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.

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. By 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.
A NOTE FROM FRANKLIN D. VAGNONE
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

"He houses instinctively that space identified with his solitude in creative that even when it is forever engrossed from the present, when, hereafter, it is to alien to all the promises of the future, even when no longer have a garret, when the attic room is lost and gone, there remains the fact that we once lived a garret, once lived in an attic."

The Poetics of Space, Gaston Bachelard

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 discourse of house preservation 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 IS ABOUT 5% OF ITS POPULATION LIVES IN SAME SEX HOUSEHOLDS. THIS FITS IN THE TOP 10 "GAMER" STORIES 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 2010 THERE WERE 222 SUPERFUND SITES IN NEW YORK STATE ALONE, AND THE GOVERNOR OF NEW YORK PASSED INTO LAW, THE LAST OF ANY STATE, THE NO-FAULT DIVORCE LAW, THE LAST OF ANY STATE, WHICH TOOK EFFECT IN OCTOBER.)

• Deportations of illegal immigrants from the United States hit a record high of 392,862 this September. (IN 2009 NEW YORK CITY AND 2.2 MILLION NEW YORK-BORN RESIDENTS, THE LARGEST MURRAY IN THE STATE OF NEW YORK, ARE SPANISH SPEAKING.)

• 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, WHICH TOOK EFFECT IN OCTOBER, MAKES THE DIVORCE FORMALITY OF DECISIONS.)

• The marriage and divorce rights, cleaning up our neighborhood, now sings of northern end of the neighborhood, now sings of people who worked for wealthier residents at the Brooklyn. The brick house, built to house single people who worked for wealthier residents at the northern end of the neighborhood, now signs of family. Rebecca, a volunteer at the Old Stone House, lives here with her partner, Elly, and sons Tyler, 17, and Cameron, 12.

 Political battles rage as we adjust to these statistics; headlines almost daily. In this issue we look at how historic interpretation can contribute to our understanding of these issues.

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normalcy 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 1893, were no different than most households of the 19th century in relying on domestic help. 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 females 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 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 Tredwell’s 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 tones 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.

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.

### Fall 2010

**In the Company of Masters, Clerks, and Craftsmen:**

**Historic House Trust of New York City**

**By Kim Marr, Executive Director**

**Old Stone House**

**Introduction by Claire Vagnone**

As we reflect on the activities undertaken that made that house run, we imagine the daily interactions between the servants and the Tredwells. In the past, this kind of interaction was often a question of power and hierarchy. However, in the Merchant’s House, we can see evidence of the servants’ own agency and the ways in which they negotiated their roles.

By 1800, the population of New York City had reached 5,740 and New York County had 60,515 residents. By 1860, these figures had risen to 266,661 and 813,669, respectively; in 1900, the census shows 1,166,062 in King’s County and 1,850,000 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. Ditchfield 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 united to form the City of New York. It proudly boasted both

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As early as the 1890s, studies had been commissioned declaring severe health risks to the Gowanus neighborhood. Even after unification of the boroughs, the Gowanus Canal was declared the most profitable canal in the nation and a headline on October 29, 1942 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 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 Venice; Some See a Canal.”

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 coltman’s chokey Gowanus Creek; the site of a pivotal battle in the Revolutionary War; home to waves of immigrants; an emblem of American industrialization; a barherger of deindustrialization and urban blight; and 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.
rejected the term "lesbian" for themselves because it was associated in their day with lower-class outlaw behavior and perversion. 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 those women, who committed themselves to one another for life, would not have hescowed 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 "canny" photograph "Julia Martin, Julia Breck and Stif Dressed Up As Men" shows three women wearing men's pants, jackets, and ties, one woman holding 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 account of her marriage to Gertrude Tate (1871–1962) endured for more than 50 years. The two women met and endured for more than 50 years. The two women met and

In the last year of her life, she was able to move to a private nursing home. 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 was buried at the Austen family plot on Staten Island. The woman who was her family through most of her life is buried in Brooklyn's Cypress Hills Cemetery.
ALICE AUSTEN AND GERTRUDE TATE: A "BOSTON MARRIAGE" ON STATEN ISLAND

BY LILLIAN FADEKMAN AND PHYLLIS IRWIN
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY CARL RUTHER, 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.

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 Austen was just a few months old, she and her mother moved into Clear Comfort because they had been abandoned by Austen’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 acclaimed history: Alice Austen’s remarkable photographs, portraying immigrants at work and socialites at play, capturing sprawling 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 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 visible, to take as her life partner another New Woman. Indeed such 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