

When Your Home Has a History

If These Walls Could Talk

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Brad Dickson for The New York Times

By Joanne Kaufman March 2, 2018

When a co-op at the Hotel Des Artistes on West 67th Street became available almost seven years ago, Pamela Johnson and her husband grabbed it up. The one-bedroom duplex “wasn’t large, but it was lovely,” said Ms. Johnson, an anthropologist.

The space had double-height windows, a terrace and greenhouse. But it also had quite a history as Ms. Johnson learned when the purchase neared completion — Rudolph Valentino lived there in the early 1920s.

The silent film star known as the Latin Lover got himself into a bind when he injudiciously tied the knot: Even though the divorce from his first wife, the actress Jean Acker, had yet to be finalized, Valentino went and married Natacha Rambova, a costume designer. Cue the bigamy trial. Cue the breathless, scandalized newspaper coverage. (All this while he was living in what is now Ms. Johnson’s apartment.)

Because the New York area has long been rich in high-profile residents it probably wouldn't be much of a surprise to learn that the property you're about to buy or rent was once the home of a celebrity (or perhaps a boldface name simply slept there.)

Real estate brokers often try to gin up interest in a listing by mentioning, and mentioning again, the previous residents or the big-deal event that occurred on site. And maybe the "touched by greatness" aspect of the deal is what goaded you to sign the lease or the deed in the first place.

But there's a particular thrill about discovering your home's storied history *after* you take possession, something akin to stumbling on a hidden room. "It gives you bragging rights at a party and may help when it comes time to sell," said Jonathan Miller, the president of the real estate appraisal firm Miller Samuel. "But I don't see it as a market driver. It's more of a marketing tool."

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One intriguing feature of the apartment at Hotel des Artistes had escaped the notice of Ms. Johnson on her pre-purchase visits to the Upper West Side building. But before moving out, the seller led her upstairs and pointed to the back of a closet where there was a narrow framed slit closed off by a square of painted plywood.

During Valentino's residency, the skinny opening (a mere 15 inches) was a door to the neighboring apartment that allowed Rambova, reportedly staying down the block with her aunt, to come and go undetected.



Left, Pamela Johnson, an anthropologist, and her husband's apartment at Hotel des Artistes. Right, the silent film star Rudolph Valentino with his dog.

From left, Brad Dickson for The New York Times; Bettmann, via Getty Images

“I don’t know who lived next door at the time or how Natacha got access to that apartment, but she was able to go straight through into Valentino’s bedroom,” Ms. Johnson said.

Did Washington Irving Sleep Here?

The bronze plaque with the words “This house was once the home of Washington Irving” had always intrigued Dan Critchett when he walked past 122 East 17th Street (it has the alternate address 49 Irving Place), a three-story brick Italianate-style townhouse and former single-family residence that has been cut up into rental apartments.

Four years ago, an alcove studio on the parlor floor became available, “and I thought it was cool,” said Mr. Critchett, 61, a real estate agent at Stribling and Associates. “I thought, ‘This is a historic house and it will be something fun to tell

my friends.’ ”

Something fun, sure, but, as it turned out, pure fiction.

The author of “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” and “Rip Van Winkle” apparently never crossed the threshold, according to a New York Times Streetscapes column from 1994

(<https://www.nytimes.com/1994/03/13/realestate/streetscapes-washington-irving-house-why-legend-irving-place-but-myth.html>) with the headline: “The ‘Washington Irving’ House; Why the Legend of Irving Place Is but a Myth.”

Mr. Critchett doesn’t know how long the plaque has been affixed to the building; who put it there is another mystery. But after settling in, he learned that he had plenty to dine out on without an assist from the creator of the headless horseman. The townhouse had once been the residence of Elsie de Wolfe, often called America’s first interior decorator, and her companion, Elisabeth Marbury, a literary agent and theater producer whose clients included Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw. And there is reason to believe that Sarah Bernhardt, the architect Stanford White and assorted Astors, Morgans and Vanderbilts, might have turned up at the couple’s Sunday salons.

“I’m getting a lot of mileage telling people about the house,” said Mr. Critchett, who lives in what was once the de Wolfe-Marbury living room.

Learning of a house’s past can turn residents into amateur historians and scholars. Ms. Johnson, for instance, began hunting for pictures of Rambova and Valentino, unearthing several of the pair doing the tango, and is planning an evening of Valentino movies for residents at the Hotel des Artistes some time next year. For his part, Mr. Critchett read “Ladies and Not-So-Gentle Women” a group biography of, among others, de Wolfe and Marbury, as well as de Wolfe’s design book “The House in Good Taste.”

“There was a chapter on this house because it was her home,” Mr. Critchett said. “My sofa is where her writing table was. She looked out the same windows I look out. And I imagine people of that era arriving for grand dinner parties here and

looking at Elsie's décor."

Home to an Impresario and a Social Activist

Jessica and Robert Nacheman are, "old home people," said Ms. Nacheman, 63, a lawyer. When they bought a wood-fronted townhouse at 312 East 53rd Street in 2012, they knew it had a past — after all it was built in 1866 — but weren't clear on the specifics. But as they began making plans for the property's restoration, they learned that Lincoln Kirstein, the founder, with George Balanchine, of New York City Ballet, had lived there in the 1920s and that the society hostess, artist and social activist Muriel Draper lived there in the 1930s.

"I think a historical perspective on a house and a recognition of previous residents can bring a property to life," Ms. Nacheman said. "You see the house through the people who once lived there and who live there now. It's like time-lapse photography."

Ms. Nacheman said she did wonder if Balanchine ever came over to visit Kirstein, then realized that the men's association began after Kirstein left the house. "My husband and I are interested in ballet," she said, "but I don't think knowing that Kirstein lived there made us more interested. We didn't run out and buy a season subscription."

But Muriel Draper was another thing. "I find the thought of her more interesting than Lincoln Kirstein maybe doing some pirouettes in the living room," Ms. Nacheman said. "She would often have famous people over and they would sit in the parlor and have discussions. That's fascinating to me."

Fascination of a different kind would characterize Ms. Nacheman's reaction to Draper's sense of style. "I've seen one or two pictures of how Muriel decorated the house," Ms. Nacheman said. "And I just think to myself, 'If she saw it now, thank God, she wouldn't recognize it.'"

Partying With Mr. Showmanship

When she was a little girl, Karen Grava recalls, she watched “The Liberace Show” with her grandmother “because my grandmother loved Liberace,” said Ms. Grava, the director of media relations at the University of New Haven who — sorry, Granny — was decidedly lukewarm about the flamboyant pianist.

Fast forward to 2003 when Ms. Grava and her husband, Robert Luby, a retired accountant, bought a renovated 1924 neocolonial house in Wallingford, Conn. Some time after the couple moved in, Ms. Grava was standing in the front yard when the former town clerk happened by.

The property had been the site of many famous parties, she told Ms. Grava, and Liberace had played at one of them. That’s because a previous owner of the house, one Thomas E. Conheady, also owned a local tavern that presented famous performers of the day.

Left, the pianist Liberace; right, Karen Grava and her husband’s neocolonial house in Wallingford, Conn. From left, Herbert Dorfman/Corbis, via Getty Images; Brad Dickson for The New York Times

While Ms. Grava does own a few candelabras (though none as elaborate as those beloved by the man known as “Mr. Showmanship”), she has no Liberace records and — bank on it — no plans to buy any. Still, “I think it makes my husband and me feel proud to live here,” she said. “If we ever do put the property on the market, we’ll definitely mention it to prospective buyers. It’s an intriguing fact, and it adds character to the house.”

In the Presence of Lady Day

Arnold Steinhardt was the first violinist of the famed Guarneri String Quartet from its founding in 1964 until its dissolution in 2009, and the group frequently rehearsed in the expansive living room of Mr. Steinhardt's apartment on the Upper West Side.

"I often thought that if the walls could talk and play back some of the wonderful music by Mozart and Beethoven and Bartok and Schumann what a wonderful thing it would be," said Mr. Steinhardt, 80, a professor at Bard College, the Colburn School and the Curtis Institute of Music. "But of course it's a fantasy. The walls can't talk."

Oh, but they can. They can.

Two and a half years ago, Nan Newton, a Steinhardt family friend, and her husband, Dave Grusin, a pianist and composer, had dinner with Lorraine Feather, a jazz singer and lyricist with whom Mr. Grusin had just finished a recording project.

It was a first meeting for the two women, and Ms. Newton was interested to learn that Ms. Feather, a longtime resident of the West Coast, had spent her early years in New York.

Oh, really, where?

On the Upper West Side.

Where?

On 106th and Riverside.

Well, what a coincidence: Ms. Newton had good friends who lived on 106th and Riverside. What building?

340 Riverside.

Amazing. That's just where her friends the Steinhardts live. What apartment?

11A.

"And Nan almost fell off her chair because that's our apartment," Mr. Steinhardt recalled.

An animated email exchange between current and past resident ensued, and Ms. Feather was invited over for a visit. "She stood in the foyer and said, 'Oh, my gosh, what went ON in this living room.'"

"And I said, 'WHAT went on in this living room?'" Mr. Steinhardt said.

Ms. Feather began to tell of jam sessions with Dizzy Gillespie and Bobby Short, and of her godmother Billie Holiday performing several numbers there in November of 1956, a week after her two sold-out "Lady Sings the Blues" concerts at Carnegie Hall — and 15 years before Mr. Steinhardt and his wife, Dorothea von Haefen, moved into the building.

"I said, 'Billie Holiday sang in OUR living room?' You can imagine what a strange and wonderful feeling it was," Mr. Steinhardt said. But wait, there was more. Ms. Feather mentioned that her father, the jazz critic Leonard Feather (<https://www.nytimes.com/1994/09/24/obituaries/leonard-feather-80-composer-and-the-dean-of-jazz-critics.html>), had made recordings of the sessions, and offered to send Mr. Steinhardt a link. Yes, please.

Billie Holiday, performing in 1947 at Club Downbeat in Manhattan. William Gottlieb/Redferns

“My wife and I sat in our living room and listened to Billie Holiday singing in our living room,” he said. “ ‘Good Morning, Heartache,’ ‘Miss Brown to You.’ I mean it was surreal. When I think about it I get goose bumps.”


Mr. Steinhardt and his wife courted to Billie Holiday, he said. “I tell my students: If you want a great pianist who communicates something special, it’s Arthur Rubinstein; a great cellist, Pablo Casals,” he continued. “But if you want to know about great art and communication in jazz, it’s Billie Holiday because when she sings, she’s singing about the meaning of life, basically.”

After 47 years, the Steinhardts are moving to Santa Fe; the prospective residents of 11A, which is now in contract, won’t be at all surprised about what happened in the living room on a special fall night in 1956. Lady Day’s concertizing was played up in the [listing \(https://www.corcoran.com/nyc/listings/display/5317357\)](https://www.corcoran.com/nyc/listings/display/5317357), and, according to Dan Douglas, a Corcoran Group associate broker, it was the story of that special night that drew the new owners to take a look at the apartment in the first place.

Mr. Steinhardt couldn’t be more pleased. “I feel the same way about my apartment as I do about my 1785 violin that was made by a Cremonese master,” he said. “I wanted it to go to someone who would appreciate it.”

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A version of this article appears in print on March 4, 2018, on Page RE1 of the New York edition with the headline: Fame Lived and Played Here. Order Reprints (<http://www.nytreprints.com/>) | Today's Paper (<http://www.nytimes.com/pages/todayspaper/index.html>) | Subscribe (<https://www.nytimes.com/subscriptions/Multiproduct/lp8HYKU.html?campaignId=48JQY>)

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