

T.M. RIVES



SECRET NEW YORK

AN UNUSUAL GUIDE



JONGLEZ PUBLISHING

STUYVESANT STREET

• Transport: N and R trains/8th St – NYU; 4 and 6 trains/Astor Pl

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**The only
true
east-west street
in Manhattan**

Stuyvesant Street is the one true, compass-tested east-west street in Manhattan. New Netherland director Peter Stuyvesant, who despised disorder, would be pleased.

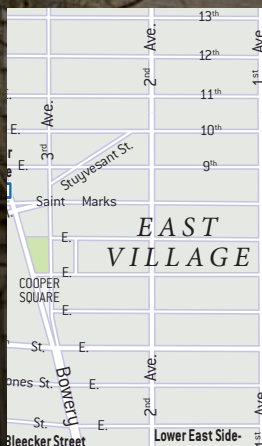
Stuyvesant is the closest thing New York has to a mythical founder. Sent here in 1647 by the Dutch West India Company to put the fear of business into the locals, he managed within a few years to convert the lower Manhattan landscape of hogs and mud into a profitable port town, with row houses, canals, a stockade wall, and a stone fort. He had only one leg – the other was pulped by a cannonball – and stumped about on a piratical peg, sword hanging at his side. Clues to the man's puritanical nature and the general tenor of New York life at the time are found in his first decrees: outlawing drinking on Sundays and knife fighting in public, and stiff fines for sex with Indians. His farm bordered much of today's Bowery (old Dutch *bouwerij* means "farm") and he and his family came to own virtually all of what we now call the East Village.

The street named after "Pegleg" Stuyvesant has an almost cosmic authority: it flouts the grid plan, making St. Mark's one of the only churches in Manhattan besides Trinity that command a street approach. The church stands on the site of the chapel of Stuyvesant's manor house, where the director lived after his surrender of New Amsterdam, thereafter called New York, to the English in 1664. Stung by how readily the city accepted English rule, Stuyvesant played out the rest of his life in the pastoral doldrums of what was then the city's far outskirts. He died in 1672.

By the early 1800s a small community called Bowery Village had formed around Stuyvesant's old manor. Petrus Stuyvesant III, the director's great-great-grandson, anticipated the grid by laying out a street system in the area that was faithful to the compass. When the Commissioners' Plan of 1811 was put into effect, magnetic north was discarded so avenues would follow the natural cant of the island: 29 degrees. Because Stuyvesant Street was by then heavily trafficked – and because you don't mess with the Stuyvesants – it was allowed to stay true.

NEARBY

You can see Stuyvesant's tomb at St. Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery, built into the east side of the foundation. The stone says he died at 80, but it's twenty years off: Stuyvesant was born in 1612. He was only 35 when he first terrorized New Amsterdam.



MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN GANGSTER

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- 80 St. Marks Place
- 212-228-5736
- www.museumoftheamericangangster.org
- Open Thursday to Monday 1 – 6 pm
- Admission: \$20, students and seniors: \$12
- Transport: 4 and 6 trains/Astor Pl; L train/1st Av



*Pleasant
anarchy*

When he was 10 years old, Lorcan Otway, current owner and operator of the Gangster Museum, dug out the basement of 80 St. Mark's Place with his father, who had bought the property from gangster Walter Sheib. In a space next to the old beer cooler they found a safe; inside was \$2 million in mildewing cash. The family kept none of the money (Sheib hauled it away in a duffel bag to launder through Eastern Europe), but this brush with the wiseguy life kicked off Otway's healthy obsession with lawlessness.

The Gangster Museum deals with violent scoundrels and the cops who chased or helped them. There's the death mask of Dillinger, bullets from the St. Valentine's Day Massacre, Tommy guns, scale models of rum runner speedboats and race cars. The dead eyes of black and white mugshots stare from the walls. Otway's fascination with the underworld is all the more appealing for his being a Quaker. He wears collarless blue shirts, respectable spectacles and a white chinstrap beard; but when the conversation turns to the history of havoc, his eyes get electric. Talking with the museum owner is to enter the tornado of his Theory of Everything. He can connect John Hancock to the rise of the modern American woman in three criminal steps. The Revolution wasn't for independence at all but to preserve slavery, which was funded by smuggling alcohol into Europe. "Labor and vice," he says, "the two main concepts in organized crime from then on." On a wall hangs a diagram plotting the forces of Totalitarianism and Anarchy. "During Prohibition, the federal government poisons 10,000 Americans by putting strychnine in rubbing alcohol," he says, "while on the anarchy side, the Thompson submachine gun is injected into the equation." Otway nudges his glasses back onto his nose and beams – not at the thought of desperate drunks or bleeding lawmen, but at the satisfying click of history.

With luck, you might get a personal tour of the rest of the building, where Otway has lived for decades. Downstairs is the theater his father created, and the Cuban mahogany bar that made Walter Sheib filthy rich in the 20s. Further down are the ancient foundations of a Dutch farmhouse. "Just a second," Otway says, taking a brief call on his smartphone. "Well," he smiles, "that was just the son of Al Capone's hit man." For people who worry that the East Village has lost its flavor: here's your man.

TRACKING MINETTA BROOK

Around Washington Square Park

• Steve Duncan's site: www.undercity.org

• Transport: A, B, C, D, E, F and M trains/W 4 St; N and R trains/8 St – NYU

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**An
underground river
flows through
the Village**

One of the most suggestive, eerie, and seemingly fictitious features of the Village is Minetta Brook, a river that flows secretly underground. There are tales of flooded restaurants, and men with fishing poles gathered around holes in the concrete floors of basements, and garden fountains tapping the black water deep below. But Minetta exists. It was once a creek full of trout; sometime in the early 1800s it got entombed by a blanket of humming metropolis.

Today you can follow the course of the buried stream as it flows from about Fifth Avenue and out to the Hudson River. With an ordinary flashlight you can even see it, but you'll need the tour plan of Steve Duncan, Internet personage and expert on all things subterranean. "From the tops of bridges to the depths of sewer tunnels," according to Duncan, "these explorations of the urban environment help me puzzle together the interconnected, multidimensional history and complexity of the great metropolises of the world." The hidden stream is the subject of his doctoral thesis. It's also very clearly his obsession: when he talks about it—gesturing with scuffed hands, a rolled cigarette wagging from his lip—you know you've found an authority. Here are the highlights of his recent tour of the Village's own hidden river.

45 WEST 12TH STREET

This house is a relic of the old stream course. It overlaps its neighbor oddly, and actually has a wedge-shaped floor plan. The creek used to cut a diagonal across the lot, and the structure was built to skirt it.

60 WEST 9TH STREET

The address doesn't interest us: what does is the manhole cover in the street out front. It's a DPW (Department of Public Works) type, with large holes. Look in one hole and shine a flashlight down another. The water you see, according to Duncan, is a combination of "natural water flow and water used by residents in the area." Minetta, in other words, has been channeled into the city's infrastructure.

MINETTA STREET

Here, as the name indicates, is deep in Brook territory. The kinked shape of this street (unique in Manhattan) is said to follow the path of the old water. If you hunt out the manhole cover—a DPW "hexagon" model like the one above—you'll see a steady flow, and be as close to the original stream as you can get without a crowbar and hip waders.



18 WEST 11TH STREET

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• Transport: L train/6th Av; N, Q, R, L, 4, 5 and 6 trains/Union Sq



***The bomb
factory
of the Weather
Underground***

The townhouses on 11th Street from Nos. 14 to 24 resemble the other stately homes on the block, and are virtually identical to each other – with one conspicuous exception. No. 18 has a jutting wedge angling from its face, as if some force neatly spun part of the house clockwise. You might be thinking there’s a tale here somewhere. There is.

In the spring of 1970, No. 18’s owner James Wilkerson left on vacation to St. Kitts, unaware that his daughter Cathlyn would use the subbasement as a meeting house for the Weather Underground, a radical leftist organization born from student opposition to the Vietnam War. On March 6, Wilkerson and four other Weathermen were making bombs from nails and dynamite. Just before noon the bomb factory became a bomb, period. No. 18 blew up.

Wilkerson stumbled out of the flaming house naked: the blast had ripped her clothes clean off. Three other bomb makers were killed with such violence that a neighbor summoned later to identify them (Dustin Hoffman, strange to say) had trouble telling what body part he was looking at. The intended target of the bomb was probably Columbia University. When James Wilkerson was later asked if he ever talked to his daughter about her involvement, he reportedly said, “Never.” He added: “And she never offered.”

What do you do with a blown-up historic townhouse? Whatever you can get away with. The angular design that sets the house apart was drawn up by architect Hugh Hardy, who soon afterward sold the property to Norma and David Langworthy. The Langworthys had to fight the stuffy Landmarks Commission to let them go through with construction. “Hugh wanted to make a statement,” says Norma, “that this was a new building, not an old building redone, and that’s the way it was.” No. 18 stands out for another reason: for the last thirty-two years, Norma has kept a Paddington bear doll in the front window and changes its costume according to the season and the weather. “It has nothing to do with the Weathermen,” she says. “My husband is dead, bless his heart. But he loved bears. We have all kinds in the house.”

After the explosion Cathlyn Wilkerson and fellow bomb maker Kathy Boudin disappeared for ten years. Wilkerson served a short prison term in 1980; Boudin, also found guilty of other crimes, wasn’t released until 2003.

LEVER HOUSE PLAZA

390 Park Avenue

• 212-421-7027

• Open Monday to Friday 7 am – 7 pm; Saturdays 7 am – 1 pm

• Transport: E and M trains/5th Av – 53rd St

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**Big art
for working stiffs**

The Lever House has always been an icon: it's the first "curtain wall" skyscraper, where the outer shell is hung on a load-bearing structure within. Recently the building has come to notice for a different reason: as an unexpected contemporary art museum.

Constructed in 1950-52, the building was initially the headquarters of British soap manufacturers Lever Brothers. The crystalline slab, 24 stories high, sparked a rage for curtain walls: within ten years, the mile of Park Avenue from Grand Central to 59th Street shimmered with glass. Landmarked in 1982 and restored by real estate company RHR Holding, today the Lever House looks like it did half a century ago. With one compelling difference: the outdoor plaza now features large, even monumental sculptures and installations by prominent artists.

This is thanks to Richard Marshall, a friend of the owners and for twenty years a curator at the Whitney Museum. Originally RHR Holding mulled a commercial application for the spot, but the building's landmark status limited the options. Marshall pushed the idea of an ever-changing exhibition space, where artists would present large sculptural works in the plaza, supplemented by other work in various media in the glass-encased lobby. Now the project is Lever House policy.

Major sculptures by (among many others) Damien Hirst, Keith Haring, and Jeff Koons have been shown here. Artists are attracted by the chance to install their work in a part of town that no one would think to call edgy, and RHR Holding makes gains in the nebulous area of cachet. But it's basically a public service. "Galleries have shows to sell something, and museums ask admissions," notes Marshall. "We don't do either. We don't sell anything. We don't charge anything. And it's open every day." Asked if the art isn't maybe a bit much for the office crowd (for instance, Hirst's 35-foot bronze sculpture *Virgin Mother* is a pregnant woman with half her skin peeled off), Marshall says, "I hear complaints and I hear compliments."

Cross the street to 375 Park Avenue to visit another icon of functionalist architecture: Mies van der Rohe's 38-story Seagram Building, erected five years after the Lever House.

VETERANS ROOM IN THE SEVENTH REGIMENT 17 ARMORY

643 Park Avenue

- www.armoryonpark.org
- See online calendar for events; for tours call 212-616-3930
- Tour admission: adults \$15, students and seniors \$10
- Transport: 4 and 6 trains/68th St – Hunter College; F train/Lexington Av – 63rd St



*Interior
decorating
for old warriors*

Built in 1880, Seventh Regiment Armory is the only armory in the United States that was privately funded. Every detail reflects the taste of the members: scions of New York's great Dutch and English families who were in general so well-off, the Seventh's nickname was the Silk Stocking Regiment. "It's the wealth of New York," says Kirsten Reoch. "This is it."

Reoch is project director at Park Avenue Armory, the nonprofit that is laboriously restoring the building and reinventing it as a cultural arts center. Today the best way to see the inside is to attend an event – for example a concert of the New York Philharmonic – and then wander through the ground floor until you come upon the remarkable Veterans Room. Here you'll see how well a limitless budget agrees with the military.

"At that time the decorative arts weren't considered womanly," says Reoch. "It was part of fine art, in a way. Men were very involved." To say that the decoration is manly falls short: the room might as well be lacquered in testosterone. Studded timber beams, wrought iron, polished woods; dragons, eagles, jousting knights, gladiators. The painted frieze around the ceiling cornice tells, in individual panels, the entire history of warfare. Even more remarkable: it all hangs together. The Veterans Room is an early effort by the decorators who would soon conquer the city as the design collaborative Associated Artists: Lockwood de Forest, Samuel Colman, Candace Wheeler, and Louis Comfort Tiffany. Tiffany was the guiding hand, and the Veterans Room is considered his most complete interior anywhere.

One detail summarizes the whole spirit of the place: the large pillars wrapped in tightly coiled iron chains. The effect is handsome, tactile, martial. During the Civil War, a regiment officer had the idea that a long chain attached between two cannonballs would skim across the field and, as Reoch tells it, "chop all the men on the other side in half." It might have worked, except field cannons are impossible to sync. The only time the man-chopping chain system was tried, the first ball shot out and whipped around behind the line. The chains here are a Seventh Regiment inside joke.

The metallic touches embedded in the design were meant to be seen under 19th-century gas lighting. In the constant flicker of flames, the Veterans Room would have glittered like treasure.

THE WISHING TREE

Apollo Theater
253 West 125th Street
• www.apollotheater.org
• Tours: 212-531-5337
• Transport: 2, 3, B, C and D trains/125th St



**Rub
the stump**

The big acts that have crossed the Apollo Theater stage are countless. But so are the small ones: the unknowns, the would-have-beens, the newly discovered. On Wednesdays for over seventy years the Apollo has hosted “Amateur Night,” where anyone can perform to a raucous crowd. Next to the wings, on its own pedestal, sits an unlikely object: a section of a tree stump. The Wishing Tree, according to Apollo tradition, must be rubbed for good luck before testing your talent onstage. The hopefuls have polished the wood to a shine. Some of them stepped into the lights, took up the microphone, and moments later became Whitney Houston, or Ella Fitzgerald, or James Brown. Others stayed who they were: just people. Still, the stump contains dreams.

The theater’s history echoes the history of Harlem. Originally a burlesque house, under the management of Jewish partners it became the first venue in New York to introduce black performers to white audiences. “The way black people danced,” says historian and Apollo tour guide Billy Mitchell, “the way we played our music, our theater, our poetry, our intellect, our activism – our whole *swagger*, as they say. Our white brothers and sisters wanted to see black people perform.” Once they did, they wanted more: American culture changed forever. And this wider success of black culture inspired the unknowns of Amateur Night who took to the stage, rubbed the stump, and prayed for discovery.

The roots of the Wishing Tree go beyond the Apollo, and beyond the Harlem Renaissance, stretching deep into black city lore. The stump is one section of a great elm that grew on 131st Street, in front of the old Lafayette Theater, in the early 1900s the foremost African-American venue in the country. Performers thought that standing in the tree’s shade, or touching its bark or wearing its twigs and leaves would bring work, and luck. After the Wishing Tree was felled in 1934, pieces were sold off for souvenirs and firewood.



RIVERSIDE LABYRINTH

490 Riverside Drive

- www.trcnyc.org
- 212-870-6700
- Open daily 7 am – 10 pm
- Transport: 1 train/116th St – Columbia University

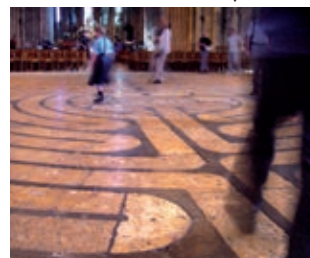
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**Still
mysterious
after a thousand
years**

On the floor of the Riverside Church chancel you'll find an interesting hallmark of the building's medieval roots: a stone labyrinth.

Labyrinths first started appearing in the floors of Christian churches (although they predate them) around the year 1000. One theory holds that meandering along the loops and switchbacks served as a proxy journey for devout Christians who couldn't make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem: the hassles of travel in a conveniently concentrated form. If bumping around a maze sounds like a surer path to rage than to spiritual fulfillment, keep in mind that labyrinths are patterns, not puzzles. Everyone who walks the labyrinth walks the same inevitable route: there's only one.



The Chartres labyrinth

Completed in 1930, Riverside Church is modeled after Chartres Cathedral in France and inherited the labyrinth along with the architecture. Chartres has the most well-known church labyrinth in the world: over 40 feet in diameter, it fills the entire nave of the cathedral. The design in the floor of Riverside is mostly symbolic: formed by contrasting polished marbles, it's only 10 feet

across – borderline unwalkable. Still, since the 1990s the church has attracted labyrinth enthusiasts with a larger, portable version that can be spread out on the floor. The practice began with Riverside Church member Richard Butler, who first helped create a paper labyrinth for Easter Holy Sunday, and later had the design painted on canvas. “I experience a clearing of my mind,” Butler told the *Times* about walking it.

Labyrinths are a wider phenomenon. Diana Carulli, an artist who has designed large public labyrinths in Union Square and other parts of the city, says there's a growing public need for walking around in circles. “Labyrinths go through these tremendous revival periods,” she says. “They work through strengthening your core in some mysterious way.”

Riverside's Parish Life Ministry hosts labyrinth walks on a more or less quarterly basis. Anyone can come and try it.

PORTOLAN CHART

The Hispanic Society of America

Broadway between West 155th and West 156th Streets

• www.hispanicsociety.org

• 212-926-2234

• Library open Tuesday to Saturday 10 am – 4:30 pm

(Museum same hours, also open Sundays 1 – 4 pm)

• Admission free

• Transport: 1 train/157th St; C train/155th St



**America,
terra incognita**

If there's anything more compelling than a map of the world, it's an ancient map where things are patchy and strange, and whole continents of *terra incognita* fade off into the margin. The Hispanic Society of America Museum has one hidden away in the library: a giant portolan chart on parchment from 1526 by Juan Vespucci, nephew of the great Italian explorer Amerigo.

Created for the purposes of trade, the portolan charts are the first nonsense maps of the known world. The one in the Hispanic Society is believed to be the official Spanish exploration atlas called the *padrón real*, or royal register. "When sailors returned from America to Spain," says library curator William Delgado, "they had to draw the contours of the coast that they saw, and make a report." The resulting chart, regularly updated, was a state secret: the New World glimmered in the imaginations of contending European powers like a vast tract of solid gold. The person in charge of compiling the fresh information was called the *piloto mayor* or master navigator. The explorer Amerigo Vespucci held the title until his death in 1519, when it fell to his nephew Juan. The master navigator had to perform a political balancing act: both correctly record the buzz of new discovery and keep a lid on it. At some point, Juan tripped. "He got fired," Delgado smiles, raising his eyebrows at the 500-year-old scandal.

Vespucci's map still has an appealing air of secrecy about it. For one, it isn't kept in the main museum, but in the attached library. There you have to whisper your desire to an assistant, who will direct you to a curtained wall and, with a certain drama, pull the cord to reveal the known world of half a millennium ago. Europe is well-defined. Africa too, but the blocky elephants were drawn by someone who had clearly never seen one. Brazil is patrolled by mysterious dragons. Most striking is the nascent accuracy of the Americas: the Gulf of Mexico and the Indies are precisely drawn, and Florida appears as a peninsula and not the island it was once believed to be. As you would expect from a chart made by sailors, the details are in the coasts. Inland America grows vague: just a wash landscape of gloomy blue hills that fade into nothing, the very depiction of the unknown.

