LIKE an old parchment that has been written on over and over again, Christopher Street carries the traces of its historical past in the remnants and remains of its street pattern, block and lot formations, and its array of architectural forms. As careful observers we can travel down Christopher Street, sifting the evidence that tells us about the early beginnings of Greenwich Village and slowly exploring its development over time.

FROM FARMS TO BLOCKS AND LOTS: 1626–1821

The land in the vicinity of present-day Christopher Street was recognized by the Dutch as a valuable piece of real estate. Thus in 1629 an employee of the Dutch West India Company, Wouter Van Twiller, was granted two hundred acres near the Native American settlement of Sappookenkanican, which lay close to the intersection of present-day Gansevoort and Washington streets. Arriving in New Amsterdam in 1633 as its third director general,
STRAIGHT DOWN CHRISTOPHER STREET

Van Twiller lost no time in turning his land into a tobacco plantation he named Boschen Bouwery, or "Farm in the Woods."1 Sometime before 1638, when Van Twiller was recalled to Holland, he transferred two large parcels of land to Francis Lastley (or Lesley) and to Jan Van Rotterdam. We know from studying later maps that the boundary between these two plantations eventually became known as "the road along Jan Van Rotterdam's to the Strand" and represents the exact trajectory of present-day Christopher Street.

When the English assumed power over Manhattan in 1664, they transferred the large tract of land on the south side of Christopher Street to the Crown. Hoping to make the Church of England the established church of New York, Queen Anne instructed her nephew, Lord Cornbury, to make a grant in 1708 of this Crown land to Trinity Church. The terms of the grant were exceedingly vague, and consequently it is unknown whether the grant extended as far north as Christopher Street or whether it stopped a short distance north of Canal Street. But conveyance records tell us that by the mid-eighteenth century, Christopher Street was the northern boundary of Trinity Church Farm. The property east of this farm and adjacent to Christopher Street was the Elbert Herring Farm. Directly to the north of these two farms, across the division of Christopher Street, lay the three-hundred-acre estate of Sir Peter Warren. As commodore of squadrons assigned during the 1730s and 1740s to capture French and Spanish vessels bound for the West Indies, Warren was reputed to have become exceptionally wealthy from the sale of this lucrative bounty. He used the proceeds in 1740 to build a country house two blocks north of Christopher Street, a site bounded by present-day Bleecker, West Fourth, Charles, and Perry streets. At this time, Christopher Street was known as Skinner Road, named for the husband of Warren's youngest daughter, and it extended northeastward to the middle of the present-day block between Fifth and Sixth avenues. Sometime later it was renamed Christopher Street in honor of an heir of one of Warren's trustees.

On the death of Warren and his wife, his estate was divided among his three daughters. The lot adjacent to Christopher Street was granted to Charlotte Willoughby, who, with her husband, the earl of Abingdon, subdivided the land as early as 1788. And so it happened that Richard Amos acquired the land to the north of Christopher Street between present-day Washington and Hudson streets, while David Mallows acquired the site to the east of Amos's land, between Hudson and Bleecker streets, and to the west between Washington Street and the river. By 1794 Mallows had transferred ownership of his land to Abijah Hammond, who in turn granted the riverside lots to the city of New York for the site of a new state prison.

Amos, Hammond, and their neighbors wasted little time in subdividing their holdings. Amos's land had been subdivided into blocks and lots...
by 1789, and the Herring Farm, located on the south side of Christopher Street, was platted in 1794. Hammond's property between Bleecker and West Fourth streets was platted in 1799, while his holdings between West Fourth Street and Greenwich Avenue were subdivided by 1807. The Thomas Ludlow Farm, situated to the east of the Herring Farm, would be platted in 1826, and the Trinity Church lands in 1827. Eventually the entire length of Christopher Street was ready for development.

At the same time that these farmlands were subdivided, streets were surveyed, and Christopher Street was divided into blocks as well as lots. Amos surveyed the land for Charles, present-day West Tenth, and Greenwich streets in 1796. The same year a survey of the Hammond land located present-day Bleecker and West Fourth streets and Waverly Place, while surveys of the south side of Christopher Street done in 1799, 1809, and 1811 laid out present-day Bedford, Grove, Barrow, and Commerce streets. Although surveyed and located on maps, most of these streets were not officially opened nor their elevation regulated for some time to come. An application to the Road Committee was submitted for Christopher Street in 1810, for example, but it was neither regulated nor opened until 1817.

Throughout most of the eighteenth century, Greenwich Village was a rural hamlet and a popular resort for fashionable day-trippers. The rising tide of epidemic disease that repeatedly racked the population of Lower Manhattan in 1791, 1795, 1799, and 1805 transformed the bucolic, well-
drained farmlands into a haven from pestilence, and the village into a town. "The demand for houses at Greenwich," reported a Boston newspaper in 1805, "is scarcely greater than the rapidity with which they are raised. On a spot where yesterday you saw nothing but a green turf, tomorrow you behold a store. . . . By night as well as by day, the saw is heard and the hammer resounds, and the consequence is that the village begins to assume the appearance of a town."2

Another impetus for development was the opening in 1797 of Newgate Prison, which extended northward from the foot of Christopher Street to Perry Street. One of the earliest reform penitentiaries in America, the Newgate was praised for its separate quarters for women, bathing facilities, and workshops training prisoners to be, for example, blacksmiths, nail makers, shoemakers, tailors, cooperers, turners, spinners, and weavers. Because of a poor security system, however, revolts and prison breaks were frequent occurrences, and consequently the prison closed operations in 1827. Nevertheless, for thirty years the presence of the prison drew visitors during the summer months and spawned its own spontaneous development. The Greenwich Hotel opened its doors at the prison's doorstep in 1809, and within two years the Greenwich stage passed from the hotel to Federal Hall and back at least five times a day, keeping the West Village in constant contact with the city to the south.

By the 1820s Christopher Street was inhabited by modest craftsmen and tradesmen who also worked in Greenwich Village. Among the thirty-two names mentioned in Longworth's American Almanac of 1820 were the keeper and two assistant keepers of the state prison, five cartmen, six grocers or dry-goods men, and four members of the building trades. Twenty-seven of them lived on Christopher Street between Bleecker and Hudson streets. The oldest residence still standing is Number 133, on the north side of the street a few doors west of Hudson Street. Erected in 1819 for the cartman William Austen, the structure has since been widened and raised, but the outline of its original two and one-half stories can be determined by noting the change in the brickwork from Flemish to running bond. Sometime between 1802 and 1808, William Patterson erected a two-and-one-half-story house at the northeast corner of Bleecker and Christopher streets, devoting the first floor to his grocery store. The oldest structure on Christopher Street, it is still a grocery store.

 Markets and churches always follow the growth of population. In the early months of 1804, two butchers put up a shed on the Greenwich Road, just south of Christopher Street. Four years later, in response to petitions from these butchers and local residents, and despite protests from licensed butchers in the public market on Spring Street, the city approved the construction of a public marketplace near the Newgate Prison. The Greenwich Market stood for twenty-two years on land donated by Trinity Church in
CHRISTINE BOYER

1813. The greater width of Christopher Street on this block, where the Federal Archives Building now stands, is to this day a reminder of the wagons and carts that once crowded the site.

In 1821 Trinity made a second donation of Village farmland, on this occasion for the construction of St.-Luke's-in-the-Field, just to the south of Christopher Street on Hudson. In the same year, St. John's Church was built as a handsome stone-veneer structure then known as the Eighth Presbyterian Church.

FROM COUNTRY ROAD TO CITY STREETS: 1822–1865

Although most of the land along Christopher Street had been parceled into lots and sold in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, the surrounding countryside remained predominantly open. The view eastward from Greenwich Street to the gallows standing in present-day Washington Square Park was unobstructed by development. In 1820 the expanse of open land that separated the Village from the city to the south was assumed to be a barrier that no pestilence could overcome. When an epidemic of yellow fever struck the city in 1822, Greenwich Village's reputation as a safe haven forced it to outgrow its narrow country form. One contemporary described the exodus from the city as having the appearance of a flight from a town under siege:

From daybreak till night one line of carts containing boxes, merchandise and effects was seen moving toward Greenwich Village and the upper parts of the city. . . . Temporary stores and offices were erected, and even on the ensuing day (Sunday) carts were in motion and the saw and hammer busily at work. Within a few days thereafter the Customhouse, the Post-office, the banks, the insurance offices and the printers of newspapers located themselves in the village, and these places almost instantaneously became the seat of the immense business usually carried on in the metropolis.¹

Many streets were built up with new residences for merchants and bankers, and temporary offices for employees fleeing the danger of Lower Manhattan. Although many businesses returned to the city after the fever subsided, abandoning structures that were eventually filled by immigrants and laborers, the gap between the city and the country had been closed once and for all. The Commercial Advertiser recorded this change in a January 18, 1825, article that noted: "Greenwich is no longer a country
village. In three years' time, at the rate buildings have been built last season, Greenwich will be known only as part of the city and the suburbs will be beyond it.”

City improvements quickly followed once the Village’s isolation was ended. Christopher Street was paved and its sidewalks flagged in 1825. In the same year the city filled in the land between the present Washington and West streets that was underwater and extended Christopher Street to its full length. In 1825 the opening of the Erie Canal turned New York into a major seaport. Within three years a pier built at the foot of Christopher Street was the main entry for lumber and building materials targeted for the expanding city to the north.

With the closing of Newgate Prison in 1828, the city lotted and sold its grounds, setting aside space for a public marketplace on present-day Weehawken Street. Much to the surprise of real estate speculators, in 1833 the city decided instead to erect the Jefferson Market at the eastern end of Christopher Street. Following the vocal objections of property owners, however, the Weehawken Market opened as well one year later. Certainly three markets on one small street were too many, even at a boontown location. Competition drove the Greenwich Market out of business within a year and denied success to the Weehawken Market, which closed in 1846. But the Jefferson Meat Market thrived, expanding in 1836 to include fishermen, poultrymen, and hucksters alongside the butchers.

The market’s expansion spurred the development of the eastern end of Christopher Street. While shops and taverns clustered near the pier on the street’s western extremity, town houses began to dominate its eastern stretch. The speculative building activities of Samuel Whittemore, a textile manufacturer and state assemblyman, reflect the pace at which lots were purchased and structures erected and sold. Whittemore purchased ten lots on the north side of Christopher Street between Greenwich Avenue and Waverly Place. By 1827 he had erected a row of ten two-story wood-frame houses with brick fronts. Although greatly altered, five of these houses—Numbers 13, 15, 17, 23, and 25—still stand today. In 1829 and 1830 Whittemore purchased the entire block on the south side of Christopher Street between Bedford and Bleecker streets, and the following year he added lots between Bleecker and Fourth streets. On the latter block two houses built for Whittemore in 1836 still survive.

By 1830, as indicated by Longworth’s New York Register of 1829–1830, remarkable growth had occurred along Christopher Street. The 102 residents surveyed now resided across the entire length of the street. Attesting to the city’s northern growth, twenty-four residents were members of the building trades. Among the carpenters, masons, and painters were three stonemasons, one dock builder, and one street paver. By this time Christopher Street had also become home for those who serviced the expanding

* * *

41
CHRISTINE BOYER

residential community. At least nineteen residents were involved with producing, delivering, or selling food, for there were six grocers, two butchers, and one baker as well as three watermen, two milkmen, and four individuals employed as porters. It is not surprising to discover that—in response to the needs of a residential community—inhabitants of Christopher Street were also engaged in the garment industry: six shoemakers, two tailors, and one hatter resided on the street. A professional class was also beginning to emerge, for a doctor, an attorney, an accountant, and a Spanish teacher could be found living on Christopher Street in 1830. The city’s carting industry was yet another category in which a sizable percentage of the street’s population found employment. In 1830 twenty-five cartmen, who carried hides, stones, coal, oysters, pipes and hogsheads, household furniture, and hollowware, resided on Christopher Street.

A change in the residential character of the street became apparent in 1830. While most of the buildings east of Fourth Street were apparently single-family residences, boardinghouses and multiple dwellings were springing up on the western end of the street. On the block between Bleecker and Hudson streets, for example, which contained the street’s oldest structures, ten of fourteen houses surveyed in 1829–1830 contained two, three, or four different residences. A similar pattern was developing on the blocks west of Hudson Street.

The appearance of multiple-family dwellings by the 1830s suggests that the Village was beginning to experience the ills of overcrowding that haunted much of the city to the south. In 1835 fire destroyed houses that sheltered forty-one families and were described as “filthy, overcrowded, and disease breeding.” Villagers petitioned for a park on the site and in 1837 the city created Christopher Park (renamed Greenwich Park in 1856) through condemnation. Not far away the Northern Dispensary, a medical institute founded in 1827 to treat the poor living outside Lower Manhattan, had six years earlier erected a two-story triangular brick building. The need for this clinic, which still stands, is dramatically reflected by the fact that in its first year of operation, 3,296 patients were treated.

Often called “the year of the riots,” 1834 marks the beginning of a new social consciousness among New Yorkers. As Daniel Walkowitz chronicles elsewhere in this volume, stonemasons rioted in Washington Square to protest the use of Sing Sing prisoners to cut the stone for the new buildings of New York University. Greenwich Village also honored one of the leaders of the abolition riots of that year by naming a street after Sidney Howard Gay, a New York lawyer and editor of the Anti-Slavery Standard. Gay Street had been opened a year earlier to connect Christopher Street and Waverley Place.

The growing social consciousness manifested in these events is hardly surprising. Artisans comprised a significant portion of the Village’s population and were among the most politically active groups of the era. A survey
of 162 residents of Christopher Street in Longworth's American Almanac of 1835–1836, for instance, underlines the increasing importance of the building trades. Eighteen carpenters, eight masons, three stonemasons, one turner, and one sawyer resided on the street. The number of Christopher Street residents working in the food services and the garment industry also continued to grow. The trend toward multiple housing continued: Forty-two of the ninety-four buildings surveyed in the Almanac contained multiple-dwelling units, and the area east of Fourth Street that had previously been predominantly single-family residences contained at least fifteen multiple dwellings.

Between 1840 and 1865 Christopher Street became increasingly commercialized, providing a service spine for the residential community located on its surrounding side streets. The reestablishment of the Hoboken Ferry at the foot of Christopher Street in 1841 prompted commercial interests to cluster near the riverfront: In 1845 a sailmaker's factory stood next to the Christopher Street Oyster Market, and in the next decade grocers, bakers, and blacksmiths all set up shop next to grain and feed warehouses, cigar dealers, and alehouses.

Two new trades were developing along the waterfront end of the street in the 1840s: an increasing number of residents (four in total) were now involved in the tobacco trade and a number of others found employment in shipping and dock activity. Christopher Street was home not only to a sea captain and numerous boatmen and seamen but also to a sailmaker, a ship carpenter, a boat builder, a ship joiner, a dockage man, and a wharfinger.

By 1860 the Hotel Christopher, known as the Great Eastern Hotel, was erected across from the ferry wharf. An ice company, a coal yard, a slaughterhouse, and several saloons joined the proprietors noted above, creating a hub of commercial activity at the western end of the street.

By the mid-1840s the commercial and manufacturing nature of Christopher Street was well established. The number of shopkeepers continued to rise and more and more structures that were once strictly residential now contained retail establishments. Two adjacent four-story buildings—Numbers 92 and 94—were representative of this shift toward commercial activity. Although built during the 1840s as traditional single-family houses, the two were exceptional because their original design included stores on the ground floor. All along Christopher Street, existing structures began to alter their first stories to include the addition of storefronts. In the city directory for 1845–1846, specific mention is made of stores, among them a milk store, a fruit store, a flour and feed store, and a toy store.

Other occupants listing Christopher Street as their business address included dressmakers, hairdressers, shoemakers, blacksmiths, tailors, tobacconists, and a clockmaker. The ranks of the cartmen had also expanded and now included such subcategories as hucksters, porters, night scavengers,
CHRISTINE BOYER

express carriers, and a paper carrier. The dry-goods and grocery trade continued to expand: fifteen grocers; five porters; five bakers; five flour, feed, grain, or dry-goods merchants; two provisioners; and two butchers lived on the street. The garment industry was also represented in growing numbers. Simultaneously the presence of those employed in the building trades began to show both an increasing degree of specialization and a decline as the Manhattan building line pushed northward. Only one mahogany sawyer, one housepainter, one slater, and two whitewashers lived on the street in 1845.

The city directory of 1845–1846 also marks the first time that most of the residents along Christopher Street located their place of employment outside the immediate neighborhood. No doubt this shift resulted from the development of the omnibus, stagecoach, and horsecar system, which gave employees the freedom to live at a greater distance from their place of work. It was also an indication of the growing middle-class population that inhabited Christopher Street. As this class expanded, professionals began to find a place on the street. The architect J. B. Snook resided there in the 1840s and 1850s, and doctors, lawyers, accountants, brokers, and clerks began to fill out the professional profile.

At the same time the number of residents employed in the carriage trade rose. Since the Manhattan building line in the early 1850s lay somewhere between Fourteenth and Twenty-third streets, the numerous smiths, stage drivers, harness providers, saddlers, wheelwrights, coachmakers, and stage-hands residing on Christopher Street no doubt reflected the early beginnings of the retail district that would center around Union Square and cater to the residential districts just to its north. Irow's New York City Directory of 1860 recorded a decline in the number of cartmen living on Christopher Street, undoubtedly in response to the advance of the Manhattan building line beyond Twenty-third Street. The year 1860 also marked the moment when professionals disappeared and minor specialization spread to the lower rungs of the economic ladder.

The growth of commercialization and the resulting changes in the demographics of Christopher Street between 1845 and 1860 were mirrored by a significant change in the nature of residential housing. Although several new single-family residences were built along the street in the 1840s and 1850s, the construction of the Village's first tenement—Number 98—in 1856 by Samuel Taylor would dramatically change the character of the neighborhood. By reducing the height of each floor of this plain, six-story brick building, Taylor created apartments that, while crowded and dark, obtained a greater return on his investment. More tenements soon began to replace the two- and three-story town houses along Christopher Street. The transition from country resort to commercial city neighborhood was completed in 1865 when the old Warren mansion, which had been maintained

***

44
as a country home by Abraham Van Nest from the time he purchased it in 1819 until his death in 1864, was demolished. The site and its surrounding grounds were replaced by the rows of town houses that stand there today. As the fashionable city began to stretch northward above Twenty-third Street, the profile of Christopher Street would change once again.

**IMMIGRANTS, TENEMENTS, AND TRAINS: 1865–1910**

After the Civil War, New York City’s industrial base expanded and its population grew. By 1890 the city’s population numbered 1.5 million. The retail center, called Ladies’ Mile, moved into the blocks around Union Square and up the spine of Broadway to Twenty-third Street. Luxurious residences began to fill in the empty lots along Fifth Avenue above Twenty-third Street.

Christopher Street became part of a relatively quiet residential community. A report of the Council of Hygiene and Public Health, which had been formed to investigate the sanitary and living conditions in the city, noted in 1865 that Greenwich Village west of Sixth Avenue between Houston and Fourteenth streets was generally a neighborhood containing two-and-one-half- to three-story brick structures. More than 80 percent of these, or 2,850, were single-family houses. The remainder were private residences converted to lodge two or three families. In addition to these conversions, a few four- to five-story tenement houses were built along Christopher Street before the depression of 1873 froze all real estate activity in New York for nearly two decades.

The ethnic diversity of Christopher Street increased markedly during the 1870s. Although forty-six residents had identifiable English surnames, twenty-six had Irish, and eighteen had German. Many of these residents were employed in the sawmills, stone yards, breweries, and docks of nearby West Street. Others were shopkeepers whose enterprises were located on nearby Village streets, or clerks who worked in large downtown office buildings or the newfangled department stores along Ladies’ Mile. One observer noted that new resident storekeepers “were content to take half a store and live in the rear of it, and to rise up earlier and stay up later than the old Village merchants.”

Reuben May, who located his organ-making shop on Christopher Street in 1879, may have been one of these new storekeepers. Others may have included German saloonkeepers like Becker and Son, Theobald Scherrer, and Frederick Stock, all of whom located their establishments at the western end of the street near the riverfront.
CHRISTINE BOYER

By 1871 a steam-powered elevated railroad had been constructed, with an elaborately simulated "Swiss chalet" station straddling the western end of Christopher and Greenwich streets. Dirty and incredibly noisy, the "el" was a nuisance, and housewives reportedly kept a pile of bricks in their kitchens to hurl at the trains when they passed within a few feet of their windows. Nevertheless it enabled the many clerks and office workers who resided in the West Village to be transported downtown rapidly by avoiding streets congested with trucks and carts that made overland travel a time-consuming affair. The popularity of this unique transportation in the sky, with its speed and efficiency, led in 1878 to the authorization of a competing line with a station located at the eastern end of Christopher Street. Just a few years before, Frederick Withers and Calvert Vaux had designed the colorful Victorian Gothic Jefferson Market Courthouse, with its tall watchtower, adjacent to the site of the new elevated station. These two railroad lines, in combination with the Central Park, North and East River Street railway, which had plied its way along West Street since 1860, and the Metropolitan Crosstown Railway, which traveled along Waverly Place from the East Village to Fourteenth Street, offered Village residents several rapid-transit options.

Although travelers had crossed the Hudson River from the foot of Christopher Street since the end of the eighteenth century, a formal ferry service seems to have been inaugurated only in 1838, after the Hoboken Land Improvement Company acquired the Barclay Street Ferry line. Little is known of the early ferry facilities, although in 1870 it was recorded that six million passengers per year were crossing from Hoboken to Manhattan and landing at either the Christopher or Barclay Street slips. In 1872 the Christopher Street Rail Road Company constructed a horsecar line from the Tenth Street Ferry on the East River, across Eighth Street, past Cooper Union, and along Christopher Street to the Hoboken Ferry. Its car barns and stables occupied the southern block between Washington and West streets, adjacent to the Great Eastern Hotel. The president of the Hoboken Ferry, Edwin Stevens, purchased the New Jersey State Pavilion building from the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition, dismantled and shipped it to Christopher Street, and there had it reconstructed as the Hoboken Ferry Terminal. It was used until 1953 and subsequently demolished. With all this uptown, downtown, and crosstown commuting, it was no wonder that by 1879 ten different billiard and beer saloons could be found along Christopher Street.8

The largest landowners in this area of the Village after 1880 were William H. Beadleston and Ernst Woerz, the proprietors of the Empire Brewery. Their enterprise occupied the entire block between West Tenth, Charles, West, and Washington streets until it was demolished in 1937. Beadleston also began to speculate in real estate and in 1879 constructed a tenement on the corner of Christopher and Washington streets. In the 1880s

* * *

46
STRAIGHT DOWN CHRISTOPHER STREET

New York's population rose in tandem with the city's recovery from the severe economic depression of the previous decade. The arrival of a significant number of Catholic immigrants from Italy, Ireland, and Poland in New York and their subsequent settlement in the West Village led Father John Fitzharris to found St. Veronica's Catholic Church and School on Christopher Street near Greenwich Street in 1887. He celebrated his first mass on Palm Sunday in a renovated stable on Washington Street, while the church, designed by John J. Deery, was still under construction.9

With economic recovery a new cycle of housing construction began in the late 1890s, lasting until just before World War I. Perhaps the greatest alteration to the architectural fabric of the street was the construction, beginning in 1891, of the massive United States Appraisers Warehouse. Designed by Willoughby J. Edbrooke, it is now known as the Federal Archives Building. Although several city politicians and real estate speculators wanted to erect this structure near Bowling Green, the shipping and importing industry wanted an uptown location closer to the Hudson River piers. Consequently, Trinity Church farmland was selected as the site. According to an article of the time, the erection of such a massive and well-designed structure housing dozens of customs inspectors was expected to reverse the "depressed" real estate market in Greenwich Village.10

Although families with English surnames still made up the majority of residents on Christopher Street in 1890–1891, there were nearly as many families with Irish and German names. Within a decade, however, the picture had changed. By 1902 40 percent of the households on the street were of Irish parentage, 24 percent of American, and 16 percent of German.11 Christopher Street's population was increasing as well, with many of the new residents living in large apartment structures that were usually seven stories high and sometimes covered several building lots. These new apartment buildings, often ornamented with a variety of stylistic motifs such as Romanesque Revival arches or fanciful terra-cotta elements, began to replace smaller brick houses along Christopher Street, especially along the blocks between Hudson and Bleecker streets. One tenement erected in 1900 and still standing has the "dumb-bell" floor plan (so named because of the shape of the building) that was mandated by the Tenement House Act of 1879 to allow light and air into every room.

BOHEMIAN TIMES: 1910–1945

By 1910 the Village had become a congested district whose maze of crooked streets were populated by Irish, Germans, Jews, Italians, and sailors as well
as some old “New Yorkers.” In 1904 the Municipal Arts Society proposed widening Christopher Street and extending it on a diagonal all the way to Union Square. Such a thoroughfare, it was thought, would open the Village to the flow of commercial and industrial activity. Even without this scheme, however, manufacturers and wholesale merchants were moving to the West Village to take advantage of cheap land values and low rents. These new developers began to construct warehouses and loft buildings to house the expanding drug, leather, hardware, and ironware industries, as well as printing, publishing, and plumbing establishments.

The Greenwich Village Improvement Society demanded more play space for children, better lighting, paved streets, and the installation of comfort stations. Greenwich Street in 1914, one report claimed, was “dark and dangerous” because the “el” obscured all the electric lights. Furthermore, there was “no record of when [Christopher Street] was last paved, but apparently it was many years ago.”

In 1910 several Village boosters selected “the psychological moment,” when the city’s planned cut-through of Sixth and Seventh avenues was assured, to propose that a new courthouse and law center replicating the Paris Opera House be located on a triangular plot of land formed by Christopher Street, Greenwich Street, and the widened Seventh Avenue. A different approach was taken by reformers who argued that the city, which had demolished three hundred pieces of property for the cut-through of Seventh Avenue and dislocated at least one thousand families, should be charged with rehousing these former Village residents in new low-income structures. Neither of these plans was adopted. Nonetheless, the alterations to Seventh Avenue drastically changed the appearance of the West Village. Three blocks on Christopher Street were plowed through, saving off parts of buildings and offering the rear of some structures a new frontage on the Avenue. This cut-through, plus the construction of the new IRT subway line under Seventh Avenue and Christopher Street, only strengthened the growing division between the eastern and western parts of Christopher Street.

One Village resident “looked into the future and visioned squadrons of trucks racing down a new avenue, bound to and from warehouses. He saw the new subway disgorging thousands. In his jaundiced mind’s eye, he visioned tall factory buildings on the sites of nineteenth century three-story dwellings.” Perhaps in anticipation of these new crowds, developers were busy constructing new six-story apartment houses, and Trinity Corporation announced in 1917 that they would replace 350 houses with modern structures in the Seventh Avenue section of their holdings. In spite of the incursion of warehouses and manufacturing establishments, the residential center of the Village was shifting westward. Furthermore, the conversion of homes into high-class rental apartments near Washington Square inevitably meant that cheaper apartments could be found in the Village near Sheridan Square and Seventh Avenue.
STRAIGHT DOWN CHRISTOPHER STREET

By 1916 the new zoning law heightened still further the distinction between the eastern and western sections of Christopher Street. West of Hudson Street, the waterfront blocks were left without restrictions, thereby permitting any type of building and land use. The Village to the east was a district from which all nuisance industries and large manufacturing establishments were excluded. The dividing line really lay along the new cut-through of Seventh Avenue: To the west, the ground floors of tenement houses were occupied by saloons and stores. These tenements and those on the streets immediately to the north and south were home to Irish longshoremen who crowded around hiring bosses on the waterfront in the early morning hours, at noon, and again at four in the afternoon, hoping to receive a brass check that meant a job unloading ships. The ships’ crews also supported local businesses: In port for four to twelve hours a day, sailors patronized the street's speakeasies, poolrooms, cafés, and boardinghouses. To the east commercial establishments, such as Prohibition-style tearooms, nightclubs, bookstores, clothing shops, and gift stores, became the predominant activity. Two of the more notorious tearooms of the 1920s and 1930s, Romany Marie’s and Bonnie’s Stone Wall, were located on Christopher Street.

By the mid-1920s the expansion of Seventh Avenue, the opening of the subway, and a real estate building boom combined to transform Sheridan Square into the center of the Village and to make Christopher Street into a social and commercial attraction. The growing commercialization of Village activities highlighted the distinction between the Village’s small coterie of bohemians, including their hangers-on, and the surrounding population. In her 1935 book Greenwich Village, historian Caroline Ware separated the residents of the Village into “locals” and “Villagers.” “Locals,” she claimed, were longtime residents located in the West Village and descended from immigrant families who settled there during the last decades of the nineteenth century. They were enthusiastic supporters of improvement schemes such as the Seventh Avenue cut-through, hoping that it would decrease the congestion of Village streets and improve their local businesses. The “Villagers” represented the new wave of sophisticated settlers, and their terrain remained the east side of Seventh Avenue.

On Christopher Street, consequently, there arose a neighborhood of different types. The working-class locals—longshoremen, butchers, saloonkeepers—lived in tenement houses to the west. The well-educated Villagers, a group that included socialists, poets, and writers, resided in high-rise apartments to the east of Seventh Avenue. These two groups shared no common ground, only a basis for suspicions. A Village reporter noted: “Old Irish residents, and to a lesser extent the Germans... hated these strange Bohemians they did not understand. With prohibition, systematic raids were started which were rightly called the Slaughter of the Innocents.” The competition from speakeasies promoted by Italian
racketeers and the frequent raids by Irish and German policemen prompted many tearooms either to sell liquor under "protection" or to close, thereby assuring the economic failure of many of the "Villagers' gathering places.

By the 1930s bohemian Greenwich Village was fading away, for unemployment was rife among both the intellectuals and the locals. Although the neighborhood was being transformed into a sedate community, it continued to expand, largely through the construction of high-rise apartment buildings. On Christopher Street, two of the new apartment buildings rose sixteen stories tall. "Of late years," noted one 1932 account, "Greenwich Village has increased its regular popularity by leaps and bounds as a result of the many beautiful new apartment buildings that have replaced the old rattletrap shacks here, and are bringing in a more circumspect type of resident to the community." But the Great Depression and then World War II soon brought an end to extensive redevelopment. Only one structure was built on Christopher Street between 1933 and 1945.

THE CONTEMPORARY LANDSCAPE OF CHRISTOPHER STREET: 1945–1990

Following World War II, Greenwich Village retained only faint remnants of its reputation as a bohemian enclave. In 1945 one local newspaper claimed that the Village epitomized "short crooked streets . . . tiny antique shops, unusual signs everywhere . . . the last word in modern night clubs . . . [the] suggestion of the quiet of a Paris street here and there." By 1950, however, another local newspaper argued that "in trying to sum up the last seedy stronghold of Bohemia in New York one is forced to turn to the inevitable cliché: Greenwich Village is a state of mind. Once you are under its spell—the tiniest phoniest thinnest spell you can imagine, it is easier to unearth its attractions. When you come to it clinically the task of finding them is monumental."

A shift in the character of the Village was apparent. Christopher Street had been rezoned in 1945, an act that accentuated the division between east and west by forcing all restaurants and industrial uses to move to the west of Seventh Avenue, and leading clothing stores and antique shops to settle to the east. Several Christopher Street tenements were demolished in 1953 to make way for St. Luke's School, and four years later the abandoned ferry terminal was torn down to make way for a new railroad freight depot.

The physical changes in the Village were accompanied by a steady decline in population during the 1940s and 1950s as people moved uptown or

* * *
to the suburbs. By the late 1950s racial antagonism had also developed between the longtime Italian residents and blacks, referred to as "A-trainers," who had become the newest residents of the Village. Organized racketeering, an overabundance of nightclubs, and the presence of a large homosexual community also produced social friction and led to occasional street brawls.

One of the most notable instances of such street violence occurred in 1969. After a raid by plainclothes police at the Stonewall Inn, a Christopher Street bar frequented by homosexuals, many of the two hundred young men expelled from its premises transformed the immediate area into the scene of several protests and riots. On the boarded-up windows of the Stonewall Inn, graffiti called out to SUPPORT GAY POWER and LEGALIZE GAY BARS. Christopher Street quickly became emblematic of the Gay Liberation Movement and a focal point for subsequent marches.

During the early 1970s crime seemed to increase steadily in the Village, as did the traffic from an exceptionally large number of private clubs. To add to the social tensions, a Village report estimated that between fifteen hundred and two thousand homeless men were sheltered in single-room-occupancy hotels like the Greenwich Hotel. The catalyst for public debate over these mounting problems seemed to be the 1972 decision to demolish the Women's House of Detention at the eastern end of Christopher Street. Some Village residents wanted it replaced by the Urban Center of the New School, while many in the gay community wanted it turned into a community center with space allotted to local groups. It eventually became a community garden.

Amid the social tensions another movement was afoot. Buildings like the Northern Dispensary on Christopher Street, which had been labeled "obsolete structures" in 1946, were reevaluated and now called "interesting buildings." This trend gained momentum, and by July 1969 the Landmarks Preservation Commission found that Greenwich Village's architecture, the artistic life within its boundaries, and the sense of history throughout the area were qualities that warranted its designation as a historic district. Impulses similar to the preservationists' also led to concern over the increasingly derelict condition of the Village's waterfront. A 1973 report called for the creation of a Washington Street Special District linking the new residential areas along Washington Street and Westbeth with other residential areas in the Village. Though the district had been zoned for industrial and manufacturing uses, it was proposed that residential and retail uses now be allowed. New construction, it was believed, should be sympathetic to the architectural character and building heights of the surrounding West Village. But most of all the report requested that the waterfront be reserved and improved for recreational purposes.

After thirteen long years of struggle, the West Village Houses, located in...
part at the corner of Christopher and Washington streets, finally opened in 1974. The development of this cluster of five-story cooperative apartments, financed by the Mitchell-Lama middle-income housing program, was initially spearheaded by urban planning critic Jane Jacobs. Many felt that these walk-ups, rather than the proposed urban renewal towers in empty parkland, "would stimulate the neighborliness and preserve the character of the neighborhood by avoiding the cold impersonality fostered by high-rises." But co-op sales never materialized, and in 1975 the city foreclosed on the mortgage and converted the buildings to low-cost rental apartments.

By the 1980s the physical makeup of Christopher Street was relatively stable—stores would come and go as on any commercial strip, while new development seemed a thing of the past. When an architect sought permission to build an apartment house on a parking lot on Christopher Street, the Landmarks Commission rejected his design because it failed to harmonize with the existing streetscape. The only major change to the street in the 1980s was the renovation and recycling of the Federal Archives Building, which, after the prolonged struggle, was converted into co-ops. And so Christopher Street—like the Village of which it is a part—remains, in the words of Paul Goldberger, both "a tranquil escape from the frenzy of the rest of Manhattan . . . [and] a lively alternative to the boredom of suburbia."

* * *

NOTES

1. Van Twiller's bouwery is located on the earliest known survey of Manhattan, the Man- atus Map of 1639, and noted as Bouwery No. 10.
4. There are other Christopher Street residences from this period that still stand: two charming two-and-one-half-story Federal-style houses built by the carpenter Daniel Simonson in 1827, and a three-story town house erected the same year for the whipmaker and congressional representative Peter Sharpe. A two-story brick house was built for Elias Kent in 1828.
STRAIGHT DOWN CHRISTOPHER STREET


*****

53