

A Monument to Memory: 300 Years of Living History

Introduction

At the 1965 public hearing to designate Fraunces Tavern as a landmark, a representative of the Sons of the RevolutionSM in the State of New York, Inc., described the claim to fame that had kept this small structure on the corner of Broad and Pearl Streets from being turned over for skyscraper development:

“The City of New York has made many futile attempts to erect to the memory of Washington a suitable monument. It is already done. The preservation of Fraunces Tavern is the greatest monument that can be conceived or erected.”

Between Washington’s time and now, what was the significance of Fraunces Tavern? Early taverns were the center of both civic and social life preceding the Revolution. As politics moved into private spaces, the roles of taverns changed as well. In its 300-year history, Fraunces Tavern served as a prominent hub of activity, from a political meeting place before the establishment of local and national governments to a public museum. The tavern on the first floor has been a constant presence on this block, while the building’s functions on the upper levels have adapted to suit the needs of the area, shaping the face of Lower Manhattan over time.

Fraunces Tavern

William I. Zabriskie, 20th century
oil on canvas

Artists' imaginations have shaped the memory of Fraunces Tavern since it became a notable landmark. While they may not be historically accurate, these pieces show the nostalgia many people feel for the building.

This painting was made by Sons of the Revolution past president, William I. Zabriskie. By adding a short, gray house on its left and greenery flanking either side, he recasts the 20th-century museum building as a house during colonial time.

1964.03.001 Gift of William I. Zabriskie
Collection of Fraunces Tavern® Museum

Tavern: 1762 – now

The original building was constructed as a house for the De Lancey family in 1719, yet no known image of this house exists. In an account of the 1907 restoration, it is described as an elegant mansion constructed “in the British taste.” However, the building was not a dwelling for the De Lancey family for long, because the rest of the block was rapidly becoming commercialized. By the time Samuel Fraunces purchased the building, the De Lanceys had been running it as a warehouse for several years.

Opened as the Queen’s Head in 1762, the original tavern operated by Samuel Fraunces was a hub of activity. Not only did Fraunces provide food and entertainment, but the early tavern served a distinguished clientele: wealthy merchants who conducted business around the ports of lower Manhattan. Rooms on the second floor were available for meetings and special events, and served as a gathering place for many New York organizations: The Chamber of Commerce, The Sons of Liberty, The New York Library Society, and The Social Club, among others. The third floor served as living quarters for Fraunces, his family, indentured servants and enslaved people, hired staff, and boarders.

The first floor has operated as a restaurant and bar since 1762 except for the years it was occupied by the Department of War. Since the 1907 restoration, the tavern has continued to be a

popular watering hole for both visiting tourists and workers in the Financial District.

Original Plaster

20th century

photograph

Original Beams

20th century

photograph

What makes 54 Pearl Street the oldest standing structure in New York City if the building is not entirely original? Parts of the building's interior construction date back to 1719, but due to damage and renovations, other parts have been modernized. Exterior walls, masonry window openings, and some window frames on the second and third floors revealed themselves during the 1907 restoration. Interior structural beams were also discovered and reinforced with steel at this time.

These photos show some of the oldest parts of the building: oak ceiling beams and interior wall plaster on the second floor. You can see a tuft of animal hair embedded in the plaster. Traditional lime-based plaster contained horse or cow hair for reinforcement.

Collection of Fraunces Tavern® Museum

Bill of Fare

Fraunces Tavern, 1914

Choosing your meal from many dishes like we do today was not a typical option before the mid-18th century. People would typically only dine outside their homes when travelling. Taverns and inns provided accommodation and often served food along with alcohol, but it was not always the highest quality. Patrons sat at one large table at an appointed hour and ate family style. The food would consist of whatever the owner cared to prepare. Even after restaurants began serving dishes a la carte, menus were not necessarily distributed on individual pieces of paper. For example, Samuel Fraunces often publicized his selection in *The Daily Advertiser*.

This early menu shows us the types of cuisine preferred by the owner and reflects the clientele they served. It features French and seafood dishes, which were associated with upscale dining and highlight the area's coastal specialties.

Reproduction courtesy of the New York Public Library

Fraunces Tavern 1st Floor

1980

Photograph

Fraunces Tavern 1st Floor

1980

Photograph

These two photos show the first floor restaurant as it looked in September 1980. Can you tell which rooms they are depicting?

Collection of Fraunces Tavern® Museum

Congress Office: 1785 – 1788

It is fitting that the new Continental Congress offices were housed in a space that played a prominent role in public life as a political gathering place. By the end of the 18th century, space was limited downtown. The newly-formed Congress rented rooms in the building for the Department of Foreign Affairs in 1785. The Treasury and the Department of War followed suit and moved into the building in 1787.

Washington's compatriots John Jay and Henry Knox headed up the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Department of War, respectively.

The activity in the tavern during this short period is an example of a more significant transition in the use of public houses in the United States. Fraunces Tavern and other establishments that were previously civic and social meeting spaces became primarily social spaces as the political system professionalized and moved into private offices.

Fraunces Tavern

Harry Fenn, late 1800s

pen and ink drawing

Fraunces Tavern, Corner of Broad & Pearl Streets

G. Hayward, 1854

lithograph

Fenn's drawing is based on the *D.T. Valentine's Manual* engraving, which is one of the earliest known visual representations of the building. The *Manual* claims to represent Fraunces Tavern around the time it was occupied by Congress. However, there are several inaccuracies in the rendering, and further research has revealed that it is actually a different building. Despite this, *Valentine's* image has long been associated with the early tavern building.

x09994 Collection of Fraunces Tavern® Museum

1997.01.001 Collection of Fraunces Tavern® Museum

Letter to George Walton

George Washington, August 30, 1789

Congress moved from Philadelphia to New York City in 1785. As a major commercial center, the city functioned well as the seat of Congress and the nation's first capital after the ratification of the Constitution. However, it was only a temporary home as the ongoing conflict over its location led to the 1790 decision to move the capital permanently to the banks of the Potomac. Fraunces Tavern served as the offices for the Departments of Foreign Affairs, War, and the Treasury, and delegates met here while City Hall was being remodeled.

George Washington arrived in New York City in January of 1789 and was inaugurated as the first president of the United States on the balcony of City Hall. He wrote this letter during his first term in office.

MS215 Collection of Fraunces Tavern® Museum

John Jay

Cornelius Tiebout after Gabriel Stuart, 1854

Engraving

Henry Knox and John Jay headed the Departments of War and Foreign Affairs. Both friends with Washington during the Revolution, they played vital roles in the early governance of the United States. Knox served in Washington's cabinet, while Jay went on to become the first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. While working at his offices in Fraunces Tavern, Jay negotiated with Spain over the boundary between Spanish Florida and the United States, having previously been the minister to Spain.

x09952 Collection of Fraunces Tavern® Museum

Boarding House: 1801 – 1904

By the mid-19th century, New York City had become the busiest port on the East coast due to increased access to interior trade routes up the Hudson River via the Erie canal. In 1851, the block was filled with prominent businesses such as freight forwarders, shipping agents, and wholesale merchants.

Following fires in 1832, 1837, and 1852, the tavern looked dramatically different and experienced a downtick in reputation as it was modernized with additional fourth and fifth floors. The upper floors were split into smaller rooms, and the building became a boarding house. Fraunces Tavern continued to be a famous tourist spot, boasting a hyperbolic claim as Washington's Headquarters. However, it was described in 19th-century city guides as having "lost its prestige," and "quite uninviting in its present," due to the lodging quarters.

During the 18th century and in smaller cities, young male workers typically left their families to live with and learn a trade from a master as an apprentice. However, later industrialization in New York City and other urban centers demanded more unskilled and lower-paid workers. This undermined the old apprenticeship system and severed the residence ties between employers and workers. When work was unstable, people needed to be able to find new jobs close by. Boarding houses were nestled in commercial districts and served those who could not afford to commute. The most common boarders were young, unmarried men and women without many

financial resources, although families boarded too. Contrary to our contemporary ideal of the single-family dwelling, boarding and lodging were commonplace for urban families in the United States up to the early 20th century.

Fraunces Tavern

ca. 1867

photograph

Fraunces Tavern

ca. 1854

engraving

After it had endured three fires, 54 Pearl Street hardly resembled its original structure. By the end of the 19th century, the reconstructed third floor and new fourth and fifth floors contained 42 rooms for boarders. The above photograph is the earliest photo of the building we have discovered thus far. The engraving below looks as if the artist may have used the photograph for reference, but adds lively characters to the scene.

Reproduction courtesy of the New-York Historical Society
x433 Collection of Fraunces Tavern® Museum

Jacob Etzel Hotel

ca. 1881

photograph

Street View, Pearl Street

ca. 1880

photograph

Jacob Etzel ran the tavern and boarding house from 1881 to 1895, offering to board by the week. This picture shows Etzel to the left of the lamp, standing with the people who were boarding at the time. His wife and child are in one of the second-floor windows. The Etzel family lived in the boarding house alongside its tenants, serving communal meals in the Long Room. Etzel advertised “the best selected Stock of Imported Wines, Liquors and Segars” on small business cards for the tavern below.

Collection of Fraunces Tavern® Museum

Charles & George Hotel

ca. 1890

photograph

Street View, Corner of Broad and Pearl Streets

ca. 1890

photograph

In July 1890 the whole first story of the tavern was removed in order to lower the first floor a few steps to ground level. New iron columns and plate glass windows were inserted in place of the walls.

Along with awning signs for the hotel and tavern, you can see advertisements for George Ehret, a local brewer. Ehret ran Hell Gate Brewery, which supplied all of New York State with its immensely popular Munich lager.

Collection of Fraunces Tavern® Museum

Museum: 1907 – now

In 1900, the building was set for demolition to construct a new skyscraper due to lack of space in the growing city. The demolition was halted by city planner, Andrew H. Green, the Daughters of the American Revolution, and the Sons of the RevolutionSM in the State of New York. The Sons of the Revolution bought the building to preserve it and convert it into a museum. Its purpose was to commemorate the events of the American Revolution and that led to the society's formation.

Through the 1960s and 1970s, tall office buildings began consuming the lower 18th-century city blocks, which again threatened the existence of the building. This led to the building's landmark designation in 1965. In 1974, the Uris Corporation began illegally demolishing buildings it owned on the block to make way for a parking structure. This was halted by the New York Landmarks Conservancy, which created the Fraunces Tavern Historic Block, saving Fraunces Tavern and the adjoining buildings from the wrecking ball. Since then, the museum has grown from a small collection of objects to produce a multifaceted exploration of the American Revolutionary era.

Letter to Edmund Wetmore

William H. Mersereau, 1906

Restoration of the building began in 1905. The project's architect, William H. Mersereau, sought to recreate the structure as it appeared the day George Washington bade farewell to his officers in 1783. Before restoration, Mersereau drew elevations and plans of the building as it was found in 1904. He used archival research and examined the existing structure and other contemporary buildings to design an impressive 18th-century building. His restoration was based on the evidence he discovered after peeling away over a century's worth of alterations.

Mersereau's letter to the president of the Sons of the Revolution made a case for his restoration of Fraunces Tavern. In it, he quotes the earliest known description of the building by Samuel Fraunces in a 1775 advertisement in the *New York Weekly Mercury*. The tavern was described as "a corner house, very open and airy, and in the most complete repair" built "three stories high, with a tile and lead roof...fourteen fireplaces, a most excellent large kitchen," and "fine dry cellars."

Collection of Fraunces Tavern® Museum

Brick

18th century

Nails

18th century

This brick was found during the restoration of the building and the nails were used around the same time at another site. Many of the materials uncovered during construction in 1890 and 1905 were sold as souvenirs, but this brick made its way back to the building in 2012.

The brick's label reads, "Original Holland Brick of Fraunces / Tavern, S.E. Corner of Pearl n Broad Sts. N. Y. City / Built in the year 1778. Remolded y Hleisler ... 1906"

2012.01.001 Collection of Fraunces Tavern® Museum

x49a, b, c, i, k, o, t, x Collection of Fraunces Tavern® Museum

Corner of Long Room

ca. 1906

photograph

This photo is part of the documentation of the building's restoration in 1907, it shows the original hewn timber oak beams that were uncovered in the Long Room. Hewing is the technique of flattening out a circular log into usable timber. Before widespread use of sawmills took over during the industrial era, wooden beams were hewn, or squared off, using an axe or adze. Hand hewn timber is identifiable by gouge marks from the blades, much heavier weight, and imperfect face and edges.

Collection of Fraunces Tavern® Museum

Pamphlet Cover

1907

Fraunces Tavern, After Restoration

William H. Mersereau, 1916

acrylic on board

The restored building opened to the public on December 4, 1907. It was occupied by the tavern, a new museum, and the SRNY headquarters.

Mersereau exhibited his Fraunces Tavern Museum project in the 1916 annual exhibition of the Architectural League of New York. It featured this painting of the corner view after the restoration along with images of the front entrance, the corner view before restoration, and its original walls and brickwork.

Collection of Fraunces Tavern® Museum

Street View, Pearl Street

ca. 1966

photograph

View of Fraunces Tavern Block

1973

photograph

The neighborhood underwent drastic changes through the 20th century as many old buildings were torn down and replaced with skyscrapers. This fueled interest in preserving what pockets were left, leading to the preservation of the block as a historic district.

Collection of Fraunces Tavern® Museum

Museum Visitor

ca. 1950

photograph

Long Room, South View

1973

photograph

Museum Visitors on Tour

1973

photograph

The Museum grew to what it is today gradually through the 20th century. The John Ward Dunsmore and Henry Hintermeister painting collections were some of its first major acquisitions and were popular displays in the early years. The Long Room was first interpreted as a Colonial-style period room in 1963 and continued to be updated for the next 20 years until it resembled the room you see today.

Collection of Fraunces Tavern® Museum
