and we now have the beautiful Jefferson Market Garden in its place.

This past year we celebrated the 40th anniversary of the Jefferson Market Garden, next year will be the 50th anniversary of the Jefferson Market Library as well as the 140th anniversary of this beautiful building. History is all around us, which to me is a wonderful reason for celebration.

Thank you.

Sources: *All Around the Town: Amazing Manhattan Facts and Curiosities*, Patrick Bunyon 2011; *Encyclopedia of the City of New York*, Kenneth T. Jackson (editor), 1995; Examiner.com; musicals101.com; New York Public Library; Partners in Preservation: Jefferson Market Library; rememberthetrianglefire.org; *The American Architect and Building News*. January-June 1885; *The New York Times* (various); "The Prodigal Daughter" by Rita Childe Dorr, *Hampton's Magazine*, 1910; *The WPA Guide to New York City*, 1939; Village Alliance; *Wikipedia* (various).