

**HISTORY BEGINS
AT HOME.**

The Historic House Trust is a not-for-profit organization operating in tandem with the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation. Our mission is to provide essential support for houses of architectural and cultural significance, spanning 350 years of New York City life. These treasures reside within city parks and are open to the public.

OWNING HISTORY

Making room for controversy, opinion, rumor and conjecture



A 2010 recreation of Alice Austen's "Group on Tennis Grounds, July 23, 1886." Photographer Steven Rosen presents a conjectural interpretation of Alice Austen's original image. Austen's family built a tennis court, and many of her photographs were taken during tennis parties there. They included a wide range of family and friends whose personal relationships would, at times, seep through the images. Some of these photographs, although they appear to be impromptu, are in fact and out of necessity highly planned and choreographed tableaux. They include nuanced symbols—the placement of tennis racquet, wine bottle, or cane, the angle of a hat, a shoulder slightly touching or a directed glance. These signs, seen as a language, give us clues for a fuller reading of gender, class, and social standards of the day. In recreating the image, photographer Steven Rosen magnifies these signs in the original photograph to produce new images full of conjectures about interpersonal relationships in 2010.

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830 Fifth Avenue
The Arsenal
Room 203
New York, NY 10065
212 360-8282
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INSIDE THIS ISSUE, READ ABOUT:

Connecting the past to the present through controversy: reclaiming the environment around the Old Stone House, rumors at the Morris-Jumel Mansion Museum, gender rights at the Alice Austen House Museum, and immigration and domestic labor at the Merchants House Museum.

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Merchants House Museum



Alice Austen's "Hester Street, egg stand group" (1895).

Alice Austen House Museum and Staten Island Historical Society.

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ON OUR COVER:
Photo by Steven Rosen.
Top row: Leo Wyatt, Anna Catherine, Reggie Resino, Sam Devries, Shana Carter, Franklin Vagnone, Matthew Karl Gale. Bottom row: Nelson Santos, Richard Presser, Zahra Hashemian, John Yeagley, Victoria Arrington, Claire Vagnone, Alexander Encarnacion. Styling by Victoria Arrington.

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A NOTE FROM
FRANKLIN D. VAGNONE
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

“He knows instinctively that this space identified with his solitude is creative: that even when it is forever expunged from the present, when, henceforth, it is alien to all the promises of the future, even when we no longer have a garret, when the attic room is lost and gone, there remains the fact that we once loved a garret, once lived in an attic.”
The Poetics of Space, Gaston Bachelard

This issue has not been an easy one to produce. It is about stories – not necessarily about architecture. It, perhaps, begins to address the primary quality of a valued historic house: habitation.

To achieve this authenticity – paradoxically, we asked the question: Is there room in preservation for controversy, opinion, rumor and conjecture? Almost every historic house site that I have been directly involved with has the “old wives’ tale” about one of the inhabitants. I have wondered what things would be like if we as preservationists actually owned the rumors – imbedded the controversial and questionable into our tours and stories? I wonder if including these ideas of conjecture make historic houses more intimate, approachable, and oddly enough – authentic.

As I have done with most other newsletters, I sent out an email to the house staffs for article ideas. I usually am swimming in suggestions relevant to the newsletter theme. Not so this time! Some of the responses I did get came with caveats: “we try to stay away from controversial topics” or “these ideas are too far afield from our period of interpretation.” I understood everyone’s concerns, but those caveats were the very reason that I thought this issue of the newsletter needed to be published—nothing is as clean and contained as we portray it. I suspect that even our 23 houses were never as orderly and clean as they are now as house museums.

This newsletter is conceptually tied to the three preceding issues by a common goal – to provide expansive ideas for historic interpretation and to question the traditional paradigm of historic house museums.

This issue has been organized to test the notion of authenticity. Is it authentic to tell the whole story, or is it better to frame the story in a way that may exclude conjectural or controversial aspects? Our hope is that in raising these more difficult topics, we open up a new and more complex discussion of house museums and the stories they tell.

In addition to these questions we asked: What stories do our historic houses tell that are relevant to contemporary culture? What stories are difficult to tell, complicated to explain, or nuanced in a way so complex that an hour tour won’t do justice to them?

RECENT NEWSPAPER HEADLINES BEGIN TO SUGGEST ANSWERS:

- An 18 year old Rutgers student jumps off the George Washington Bridge because he is “outed” as a gay man online. (NEW YORK CITY HAS ABOUT 5.76% OF ITS POPULATION IN SAME SEX HOUSEHOLDS. THIS PUTS US IN THE TOP 10 “GAYEST” CITIES IN THE COUNTRY.)
- A toxic waste reservoir collapses in Hungary and floods 16 square miles of residential houses. At least 4 people are killed and hundreds are sent to the hospital with burns caused by the substance. (IN 2009 THERE WERE 222 SUPERFUND SITES IN NEW YORK STATE ALONE, AND THE GOWANUS CANAL WAS ADDED TO THE LIST THIS YEAR.)
- The divorce rate is the lowest it has been in 40 years, and is still over 40%. (NEW YORK STATE’S NO-FAULT DIVORCE LAW, THE LAST OF ANY STATE, WENT INTO EFFECT IN OCTOBER)
- Deportations of illegal immigrants from the United States hit a record high of 392,862 this September. (IN 2000, NEW YORK CITY HAD 2.9 MILLION FOREIGN-BORN RESIDENTS, THE LARGEST NUMBER IN ITS HISTORY. OF THESE, 43% ARRIVED IN THE PREVIOUS TEN YEARS AND 46% SPEAK A LANGUAGE OTHER THAN ENGLISH AT HOME.)

Political battles rage as we adjust to these statistics; marriage and divorce rights, cleaning up our industrial past, and regulating immigration capture headlines almost daily. In this issue we look at how historic interpretation can contribute to our understanding of these issues.

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THE SMELL OF A DELICIOUS DINNER wafts through Rebecca Lurie and her partner Elly Spicer’s 1920s row house in Park Slope, Brooklyn. The brick house, built to house single people who worked for wealthier residents at the northern end of the neighborhood, now sings of family. Rebecca, a volunteer at the Old Stone House, lives here with her partner, Elly, and sons Tyler, 17, and Cameron, 12.



Rebecca moved with Elly to Brooklyn from their apartment in southern Manhattan when they decided to have children. They were drawn to this house after reading an ad saying that it had three original Murphy beds. Intrigued, the couple came to take a look and found a house virtually untouched since the 1940s.



CAPTIONS BY TARA KIERNAN AND KIM MAIER, OLD STONE HOUSE

Rebecca’s quiet residential street is just blocks from the Gowanus Canal and the old industrial neighborhood that surrounds it—an area now poised for change. An abandoned brick power plant known as the “Batcave,” a former squat with powerful interior and exterior graffiti, stands as a testament to this transition. It had been slated for the development of luxury housing until the combined impact of the Superfund designation and the drop in the real estate market. Photograph by Nathan Kensinger.

Rebecca is an active volunteer at the nearby Old Stone House, where she teaches local kids how to garden in carefully tended planting beds. Two blocks away, this empty lot awaits its fate as part of a proposed Whole Foods project that has been delayed indefinitely due to brownfield remediation. Photograph by Nathan Kensinger.



Rebecca loves her neighborhood, despite the shadow of a dirtier past lingering nearby. The subway is close, the schools are good, the restaurants abundant. “Once in a while, you find some gems,” she says.

Nathan Kensinger’s photographs of New York City’s abandoned, industrial waterfront have been exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum and the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Art, and have been featured in the New York Times, New York Post, and New York Magazine. <http://kensinger.blogspot.com>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robin A. Harper is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at York College (CUNY) and a member of the Directors' Council of the Historic House Trust. Her research compares citizenship and immigrant/immigration policies in different countries. She first fell in love with historic houses as a child when she visited them as a New York City public school student.

TELLING THE WHOLE STORY

With the help of a recently completed historic furnishings plan, the Merchant's House Museum will open one of the fourth-floor servants' rooms for viewing. The museum has used the fourth floor as a storage area since its opening in 1936, so no evidence of how the rooms looked exists. Fortunately, 19th-century household manuals reveal how these rooms were furnished. The room will feature iron beds (to keep the bedbugs away), an 1850s coal stove, and washstands, oil lamps, and a chest of drawers from the Tredwell collection. Together, these objects will complete the picture of the private space occupied by two of the Irish girls who played such an important part in the family life of New York City's 19th-century merchant elite.

normally enjoy, like time off, vacation time and pay, and sick leave. Some argue that domestic work is inherently different from other kinds of labor and so does not need these kinds of protections. Others counter that because domestic labor is different it needs these protections even more. The law goes into effect in November and is being considered a progressive model for other states.

Domestic labor itself is certainly nothing new in this country. The Tredwells, the wealthy family that inhabited the Merchant's House from 1835 until 1933, were no different than most households of the 19th century in relying on domestic labor. How would they have felt about the passage of this Act? How did they treat their own servants? And how would their young Irish maids, the "ubiquitous Bridgets," as they were known, who came to escape poverty and perhaps find fortune, have felt about mandated time off or worker protections?

Research drawing on census records shows that there were four workers at a time in the Tredwell household, all female between the ages of 17 and 30. They were not-long term workers but took positions and then moved on. It is assumed, as was the custom, that once married or pregnant they lost or left their jobs. Based on practices of the day, it is likely that the Tredwells employed a cook, a scullery maid, a parlor maid, and a chamber maid, each of whom earned \$3-\$4 per month (about \$60-\$80 in today's dollars). The servants performed a multitude of jobs, from cooking and cleaning to tending fires, serving meals, caring for the Tredwell children, and running errands. Bridget, Ann, Mary, and Mary, the servants in 1855, would have risen before the family to heat water for the morning, light fires in the bedrooms, and make breakfast. Cleaning, cooking, and serving followed, and the maids likely crawled up to their beds at the end of a long, exhausting day. Throughout



Bells line the kitchen wall at the Merchant's House Museum. Each bell rang with a different note to indicate which room the call came from. The bells were activated by a small lever to the right of the fireplace mantle in each room.

the house we can still see call bells, reminding us that domestic work at that time was a 24-hour job.

Since many of the Tredwells' servants over the years were Irish, the Merchant's House Museum offers a unique place to start examination of a little known part of the Irish experience in New York. Although we know a great deal about the history of the Irish in the United States from the mid-19th century on and there have been tomes written about Irish immigrant maids, there is relatively little known about Irish immigration in general before mid-century, before the great migration waves resulting from the potato famines. Further, we know relatively little about the women who came on their own from Ireland at that time.

Historic houses can tell many stories. As we wander the halls of historic houses, especially one like the Merchant's House Museum, with its unique display of original furniture and household items that actually belonged to the Tredwell family, we reflect on the lives of the owners, the beauty of the architecture and decorations, and perhaps the technological innovations of the house. But rarely do we reflect on the activities undertaken that made that house run. In these stories, we look at elite lives. And yet it is through the lens of the Merchant's House that we can get a glimpse of the lives and interactions with immigrant servants who also played a critical role in the development of the country.

A tour through the Merchant's House Museum reminds us that immigrant domestic labor has been a constant in American life. Perhaps, through examining life at the Merchant's House Museum we may glean some point of comparison and insight for understanding relations with employers, expectations for labor and compensation, upward mobility, and immigrant incorporation for domestic workers today.



Brooklyn's Old Stone House once sat on the banks of the Gowanus Creek, where the freshwater inlet stretched all the way to today's Fourth Avenue. Dutch immigrant Claes Arentsen Vechte constructed his farmhouse in 1699 at this site for its proximity to the creek, and its access to the Porte and Gowanus roads. The Vechtes were wheelwrights, farmers, and oyster fishermen, and used the creek to ferry their goods to market in Manhattan.

EARLIER THIS YEAR when Brooklyn's Gowanus Canal was named a Superfund site by the Environmental Protection Agency, another chapter in the life of this complicated body of water began. While heralded as the key to solving the pollution problems associated with the Gowanus Canal, many know that this may be amongst the most contaminated and complicated Superfund sites in the United States. The complications run the gamut from identifying the pollutants to the polluters. Many of them have been gone for decades, if not nearly a century, considering the long history of the Canal, which opened for business in 1869.

The entire span of American history can be told from the surrounding streets of South Brooklyn. By 1700 there were already flour mills, textile mills, tanneries, and other industries along Gowanus Creek to sustain the growing population of South Brooklyn. A look at the census reveals astonishing figures about the population expansion from 1800 to 1900. In 1800,

King's County had a population of 5,740 and New York County had 60,515 residents. By 1860, these figures had risen to 266,661 and 813,669, respectively; in 1990, the census shows 1,166,582 in King's County and 1,850,093 in Manhattan. This gives a sense of how rapidly housing was erected and services grew to accommodate the vast influx of immigrants and new residents who were literally building the city and creating its infrastructure. By 1849, when New York State authorized the creation of the Canal, Edwin C. Litchfield had already bought up large tracts of land extending from Prospect Park to the Gowanus Creek to assure that this would be a commercially viable enterprise.

And it was. All manner of goods moved along this 1.8 mile stretch. Construction materials, imported goods, agricultural products, chemicals, textiles, ice, lumber, coal, and nearly any item you can name moved through the tiny waterway to be hauled onto its banks, stored in nearby warehouses, and transported to an ever expanding population. As the United States rapidly industrialized at the end of the 19th century, Brooklyn was a central contributor to the rising economic forces in the country. It was the embodiment of the promise of the Industrial Revolution and an example of American ingenuity in harnessing resources of every type. Wealth and power from these activities meant Brooklyn was very much its own city before the boroughs unified to form the City of New York. It proudly boasted both

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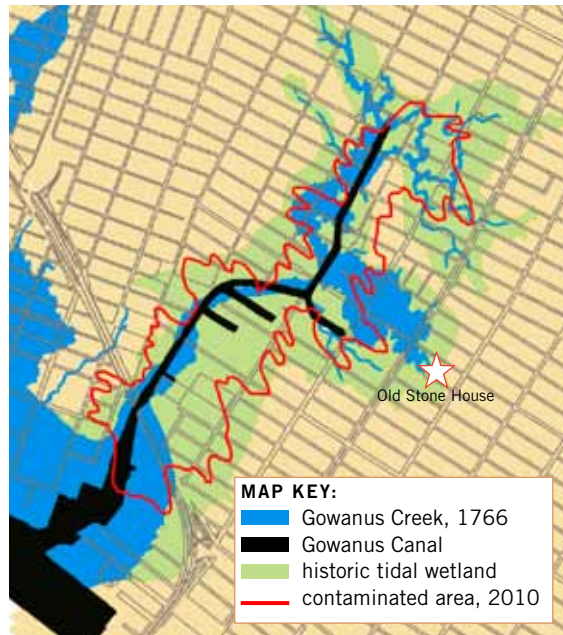
HHT Board Member Lisa Ackerman is Executive Vice President of the World Monuments Fund. Previously, she served as Executive Vice President of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, where she administered programs in art history, art conservation, and historic preservation. Ms. Ackerman lectures regularly on preservation topics, but is always especially eager to speak about the wonders of Brooklyn. She is a contributing author to *The Social Vision of Alfred T. White*, an important advocate for making Brooklyn a more livable place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

A NOD TO HISTORY

At the Old Stone House, new playground panels for the upcoming \$3M renovation to JJ Byrne playground will reflect the historic landscape of the Gowanus. The Vechte family emigrated from Holland in 1653 and built a house at the intersection of the Porte Road—now First Street—and the Gowanus Road, which was parallel to today's Fifth and Third Avenues. The Trust would like to thank Borough President Marty Markowitz, former Council Member David Yassky, and the J.M. Kaplan Fund for funding the playground redesign.



(at left) Kentile moved to the Gowanus in 1949, and had a thriving business thanks to suburbanization in the 1950s and 1960s. As the dangers of asbestos became clearer, business declined and the company was bankrupted by asbestos-related lawsuits in 1992. Photograph by Claire Vagnone.



MAP KEY:
 ■ Gowanus Creek, 1766
 ■ Gowanus Canal
 ■ historic tidal wetland
 ■ contaminated area, 2010

(below) The land around the Gowanus Creek was filled in to build the canal. The modern canal goes northwest from Red Hook, under the Brooklyn Queens Expressway, and up to Douglass Street between Bond and Nevins streets. The Old Stone House once sat along the banks of the original creek. Map designed by HHT intern Damion Long.

evident to all. Yet for decades, waste and byproducts from mills, dye manufacturers, coal gasification facilities, lumber storage, and other businesses continued to find their way to the water. Kentile was active just off the banks of the Gowanus Canal until a few decades ago. Today what remains is an evocative sign dominating the skyline, but once Kentile was the largest producer of asbestos tiles in the United States.

In the 1980s and 1990s, efforts were made to improve conditions in the Canal. Studies by credible local, state, and federal agencies declared the pollution so complex that it was safer to leave the water undisturbed. The risks and costs of trying to dredge the Canal and remove the toxins in a secure way seemed daunting. In 2005, the "Living In" section in the *New York Times* noted, "Some See Venice; Some See a Canal." Now that developers are reimagining the warehouses and industrial buildings along the Canal giving way to New York's Lido, people have been decrying its tarnished and toxic state, and calling for improvements. With the Superfund designation complete, city and federal efforts are underway to clean the Canal, a process expected to take at least nine years.

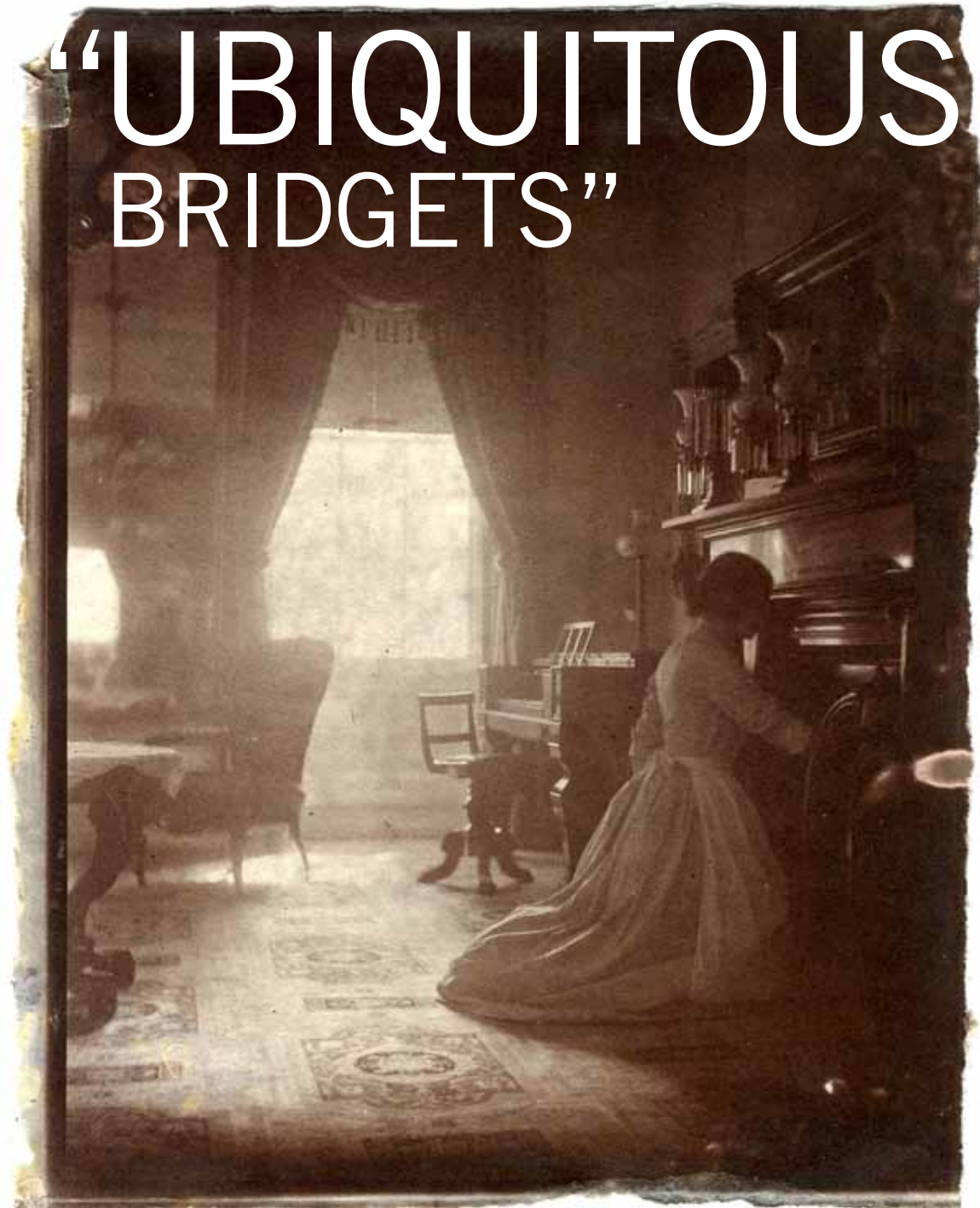
In the last decade, the population of the Gowanus neighborhood has increased. Former industrial buildings and warehouses now house artists' studios, custom furniture makers, set designers, catering companies, and many more enterprises. The Superfund status may not mean an instant clean-up of the Canal, but it marks another moment of potential great change for a location that has already had numerous incarnations: the Dutch colonists' cheery Gowanus Creek; the site of a pivotal battle in the Revolutionary War; home to waves of immigrants; an emblem of American industrialization; a harbinger of deindustrialization and urban blight. Now the Gowanus Canal is a hallmark of movement from the suburbs back to the city. Today it is perhaps the most extraordinary example of hope for a greener city, striving to be a model for sustainability.

an encyclopedic museum and an opera house before Manhattan. Even after unification of the boroughs, the Gowanus Canal was declared the most profitable canal in the nation and a headline on October 29, 1922 in the *New York Times* announced, "Gowanus Tonnage \$100,000,000 A Year."

As American industrial hegemony waned, however, the Gowanus neighborhood suffered. By the end of the 1970s, more than 50 percent of the commercial and industrial properties were no longer being used. Shipping gave way to trucking and the waterfront industries that had been the mainstay of the region were rapidly disappearing. Further, much of the port activity shifted to Elizabeth, New Jersey, which could accommodate much larger vessels and could connect more easily to interstate highway systems. The Canal remained a contaminated scar across the increasingly empty industrial neighborhood.

As early as the 1890s, studies had been commissioned declaring severe health risks to the community from the Canal and calling for improvements to ease the malodorous conditions

"UBIQUITOUS BRIDGETS"



BY ROBIN A. HARPER, DIRECTORS' COUNCIL

IN THE SUMMER OF 2010, the governor of New York State signed the Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights into law. The Act mandates vast new employment rights for household workers including nannies, housekeepers, and caregivers for the disabled and elderly. These rights include guaranteeing domestic workers the minimum wage, overtime pay, a minimum of one day off a week, three days of paid leave per year, a number of protections against sexual harassment and racial discrimination, and performing a feasibility study to see if unionization of these workers is realistic. The law will cover an estimated 270,000 people, most of whom are women and many of whom are immigrants. If the Act works as intended, many will be lifted from poverty and gain some of the worker protections that other legally employed people

A series of photographs taken by Hal Hirshorn recreates a lost record of the servants' daily lives at the Merchant's House Museum. Taken with a 19th-century camera, this image of a female stoking a fire, the thick layers of her skirt up against the hearth, remind us how dangerous it was to work in the home. It was common for women to be burned when their skirts caught fire.

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Alice Austen House and Staten Island Historical Society

Alice Austen (left) and Gertrude Tate, life partners for more than fifty years, had no legal rights to formalize their union.

rejected the term “lesbian” for themselves because it was associated in their day with lower-class outlaw behavior and perversity. Had they lived in our day, however, when the stigma against gays and lesbians has been hugely diminished and federally-legalized same-sex marriage may soon become a reality, it is probable that these women, who committed themselves to one another for life, would not have eschewed the term “lesbian” to identify themselves. They presumably would have wished for the legal and financial benefits of federally-recognized marriage.

Alice Austen often recorded the lifestyles and passions of these “proto-lesbians” in her photographs. For instance, the picture “Violet Ward on a Porch with a Friend” shows one woman in a masculine hat and tie, seated, her arm leaning intimately on the lap of her very femininely dressed friend. The “campy” photograph “Julia Martin, Julia Bredt and Self Dressed Up as Men” shows the three women wearing men’s pants, jackets, and ties; one woman holds an upright umbrella between her legs in an overtly suggestive pose.

Alice never married, explaining to Oliver Jensen, the art historian and publisher who discovered her work in 1950 and brought it to public attention, that she had been “too good to get married,” by which she meant too good at sports, photography, and mechanics to appeal to the men of her day; nor did they appeal to her. Alice’s own Boston marriage with Gertrude Tate (1871–1962) endured for more than 50 years. The two women met in 1899. Gertrude had been engaged at the time, but

she soon informed the young man that she couldn’t marry him and was going off to Europe with Alice.

For the first 18 years of their relationship, the two women did not live together. Gertrude worked as a kindergarten teacher and dance instructor to support her mother and younger sister in Brooklyn. Her family opposed her moving to Clear Comfort, characterizing her relationship with Alice as “wrong devotion.” They continued to hope she would marry a man, which alone could give her legal and financial security at a time when women’s domestic partnerships had no official standing anywhere. Alice and Gertrude nevertheless spent a great deal of time in one another’s company, at Clear Comfort and abroad. Finally, in 1917, when Gertrude’s mother and sister gave up the family home and moved into an apartment, Gertrude came to Clear Comfort to stay. Together Gertrude and Alice lived what Alice called a “lark life,” travelling often, and entertaining on their estate not only friends who were coupled as they were in Boston marriages, but also Staten Island high society.

But in 1929, the stock market crashed, and Alice lost everything. She had to sell off furniture and art works to pay grocery and heating bills; she took out a mortgage; Gertrude offered dancing classes and broadcast a series of “charm” courses over the radio; together they opened a public tea room on the estate. Finally, in 1941, they lost Clear Comfort to the bank and moved together into a small apartment.

In the winter of 1946, when Gertrude was 75 years old, she slipped on the ice and broke her arm, and then was hospitalized with severe bronchitis. It became increasingly difficult for her to take care of Alice, who was five years older and virtually immobilized with arthritis. In 1949, Alice had to be moved into a nursing home, and Gertrude went to live with her married sister on the other side of the city, though she took public transportation to visit Alice often.

In 1950, Alice signed her few remaining possessions over to Gertrude, declared herself a pauper, and went to live at the Staten Island Farm Colony, the local poor house. That is where Oliver Jensen discovered her. He raised money by writing articles about her, illustrated with her photographs, and selling them to magazines such as *Life* and *Holiday*. In the last year of her life, she was able to move to a private nursing home.

Gertrude survived Alice by ten years. The Tate family knew that at her death she wished to be buried with the woman who had been her partner for a half-century. But there was no legal or moral recognition of such relationships in 1962, when they were still widely regarded as “wrong devotion.” Gertrude’s wishes were not honored: Alice is buried in the Austen family plot on Staten Island. The woman who was her family through most of her life is buried in Brooklyn’s Cypress Hill Cemetery.

THE MYSTERIOUS MADAME JUMEL

BY CAROL WARD, MORRIS-JUMEL MANSION MUSEUM

The Morris-Jumel Mansion has been witness to some important historical figures, such as George Washington. However, it was also the home to Eliza Jumel, perhaps the most widely theorized figure in the history of the mansion. With few rights for themselves in the 19th century, women essentially had to conform either to the virtuous “angel of the house,” taking care of husband and home, or to the “femme fatale” seductress. These polar opposites left little room for women to show their independence or to become active members of society. This is why there is much rumor as to Eliza’s life at the mansion.

Eliza was born as Betsy Bowen and lived with her mother and sister in Rhode Island. While a

young woman, her family was forced to leave due to allegations of running a “dissolute household.” This term leaves room for speculation as to whether the Bowen women were involved in less than ladylike activities. The family moved to New York City where Eliza became an actress. She supposedly met many influential and affluent men, including Stephen Jumel, a wine merchant from Haiti. Stephen and Eliza were married and took possession of the mansion in 1810. Stephen passed away in 1832 after suffering a wound from a pitchfork. Rumors circulated that when Eliza undressed Stephen’s wounds to clean them, she left the bandages off, causing him to bleed out and die.

A year later Eliza married former Vice President Aaron Burr, notorious for his duel with Alexander Hamilton years before. Eliza was 59 and Aaron was 77 at the time of the marriage. The tables seem to be turned on Eliza, as this time Aaron married her for her social standing and wealth. Upon discovering this, Eliza decided to put forth the first divorce in New York City history, but Burr died the day the divorce was finalized. Eliza then used her status as the widow of the former Vice President to travel to France and participate in salons she would never have gained access to otherwise. Madame Jumel lived another 30 years, passing away at the age of 90 in 1865.

What is fact and what is fiction when it comes to Eliza Jumel? There are some clear historical answers, and there is other gossip that might fit in well in today’s tabloids. Women in the 21st century have many more avenues open to them than Eliza did when she lived at the Mansion. And today, New York’s new “no-fault” divorce law, which enables couples to divorce without having to claim wrongdoing on one side, may give women new opportunities to escape unhappy marriages, even while it might also drive the divorce rate up. But perhaps, had Eliza had the rights of property and access to divorce, things might have turned out differently for Mr. Jumel or Mr. Burr.



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- Diana Chapin
- Alice B. Diamond
- Jamie Drake
- Amy L. Freitag
- Alice Cooney Frelinghuysen
- Donald Friedman
- Robin Harper
- Margize Howell
- Kenneth T. Jackson
- Susan Henshaw Jones
- Lucy Kennedy
- Jonathan Kuhn
- Joseph Pell Lombardi
- Malcolm MacKay
- Joseph Pierson
- Dianne H. Pilgrim
- Nicholas Quennell
- Robert C. Quinlan
- Frances A. Resheske
- Gary Ross
- Frank E. Sanchis III
- David Stutzman
- Joan N. Taubner
- Gina Ingoglia Weiner
- Anthony C. Wood

MAKING HISTORY ACCESSIBLE FOR EVERYONE

In 2005, the Trust began working with the Parks Department to complete an accessibility survey of its 23 properties in order to meet current Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements for historic buildings. Several houses already have some level of accessibility, such as accessible routes, ramps, entrances, interiors, and restrooms. Some sites, however, can never be made fully accessible because of the size and interior configuration of the structure, as is the case with the Little Red Lighthouse. We are therefore developing alternative curatorial plans which include visual and text descriptions of the inaccessible areas. In other cases, guidebooks showing photographs and detailing the history of inaccessible rooms are available to visitors.

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Alice Austen in front of Clear Comfort, 1951. Alice lost the house as a result of financial difficulties in 1945; after her death in 1952, it fell into decay. In the 1960s, concerned citizens rallied to save the house from demolition. It was acquired by the City in 1975 and was restored in the 1980s.

PH: Photograph by Alfred Eisenstaedt, 1951. Courtesy of Getty Images/Life Magazine.

ALICE AUSTEN AND GERTRUDE TATE: A “BOSTON MARRIAGE” ON STATEN ISLAND

BY LILLIAN FADERMAN AND PHYLLIS IRWIN
 WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY CARL RUTBERG, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ALICE AUSTEN HOUSE MUSEUM

Alice Austen was “outed” in 1994. An exhibition at the New York Public Library celebrating the 25th Anniversary of the Stonewall Riots not only included one of her more provocative photographs but also stuck the lesbian label on her. Almost immediately the Alice Austen House was thrown into a cultural war. One side urged that the museum should become a center for lesbian and feminist studies and the other argued that Austen’s personal life was personal. A group called the Lesbian Avengers threatened to picket the house; the board threatened to close it.

When I assumed the position of Executive Director in 2002, I knew of the controversy, but had failed to realize the damage it had done. The argument had created divisions among board

members, between the board and the prior executive director, and between the Alice Austen House and segments of the public.

At the core was the word “lesbian.” Either she was or she wasn’t. To me, the argument wasn’t very interesting. What fascinated me was Alice Austen, her work, and her life. And it didn’t take much research to conclude that Gertrude Tate was the most important person in Austen’s life. This fact, supported by hundreds of photographs, is undeniable. Yet when we stopped debating the “L-word” and started to talk about what we knew of Austen, the disagreements disappeared. Today, we do not claim that Austen was a lesbian, and we do not hide Gertrude Tate. Instead, we present what we know and let the visitors make up their own minds.



Original photograph: Alice Austen House and Staten Island Historical Society.

The photographer Alice Austen (1866–1952) was the proprietor of Clear Comfort, an 18th-century Staten Island home that had been purchased in 1844 by her wealthy grandfather. When Alice was just a few months old, she and her mother moved into Clear Comfort because they had been abandoned by Alice’s father. Mother and daughter became part of an extended family, a household of six adults who doted on the one child. When Alice was ten years old, an uncle gave her a large-format camera and showed her how to use it; another uncle converted a second-floor closet in Clear Comfort into a dark room for Alice—and the rest is history.

Or, rather, a *part* of the rest has been acknowledged history: Alice Austen’s remarkable photographs, portraying immigrants at work and socialites at play, capturing stunning views of rural Staten Island and crowded Manhattan, have found a solid place in the annals of American photography. She was one of America’s earliest and most prolific women photographers and is widely considered an artist with a strong aesthetic eye. However, there is another aspect of Alice Austen that has generally been suppressed from history—not by Alice herself but by those who have wished to “save her reputation.” It is an aspect that bears discussion in these more liberal times: Alice and many of her closest friends were New Women who not only chose to live independently of men but also to have amorous and/or domestic relationships with other women.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, in the era of the New Woman, higher education, well-paying careers, and social independence were within the grasp of many females of the middle and upper classes. It was not at all uncommon for a New Woman, who no longer needed a man to support her or to make her socially viable, to take as her life partner another New Woman. Indeed such



(above) A 2010 recreation of Alice Austen’s “Julia Martin, Julia Bredt, and self dressed up as men. 4:40 pm, Thursday, October 15, 1891.” Alice said of the original in 1951, “We looked so funny with those mustaches on, I can hardly tell which is which. We did it just for fun—maybe we were better looking men than women.” Austen’s original image points to a deeper social issue, however: At the turn of the century, women had limited economic opportunities. It was not unheard of for women to dress as men to seek out better-paying and more liberating work. And more often than not, they were successful. Photographer Steven Rosen asked the award-winning Drag Alliance performance group Switch n’ Play to reinterpret the original photograph from a distinctively contemporary vantage point. Jack Kelly and K. James of Switch n’ Play; Jo. Styling by Switch n’ Play, www.switchnplay.com.

relationships were so frequent in the eastern cities of America, where numerous women’s colleges had been opened and from which educated women went out into the world of work, that the term “Boston marriage” was coined in the 1880s to describe them. Women couples of the era included the writers Gertrude Stein and her partner Alice B. Toklas, Amy Lowell and Ada Russell, Willa Cather and Edith Lewis, Nobel Prize winner and founder of the profession of social work Jane Addams and Mary Rozet Smith....the list is endless.

It was not uncommon for women in Boston marriages to live together 30, 40, 50 years—till death did them part. Many of them would likely have

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Lillian Faderman, an award-winning author, has published eleven books, including *Surpassing the Love of Men* and *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, which were both named by the *New York Times* on their list of Notable Books of the Year. Her work has been translated into eight languages. Phyllis Irwin is a professor emerita of music, a textbook author, and a very serious amateur photographer who exhibits at the Spectrum Gallery in Fresno, California.

ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHER

Steven Rosen came to photography after careers as a jewelry designer and a book designer. His decades of work in the fashion and graphic design industries give him a highly developed sense of color, light, and composition. He works throughout New York as a portrait, event, and theater photographer. His love for theatricality has exerted itself with a body of work exploring modern day dandies and flappers. Steven and his husband Ray, a writer, marry art and text in a historic art deco building in Brooklyn. To explore his work further, visit him at www.stevenrosenphotography.com.