"Nasty Holes" and New Hotels: Public Accommodations in Early New York City

Michael Albert Blaakman

College of William and Mary

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses

Part of the History Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses/285

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
“Nasty Holes” and New Hotels: Public Accommodations in Early New York City

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelors of Arts with Honors in History from the College of William and Mary in Virginia,

by

Michael Albert Blaakman

Accepted for __________________________________ _
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

________________________________________
Camille Wells, Director

________________________________________
David L. Holmes

________________________________________
Carol Sheriff

Williamsburg, Virginia
May 4, 2009
Contents

Figures iii

Acknowledgements iv

Introduction 1

Chapter One Merchants and Mechanicks: Tavern Culture in Eighteenth-Century New York 11

Chapter Two “For Salubrity and Prospect”: Aesthetic, Culture, and Governance in New York’s First Hotels 35

Chapter Three “Nurseries of intemperance, disorder and profligacy”: The Humane Society and New York’s Lower-Class Taverns 68

Conclusion 85

Bibliography 96
Figures

1. A 1774 broadside organizing Revolutionary sentiment in New York 12
2. Plan of the City of New York, 1776 15
3. The Shakespeare Tavern, Old Taverns of New York 26
4. Fraunces Tavern in 1771 26
5. The long room at Fraunces Tavern, History of the City of New York 27
6. Plan of the City of New York, 1808 38
7. The Tontine Coffee House in 1820 42
8. The City Hotel in 1831 43
9. The Washington Hotel in 1837 46
10. Tammany Hall in 1830 46
11. Learning to Smoke and Drink Grog 69
12. A Moral and Physical Thermometer, An Inquiry into the Effects of Spirituous Liquors 77
Acknowledgements

Debt is not always a bad thing. In fact, one person’s debt is another’s investment. Obligations unfulfilled, favors owed, and arrears unpaid, therefore, function to bind us to each other. Adopted New Yorker and taverngoer Alexander Hamilton recognized as much when, in his 1790 “First Report on the Public Credit,” he asserted that the federal assumption of state war debts would vest creditors with an interest in the success of the new nation. Furthermore, he noted, a national debt—a shared obligation—would “cement more closely the union of the States.”

It is this adhesive property of debt that makes me glad to have amassed so much of it while writing this thesis and through the rest of my time in college. As I face the prospect of leaving William and Mary, I am comforted by the thought that my unbalanced ledger will help me to maintain cherished friendships with professors and fellow students in the years to come. The debts outlined here, I hope, will cement us more closely.

First and foremost, I am indebted to my parents, Marcus and Laurene Blaakman, for always encouraging me to pursue whatever I wanted, and for working tirelessly to let me study at a place where I could do precisely that.

I am indebted to the dozens of friends and fellow students who, through their own passions, have inspired me to find mine. I’ll never forget the mirth and grog we shared in the taverns and coffeehouses of our own. I owe especially large sums to the members of the William and Mary Choir, to Antonio M. Elias, to Katy K. Lasdow, and to David C. Williard.

Finally, I am indebted to the members of my honors committee—Professors David L. Holmes, Carol Sheriff, and Camille Wells—three professors who, each in their own way, have shown me the promise of academic inquiry and the joys of learning. They have changed my life by inspiring me to follow in their footsteps, and I will forever strive to emulate their brilliant examples as teachers and historians.

Thank you to all. I look forward to honoring these debts.
Introduction

To colonial Americans, the word “hotel” sounded vaguely French. It carried no meaning, other than to those few francophone colonists who would have understood the word’s connotation as the residence of a French gentleman. By 1775, however, the word had appeared in an English dictionary as a synonym for “inn” and “hostel.” And by 1800, as the new American nation was coming to stand on its own political and cultural feet, an American dictionary defined “hotel” as “a very genteel house for lodging.”¹ This semantic shift bears significance. It represents a cultural transition rendered not only in print but also in bricks, stone, and timber. And it has a lot to tell us about American society and culture from the 1770s to 1820, before the social and ideological upheavals of the industrial and market revolutions.

In terms of both lodging and entertainment, hotels were the evolutionary successor to early American taverns. Like taverns, they hosted the sleeping traveler but also the local drinker. Both building types were venues for balls, concerts, dinners, and other events. The hotel, however, infused these events with a different meaning and a new significance. What was that new meaning? How did hotels differ from taverns in the way they framed and shaped daily life? What do these buildings indicate about the classes of people who built and used them? How did perceptions of taverns change as these two forms of public houses began to diverge? Above all, how did public accommodations fit within and affect culture, society, and politics more broadly? This

¹ John Ash, The new and complete dictionary of the English language (London, 1775), s.v. “hostel”; John Elliott, A selected, pronouncing and accented dictionary . . . . Being an abridgement of the most useful dictionaries now extant; together with the addition of a number of words now in vogue not found in any dictionary . . . for the use of schools in America (Suffield, CT, 1800), s.v. “hotel.”
thesis seeks to answer those questions and, in the process, to offer some new commentary about early America.

A comprehensive and nuanced analysis of these historical questions requires a local focus. Therefore I have chosen to situate this study of taverns and the emergence of hotels in early New York City. During the first decades of the American republic, New York grew to become the nation’s largest city. Because it served as a political, economic, and arguably cultural capital, early Americans left behind many fine sources—particularly newspapers and travel diaries—about this burgeoning metropolis. An examination of New York alone allows a heretofore unattained depth of understanding of the mechanism through which hotels emerged as new businesses and public spaces, and of their role in society and politics at large.

This study draws upon a rich but incomplete body of scholarship. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, anecdotal historians and antiquarians were the first to consider taverns and hotels as objects of history. To these writers, however, public houses represented the “lighter side of urban living”—quaint diversions with little implication for politics or society at large. Gilt-edged histories of old-time New York describe taverns and hotels as a refuge from politics and daily life rather than as an integral component of them. This approach to public accommodations precludes any useful analysis of their role in symbolizing and shaping society.²

More recently, a number of social and cultural historians have focused their scholarship on public accommodations. David Conroy and Peter Thompson have offered studies of eighteenth-century taverns in Massachusetts and Philadelphia, respectively. Conroy examines Massachusetts taverns as venues for political discourse between commoners, clergy, and the elite, despite early attempts by the Puritan government to restrict tavern activity. The tavern became intricately entwined with local politics as tavern regulation became a political issue, as office seekers campaigned within the tavern, and as taverns became centers of information in an age of increasing print but incomplete literacy. Conroy concludes that eighteenth-century taverns were a space for negotiating and challenging social and political hierarchies, where traditional systems of deference were sometimes bent or disregarded as patrons “resisted, initiated, and addressed changes within their society.”

Thompson’s Philadelphia taverns represented the same kind of unrestricted public space early in the eighteenth century, when “tavern talk” created a forum for political exchange between the governors and the governed. But after midcentury, he contends, Philadelphia taverns began to stratify. Amid the egalitarian rhetoric of the Revolution, early Philadelphians paradoxically segregated themselves along political lines, ethnic divisions, and boundaries of class and status.

---


Building upon Conroy’s and Thompson’s studies, Sharon Salinger has pursued a unified portrayal of public houses in early British America. Drawing evidence from New Hampshire to Georgia, she sees taverns as essentially “exclusionary” spaces. Though taverngoers may have been a heterogeneous set, they divided themselves into homogenous assemblies. That is, the populace and the elite sometimes coexisted within one tavern, but rarely interacted. In proximity to the lesser sorts, elites formed exclusive clubs and associations within the tavern space, reinforcing their positions atop colonial society. Salinger chronicles the many (usually failed) attempts by colonial authorities to restrict any tavern activity that they found threatening to social order—specifically, the sale of liquor to Indians, slaves, free blacks, women, apprentices, and sailors. As Salinger contends, early American taverns reflected the nature of the society that surrounded them—one that “maintained segregation in public by race, gender, and class.”

Conroy, Thompson, and Salinger each hint at the emergence of hotels in their epilogues, suggesting the historical importance of this shift but placing it beyond the purview of their own narratives. More recently, Andrew K. Sandoval-Strausz has followed their lead by chronicling the history of the American hotel from the late eighteenth century to the present day. On the whole, Sandoval-Strausz envisions the hotel as “a material manifestation of cultural tolerance, a significant episode in the development of the modern idea of a pluralistic, cosmopolitan society.” While pursuing breadth of scholarship, however, Sandoval-Strausz sacrifices complexity of understanding. His first chapter, for example, attributes the emergence of hotels in the

---

1790s largely to the fact that it “made perfect economic sense . . . in an age of expanding market capitalism,” while neglecting to consider that many scholars date the emergence of American capitalism to the 1820s or later. Capitalism certainly influenced the development of the hotel through the nineteenth century, but it cannot explain the emergence of an institution and architectural form that preceded it. Sometimes Sandoval-Strausz also reduces concepts which merit the attention of local specificity—complex ideologies, class distinctions, and historical transitions—to static monoliths stretched (often too far) across a nationwide field of vision. A local focus allows me to pursue such nuance of interpretation within an intricate historiographical context.

That scholarly context is the product of a generation of historians who devoted their efforts to illuminating all aspects of New York’s past. Since the advent of the New (now old) Social History, writers such as Paul Giljie, Christine Stansell, Sean Wilentz, and others have worked in tandem and in response to each other to capture the stories of early New Yorkers of all sorts. While these historians have studied many aspects of the city from various theoretical and disciplinary perspectives, they have largely neglected its cultural institutions—especially its public accommodations, which are often noted in passing but never examined. To their vast body of scholarship I will contribute my own ideas about taverns and hotels.

---


8 Elizabeth S. Blackmar, Manhattan for Rent, 1785-1850 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); Paul A. Giljie, The Road to Mobocracy: Popular Disorder in New York
More broadly, this thesis will intersect with several important works of cultural history that have emerged during the last two decades. In the early 1990s, Richard Bushman reshaped the study of cultural history by bridging the gap between archival research and material culture. His synthesis of two previously distinct fields illustrates the cultural evolution of early America as a process of “refinement” through which “Americans began to live in style.” With the acuity of a curator and the farsightedness of an historian, Bushman describes the ways in which people altered their bodies, their minds, their actions, and their surroundings to create and display rank and status. Refinement was a process that created gentility and reinforced the deferential authority of a new American elite. In the nineteenth century, Bushman contends, democratization, industrialization, and commodification diffused the culture of refinement among a new American middle class. In time, mass-produced objects of gentility became markers of middle-class respectability. In contrast to the public, performative nature of eighteenth-century refinement, nineteenth-century respectability was intensely domestic.

Dell Upton has recently reinterpreted some of the same cultural processes. Upton describes the many ways by which urban life and spaces shaped personal identity and republican ideology between the Revolution and the Civil War. Upton’s analysis of early American cities as cultural compositions provides a new opportunity to understand the

---

City, 1763-1834 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987); Raymond A. Mohl, Poverty in New York, 1783-1825 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); Christine Stansell, City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860 (New York: Knopf, 1986); Wilentz, Chants Democratic. This work has recently been synthesized in Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace’s immense but eminently useful Gotham. I will cite their tome infrequently, but owe it a debt of gratitude for helping me to make sense of a vast body of disparate scholarship. Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

hotel in a different way—not as an isolated cultural artifact, but as part of an urban whole. His book devotes substantial attention to “large-scale projects for developing, embellishing, and reordering American cities,” but he neglects to discuss hotels, focusing instead on structures such as office buildings, retail arcades, and penitentiaries.¹⁰

In October, 2008, Michael Meranze proposed a “refocusing” of the study of early American cultural history. Following a 2007 workshop, “The Cultural History of Eighteenth-Century America,” Meranze concluded that the field has not yet become a fully independent mode of historical inquiry. Despite the many valuable studies which have emerged from two decades of scholarship, cultural history remains “a supplemental tool” for understanding problems that arise from more clearly defined fields such as political, economic, or religious history. According to Meranze, the problem with cultural history stems from a “diffuse, unstable, and ultimately disabling notion of culture.” For guidance, he returns to the eighteenth-century definition of “culture,” given by one 1755 dictionary as “the act of cultivation; the act of tilling the ground; tillage.” Culture was an active process that legitimated the right to govern, says Meranze—a “technique of growth and direction.” Meranze therefore urges cultural historians to understand the cultural not as an alternative to the political, but rather to envision the two frameworks as critically conjoined. He strives for a new “history of culture as governance” that “combines culture, politics, and power in a new configuration.” In an effort to join the most current directions of cultural history, this thesis pursues Meranze’s scholarly refocusing.¹¹

Drawing upon these disparate themes and studies, I reexamine the primary evidence that provides glimpses of taverns and hotels in early New York. Though early Americans left behind many descriptions of New York and its people, few documents describe tavern and hotel culture. Rather, the world of public houses must be reconstructed mostly through small bits of information gleaned from newspaper ads, travel diaries, legislation, and visual sources.

Synthesizing this evidence, I argue that wealthy New Yorkers used taverns and hotels to try to advance their own vision for society. As important public spaces in a city whose explosive growth and chaotic daily life proceeded beyond anyone’s control, public accommodations became a tool for elites to control their neighbors and to shape their city. Paternalist New Yorkers attempted to restrict the activity of lower-class taverns while cultivating themselves within exclusive taverns and coffee houses. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the hotel emerged through an evolutionary process. At first simply a new moniker, and eventually an architectural form and business model distinct from the tavern, the hotel reflected elite desires to cling to traditional social structures while simultaneously improving their new nation. Hotels thus embodied a central paradox of elite American ideology in the years of the early republic: a backwards-looking social conservatism accompanied a sense of national progress. After the egalitarianism of popular Revolutionary mobilization, wealthy New Yorkers manipulated cultural institutions, public spaces, and the city as a whole in order to preserve the old social order that legitimated their claim to governance.

Chapter One will demonstrate the ways in which elites shaped tavern culture according to an existing social hierarchy, allowing them to further cultivate themselves
while controlling others. Different taverns appealed to specific clientele, forming a spectrum from the mean to the elegant. Taverns thus functioned as community centers for various sectors of the New York population, where individual and group identities were reinforced among like-minded company. Hotels, then, emerged from an eighteenth-century tavern culture that was already stratified along hierarchies of culture and status.

Chapter Two will demonstrate the emergence of hotels through first a semantic and then an architectural transition. It will focus specifically on how hotels and the events that occurred within them reflected and were shaped by intertwined concepts of health, morality, and republican ideology. Hotels embodied the paradoxical desires of New York’s upper social orders to shape local and national progress within the conservative framework of a social status quo. This method of power is especially evident in the ways that New York’s first hotels affected the nature of political involvement, serving to buttress elite control of the political process.

Chapter Three will examine the opposite end of the spectrum of public accommodations. While attempting to further illuminate the actions and mindset of New York’s elite, I will describe how republican ideology, health, and morality reshaped perceptions of the lower-class tavern in the early republic. As wealthy New Yorkers restructured the context in which they drank and socialized, they simultaneously sought to control the leisure habits of their lower-class neighbors. In fact, one association of wealthy citizens—the Humane Society of the City of New York—launched an anti-tavern movement in 1810, attempting to harness their own power to preserve a republican vision that they feared was faltering. Like hotels, the movement was at once conservative and forward-looking, attempting to preserve a hierarchical order while simultaneously
shaping the new United States into the pinnacle of civilization. This discussion will lead us outside of the taverns and hotels themselves, and into the minds of elite New Yorkers. The underlying focus, however, will remain the importance of public accommodations to exertions of power and broader political and social history.

To conclude this thesis, I will reflect upon the intersection of the history of public accommodations and the work of two modern philosophers: Jürgen Habermas and Michel Foucault. This discussion will consider the structures and methods of power that permeated public accommodations between the 1770s and 1820, in turn emphasizing the ways that tavern and hotel culture affected politics and society at large. It will consider both the liberating and oppressive aspects of the public sphere and public spaces—the ways that tavern and hotel culture could be at once conservative and progressive. And it will attempt to reconcile the two philosophies by considering the ways that liberation can mean oppression for some, and that oppression can mean liberation for others.

Despite my disagreements with many aspects of his history, I do agree with Andrew Sandoval-Strausz about the importance of studying hotels and the taverns that preceded them. “Complex cultural artifacts like hotels are more than just building types that exist in the physical world,” he states. “They are also expressions of human relationships, exemplars of ideologies, and scenes of social conflict.”\(^\text{12}\) So I turn now to discuss these dynamic buildings and the multifarious meanings they embodied.

Chapter One

Merchants and Mechanicks: 
Tavern Culture in Eighteenth-Century New York

During the third week of May, 1774, a broadside was tacked to doors throughout New York and distributed among the city’s noisy streets (figure 1).\(^1\) Emblazoned both across the top and again further down the page in the printer’s largest typeface, the words “To the Public” caught the eyes of passersby. The flyer advertised two meetings in separate taverns to address “the late extraordinary and very alarming Advices received from England”—the Intolerable Acts lately passed by the British Parliament. These meetings gave rise to the New York Committee of Correspondence, which sent the colony’s delegation to the first Continental Congress and helped to fan smoldering revolutionary sentiment into active, blazing resistance during the mid-1770s.

Perhaps ironically, while attempting to forward a cause grounded in egalitarian rhetoric and characterized by a sensed unity of purpose, the broadside separately addressed two audiences that were distinguished by clear boundaries of social class. The top of the sheet noted that the merchants of the city, a wealthy and distinguished cohort, had already met at the elegant Fraunces Tavern. They were invited to reconvene several days later at the Exchange Coffee House, another resort of the elite. The bottom of the sheet implored “Mechanicks” of the city—a more plebeian and radical crowd of artisans and other middling sorts\(^2\)—to meet at Edward Bardin’s tavern, “now known by the name

---

\(^1\) Broadside, “To the Public. AN Advertisement having appeared at the Coffee-House . . . .” New York, May 18, 1774.

\(^2\) Stuart Blumin asserts that, when used by elites, the word “mechanic” blurred the distinction between skilled and unskilled laborers. The term was binary; it allowed for no further distinction than “elite” and everyone else, thus identifying middling sorts more
explicitly with the poor than with the rich. When artisans themselves used the term “mechanic,” they intended to distinguish between skilled craftsmen and unskilled laborers. Stuart M. Blumin, *Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 30-38. In the case of this broadside, I believe the tone implies elite authorship, referring in the top portion to “the Inhabitants of this City and County,” and in the bottom portion to “themselves and their country.”
of Mechanick-Hall.” Both groups were to convene for the same purpose, but they were not to meet together.³

As clearly and deliberately as type arranged across a printer’s press, the broadside demonstrates not only that eighteenth-century New Yorkers were well-attuned to class differences, but also that those differences extended from their occupations and domestic circumstances into the ways they socialized and politicked in public houses. By the mid eighteenth century, New York tavern culture was stratified according to hierarchies of culture and status. Public houses formed a spectrum from the “mean dirty nasty hole” to the “excellent private inn.”⁴ Across this continuum, taverns catered to specific clientele and functioned as community centers for various sectors of the New York population, divided according to occupation and class.

**Society and Social Geography in Eighteenth-Century New York**

Like contemporary cities in early America, New York displayed a wide range of wealth and poverty on the eve of the Revolution. During the second half of the century, wealth became increasingly concentrated in the hands of fewer individuals; by the late 1700s,

---
New York tax records demonstrated an extreme inequality of real and personal property.\(^5\) A healthy Atlantic economy and New York’s success as a port city allowed the rich to become richer, and so the economic, geographic, and cultural divisions of New York grew in magnitude and intensity during the years of the early republic. The city’s prosperity as a whole attracted a flood of migration and immigration; between 1786 and 1800 alone, the population of New York mushroomed from roughly 23,000 to over 60,000.\(^6\) Such rapid development exacerbated the disparity between rich and poor, as seasonal unemployment and unpredictable wage-earning opportunities begot and perpetuated poverty.\(^7\) By 1796, the wealthiest ten percent of New Yorkers owned sixty-one percent of landed property; the poorer half owned less than five percent of taxable land.\(^8\) While refinement and opulence characterized the lives of some, most city residents experienced worsening domestic conditions in emergent slums.

By the third quarter of the eighteenth century, disparities of wealth were written across the urban landscape, as lower Manhattan’s social geography evinced a clear separation of rich and poor, educated and uneducated, refined and rude. The Dock and East Wards and Broadway near the Governor’s residence, for example, were marked by New York’s largest mansions and wealthiest businesses (figure 2). The neighborhoods in this part of town were so affluent that they created “more the impression of one of the

---

\(^{5}\) Herbert S. Klein and Edmund P. Willis, “The Distribution of Wealth In Late Eighteenth-Century New York City,” *Histoire Sociale—Social History*, vol. 18, no. 36 (November 1985), 259-283.


The intense concentration of affluent people and their property contributed to the segregation of social spheres. With vast inequality of wealth came vast disparity of wealth.

Figure 2. Detail, Bernard Ratzer, “Plan of the City of New York,” 1776. Courtesy of the New York Public Library. Modified by the author.

A. King’s College
B. Approximate location of Bardin’s Tavern
C. Approximate location of Cape’s Tavern
D. Merchants’ Coffee House
E. Governor’s Residence
F. Fraunces Tavern
G. Exchange Coffee House
most flourishing European cities than of the capital of a nascent state,” according to one European visitor in the 1780s. Artisans, journeymen, and unskilled laborers, on the other hand, found cheaper rent in the North, West, Montgomery, and Out Wards of the city. Peripheral areas of these wards were populated especially by the urban poor, while streets nearer the core of the city constituted the domain of New York’s middling sorts. 

Both during the colonial period and into the first decades of American independence, wealthy merchants populated the city government and expected a deferential attitude from their social inferiors. Complementary structures of deference and paternalism characterized most of the settled parts of colonial and early national America. Paternalism represented the notion that educated, wealthy, white males—men at the pinnacle of a hierarchical order—were most qualified to rule society at large. Deference was the notion that the masses should accept elite rule and honorably follow it. The relationship was reciprocal; in exchange for their obedience, leaders were to act in the interests of their followers. If paternalism identified the rulers of society, deference suggested the mode through which those leaders and the masses should interact.

Notions of paternalism and deference were found in every corner of European settlement in early America, but were perhaps especially strong in New York City. The city’s success as an Atlantic port had long sustained a merchant elite that maintained close contact with and strongly resembled the European aristocracy. Though they were

---

not a titled nobility, many among New York’s elite regarded themselves as the natural counterpart to European aristocracy. In the new American nation, moreover, these merchants could legitimate their claims to power with a paternalist, republican rhetoric that advocated an ordered society led by elites who would govern in the name of the commonweal. This elite republicanism reinforced the notion of deference, suggesting renewed obligations between society’s rulers and followers in the new United States. At its inception, the liberal American state remained intensely hierarchical—especially in New York.10

The Tavern: An Introduction

The intense concentration of affluent people and their property in different corners of New York City contributed to the segregation of social spheres. With vast inequality of wealth came vast disparity of lifestyles and culture. And these differences extended to the city’s many taverns. A large number of taverns had long speckled the streets of New York and New Amsterdam before it. By 1759, there were 287 licensed taverns in New York, one for every fifty-three residents and more than one on each block of the city.11 The numbers continued to climb after the Revolution, keeping pace with the ever-increasing population—in 1790, the city counted 410 taverns.12 As a ubiquitous

11 New York City, Office of the Mayor, Tavern License Book 1756-1766, New-York Historical Society; Rosenwaike, Population History of New York City, 8.
institution throughout the urban landscape, public houses pervaded the private lives of New Yorkers.

Through much of British North America, taverns were places where men associated across boundaries of class and status. In a shared drinking room lubricated by alcohol, men could bend and blur the mores that typically shaped social interaction. This was particularly true in rural taverns, which were often the only public spaces for miles around unmarked by the social ritual that colored courtrooms and churches. The occasional litany of toasts ceremoniously proclaimed by a self-inflated imbibers united entire barroom assemblies through common sentiment. Gaming—whether with dice or cards or cocks or horses—especially united taverngoers across otherwise rigid boundaries of class. Men formed an inclusive fellowship as they laughed with each other over a competition in which luck was the equalizer and class mattered not at all. That fellowship might become even closer once patrons finally retired to the bed chambers, for colonial taverns did not offer private sleeping accommodations. To the chagrin of many foreigners who traveled in America, overnight guests shared rooms and beds with any number of fellow travelers. Beds were not allotted according to social class but rather were shared by men of any standing.¹³

In port cities like New York, however, the high number of public houses enabled a stratification of tavern culture commensurate with the stratification of urban society.

New York taverns first clustered along the waterfront, where bustling trade and thirsty sailors ensured a strong customer base. New taverns that appeared further inland attracted middling and wealthy clienteles, so waterfront taverns increasingly attracted lower-class customers. By the late eighteenth century, these many taverns were each identified exclusively with certain occupations, ethnic groups, or social strata.\textsuperscript{14}

**Lower-Class Tavern Culture**

Lower-class taverns were by far the more numerous types of public houses. They became centers for what elite New Yorkers considered a cultural threat—a realm of leisure that undermined social order based upon a paternalist hierarchy. Often nestled in dark, dirty streets, far from the eyes of deference-demanding elites, laboring-class taverns became places in which society’s lower members could set the rules. Such taverns were places for the mingling of races and sexes, for heavy drinking, and for other activities that seemed to threaten the elites’ cherished social order. Unfortunately, these taverns left behind few records. Their patrons were not the type to leave diaries or letters, and the businesses themselves were not lucrative enough to publish ads in local newspapers.

But by analyzing what kinds of behavior the city government legislated against, we may ascertain some sense of what happened in lower-class taverns. Licensing practices in colonial and early republican New York show that the elites who ran the municipal government (known as the “Corporation of the City of New York”) feared the disorder that could potentially result from the unrestricted and unsupervised combination of liquor and the urban poor.

\textsuperscript{14} Salinger, *Taverns and Drinking in Early America*, 226-227.
In part to gain revenue, but also in order to keep record of taverns large and small, the city required every vendor of liquor to purchase an annual license. To be sure, many tavernkeepers—especially the most disreputable—operated without licenses, but they risked a fine of as much as five pounds, a significant sum. Each year, the city published advertisements in local newspapers notifying tavern owners to renew their license lest they be fined. What’s more, the city was willing to pay those who alerted authorities to the existence of unlicensed ordinaries; in 1750, the Common Council requested the Mayor to pay “Johannes Myer the Sum of Twenty Shillings” for reporting “a German . . . for Selling Strong Liquors by Retail within this City without having a Lycence for so Doing.” During the Revolution, in fact, the city government went so far as to require “that all Persons who propose keeping Taverns or Publick-Houses” must provide “a sufficient Certificate of their good Character signed by three creditable Persons of the Neighbourhood in which they reside.” Whether references were required or not, the city could regulate tavern activity to a greater extent once it attained a basic level of oversight through licensing.

The colonial and early national periods saw many restrictions placed on who could drink and when, all aimed at preserving social order throughout the city. For a period beginning in 1731, tavernkeepers were not to sell liquor “on the Lords Day, Called Sunday, in time of divine service or Preaching (unless to Strangers, Travellers, or those who Lodge in such Houses, for their Necessary Refreshment).” The same ordinance stipulated that a certain level of decorum be maintained in all taverns. The Common Council...

16 Ibid., V, 318-319.
Council delegated this preservation of order to the innkeepers themselves: “no Inkeeper, Tavernkeeper, Victualler, or Ordinarykeeper, is at any time to suffer any Excessive drinking, or Persons to be Drunk in their Houses under the Penalty of ten shillings for each Offense.”\(^{18}\) Without doubt, the rule was entirely disregarded. But it demonstrates the desires of governing New Yorkers to prevent riotousness among a growing underclass.

Certain sectors of the New York population—servants, slaves, sailors, and soldiers—were occasionally forbidden from patronizing taverns at all. In 1755, for example, the Common Council resolved that “the Practice of Giving or Selling Strong Liquors to private Centinalls . . . is by Experience found to be prejudiciall to his Majesties Service,” noting that “many have Lately Deserted the Service and many Breaches of the Peace Tumults and Outrages have been Committed.” To restore discipline to the king’s garrison, tavernkeepers were forbidden to serve soldiers “Between Setting and Rising of the sun.” Once again, the city was willing to reward informants; offending tavernkeepers were to pay forty shillings, twenty of which would be distributed “to the Informer . . . and the Other half to the Poor of this City.”\(^{19}\) The revenue gained from this attempt to preserve order would be diverted to the impoverished, working doubly to dispel chaos in a swelling metropolis.

New York’s leaders perceived the sale of liquor to slaves and free blacks as among the worst threats to society. In the eighteenth century, most tavernkeepers brought before or punished by the court had been arraigned for hosting interracial assemblies. The entertainment of urban slaves undermined productivity, facilitated the illicit trade of stolen goods and arms, and challenged the hegemony of white masters, claimed the court.

\(^{18}\) Minutes of the Common Council, 1675-1776, IV, 79.
\(^{19}\) Ibid., VI, 44.
Even worse, it fed New Yorkers’ fears of slave insurrection—especially after 1741, when the city was plunged into hysteria by a slave conspiracy allegedly hatched at John Hughson’s bawdy tavern in one of New York’s riverside slums.\textsuperscript{20} The mingling of races in lower-class taverns challenged a well-entrenched social order founded upon racial hierarchy. To confront this threat, the city government repeatedly fined and publicly humiliated tavernkeepers who sold liquor to slaves. Between 1683 and 1772, for example, fifty-five of the fifty-eight individuals brought before the General Quarter Sessions Court were charged with keeping disorderly taverns and entertaining blacks.\textsuperscript{21}

Lower-class taverns were also a place for the mingling of “loose” men and women—immoral, perhaps, but not illegal behavior in early New York. Considerations of reputation and respectability prevented New York’s middling and elite women from entering the rowdy, testosterone-infused drinking rooms of even genteel taverns. However, such concerns did not prevent women of the laboring class from socializing with men at taverns. Some women, usually widows, worked as tavernkeepers themselves, most often in lower-class neighborhoods. Taverns popularly known as “bawdy houses” were frequented by prostitutes and often operated as brothels, for the sex industry had not yet been criminalized in New York City. So long as prostitutes kept their business indoors and presented no signs of vagrancy or disorderly conduct, city authorities let them be.\textsuperscript{22} In 1774, one visitor to New York noted that “above 500 ladies of pleasure


\textsuperscript{21} Salinger, \textit{Taverns and Drinking in Early America}, 130-136.

keep lodgings” in the slummy northwestern reaches of the city. He disparaged the “unlucky” proximity of King’s College (now Columbia University) to a street filled with taverns “where the most noted prostitutes live.”

The combination of all these social liabilities posed a threat to the new American republic. In October and November, 1785, two New Yorkers under the pseudonyms “Roscius” and “A.B.C.” exchanged a volley of vitriolic editorials about the prospect of a theater opening in their city. Roscius attempted to assert the relative virtue of theaters by offering “simple, moderate, and unadorned observations upon the impropriety of permitting so many taverns in a republican city.” Public houses, he contended, presented an equal if not greater threat to civil society than theaters. And while entrepreneurs proposed to construct only one theater, taverns flourished by the hundreds among the streets of New York. By allowing perhaps 800 families to live off the industry of others, Roscius argued, taverns encouraged idleness and parasitism, inhibited industry, occasioned “numberless brutal animosities in poor private families,” and were “a pest, a detriment and a nuisance to the commonwealth.” Lower-class taverns served as a sanctuary for nearly every vice Roscius could imagine:

It is in such houses as these that the desperado fortifies his mind with a cheering glass, and determines upon the wicked purpose of murdering or robbing some unwary passenger,----- It is in these houses that the poor often spend the means of their subsistence, and consequently live in wretchedness the year round.--- It is in these houses the gambler and vagabond find a retreat; the dissolute, a refuge; the lazy, countenance; the drunkard, destruction; and the villain, a shield from justice.

---


24 Daily Advertiser, October 19, 1785.
In a republican city, Roscius could attribute nearly every social ill and every domestic threat to the local tavern.

For Roscius, drinking was not the problem. In fact, he encouraged any man who “wants strong drink . . . [to] buy liquors by the quart or gallon in a store, and drink it in his own house, with his relations and friends.” The problem was the institution—the “taverns, dram shops and tippling houses” that beckoned men away from their homes, their families, and their labor, to revel in the disorder inherent to these “places of temptation and depravity.” To be sure, New York’s many visitors needed lodging. But “four taverns in the city”—certainly more refined than the “nasty holes” of the Out Ward—“would be abundance [sic] for the reception of travellers and there is not the smallest occasion for another for any purpose whatever.”

In seeking to curb the profligacy wrought by “the HYDRA of VICE, the TAVERNS,” Roscius saw possibility for action “in a government that pretends to be regulated by VIRTUE.” He appealed to New York’s elite to restrict and regulate tavern culture even more than they already did. “Ye rulers of the FREE,” he implored in language that seems contradictory to the modern ear, “think of these things . . . and act accordingly.” In addressing a class of Americans busily meting out the powers of a new government, he appealed to the republican values that suffused society. “Do not be misled by any specious insinuations, however sanctioned by religious or moral hypocrisy,” he cautioned. “If you really want to protect virtue, strike the dagger of redress at the heart of its greatest foe”—the laboring-class tavern.

25 Ibid.
26 Daily Advertiser, October 19, 1785; Daily Advertiser, October 24, 1785.
New York’s Refined Taverns

New York’s most elite public houses—the Merchant’s Coffee House, the City Tavern, Cape’s Tavern, and Fraunces Tavern, to name a few—stood at the opposite end of the spectrum of refinement and respectability from those taverns which Roscius disparaged. These exclusive establishments presented distinguished facades and ornate interiors (figures 3, 4, and 5). Many, if not most, were simply city mansions adapted to the use of a tavern. Richard Bushman has noted that “genteel society created beautiful stage sets on which people performed in public view.”

Elite urban taverns represented one of those sets—they were places in which to see and be seen. Lavish suppers, ostentatious clothing, proper manners, and honed wit were all intended to impress and intimidate those of lesser rank. In public houses, members of high society demonstrated the propriety of their situation atop the social ladder by acting out a social identity that neared refined perfection. Elite use of the tavern space therefore legitimated their right to govern.

Coffeehouses deserve special comment. Though similar to New York’s best taverns, coffeehouses differed slightly in cultural connotation. These businesses were identified with coffee (a foreign commodity), with the merchants and ship captains who traded it, and with the genteel coffeehouses of London—centers of imperial commerce and weighty discourse ever since the English Civil War. In New York, the Exchange Coffeehouse, the Merchants’ Coffeehouse, and other smaller establishments carried a sense of transatlantic cosmopolitanism that even the most refined taverns couldn’t match. Despite these important differences, however, coffeehouses and elite taverns shared the

---

28 Ibid., 61-99.
Figure 3. The Shakespeare Tavern, one of the refined public houses of eighteenth-century New York City. From W. Harrison Bayles, Old Taverns of New York (New York: Frank Allaben Genealogical Company, 1915), 429.

Figure 4. Fraunces Tavern in 1777. Courtesy of the New York Public Library. www.nypl.org.
same function within society; they both served to frame upper-class life within a fashionable public space. By the late eighteenth century, coffeehouses in London and in the colonies served alcohol and therefore differed little from elite taverns in terms of services rendered. In fact, David Shields contends that “coffeehouses in eighteenth-century America more often alluded to certain cultural ideals [like cosmopolitanism] than manifested them. . . . [and] few manifested any clear-cut alternative to the world found in the larger sorts of tavern.”

Coffeehouses and elite taverns were masculine spaces, and their gendered nature contributed significantly to the establishment and maintenance of paternalist gentility. Even the most refined drinking rooms could become rowdy after several rounds, for gentility did not preclude heavy drinking. Drinking excessively was considered a marker

---

of masculinity by men among all levels of society. As places for heavy drinking, for politics, for gambling, and for the occasional brawl, taverns were outlets for expressions of masculinity. Women visited respectable taverns only for special events, and then always on the arm of a male escort. When women traveled, they avoided lodging in taverns, opting for private hospitality whenever possible. Women drank alcohol, but rarely in taverns. Those who patronized public houses risked being mistaken for servants or prostitutes, so respectable women opted instead to drink “as they generally lived, in the private rather than the public realm.”

Upper-class tavern culture was both insular and closely tied to government. Legislative committees frequently met in the city’s best taverns. In June of 1776, for example, a secret committee of the Provincial Congress of New York met in the elegant Scott’s Tavern on Wall Street to issue a flurry of arrest warrants. Seated around a tavern table, three of New York’s leading men—Philip Livingston, Gouverneur Morris, and John Jay—heard testimony, received intelligence, and identified several dozen suspects in an alleged conspiracy to assist the British in their coming attack on New York City by sabotaging patriot defenses and assassinating George Washington. The transaction of government business in a tavern setting was not limited to this one example; during the colonial period and into the first decades of American independence, committees frequently resorted to a tavern and convened around a bowl of punch.

---

31 Salinger, Taverns and Drinking in Early America, 223.
The close relationship of tavern culture and government is further documented in the travel journal of Robert Hunter, a London merchant who visited New York in October, 1785, during an extended tour of the new American nation. Hunter lodged at Mrs. Elsworth’s tavern, a resort for “gentlemen lodgers.” While in the city, Hunter spent most of his time dining at Mrs. Elsworth’s or socializing at the Merchants’ Coffee House. In either venue, he kept very refined company. Hunter entered into the insular, clannish realm of the leading men of New York’s oldest families, which expanded to include elites from all corners of the country while New York City served as the nation’s capital. Hunter dined in taverns with members of Congress and with George Washington himself. In other parts of the nation, Hunter stayed in private houses and enjoyed the hospitality of wealthy individuals. In New York, however, the city’s elite as a whole—the nation’s elite, in fact—hosted him at the exclusive public houses which constituted a focal point of their social world.\(^{33}\) By enjoying the company of their peers in taverns and coffeehouses, elite men built a fellowship and community that constituted a ruling class.

Upper-class taverns also enforced elite rule through their function as centers for the exchange of information. High-end establishments frequently subscribed to a number of newspapers from near and far, and some places maintained small libraries in specially designated reading rooms. Travelers from far-off places also contributed to the sharing of news and ideas. Conversation was the central activity, both when the barroom was charged with a sense of rowdiness and commotion and when it was more of a calm, easily sociable space. Discussions in public houses frequently took the form of political

\(^{33}\) Robert Hunter, Jr., *Quebec to Carolina in 1785-1786, Being the Travel Diary and Observations of Robert Hunter, Jr., a Young Merchant of London*, ed. Louis B. Wright and Marion Tinling (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1943), 129-142.
discourse, philosophical debate, or contests of wit. Such conversation was essential to
tavern gentility. As David Shields notes, elevated discourse enabled “the self-cultivation
that was the hallmark of civility. Being polite was pleasurable.” Access to the exchange
of knowledge constituted one more way in which distinguished taverns buttressed
structures of power.

John Cape’s Tavern exemplifies the refined resorts of the elite, and may help us to
understand them more clearly. In the fall of 1783, as British forces were finally
evacuating New York City to complete their withdrawal from the new United States,
John Cape decided to move from Trenton, New Jersey, to New York City. He took over a
well-established tavern “formerly called HULL’s, but during the war, ROUBALET’S
TAVERN.” Just a few blocks above Trinity Church, Cape’s Tavern was “beautifully
situated in the Broad-Way” where it catered to New York’s elite. Cape boasted that there
was no tavern “so well calculated in this City for the reception of Travellers.” His
customers agreed. The day before their grand procession to retake the city after the
British evacuation, the editors of the Independent Journal speculated that General
Washington and Governor Clinton would “a-light at Cape’s Tavern.” The military
procession indeed ended at Cape’s Tavern, but the Governor’s public dinner was served
at Fraunces Tavern. Nevertheless, the fact that Cape’s Tavern was considered suitable
for such a momentous occasion suggests that John Cape had quickly established himself
among the best tavernkeepers in the city.

---

34 Salinger, Taverns and Drinking in Early America, 216-220.
35 Shields, Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America, xxvii.
36 Independent Journal, December 1, 1783.
37 Independent Journal, November 24, 1783.
38 Rivington’s New-York Gazette, November 26, 1783.
Cape did, in fact, secure the patronage of New York’s wealthiest men during his first years in business. Members of the Grand Masonic Lodge frequently held dinners there. In March, 1785, the Sons of St. Patrick celebrated their namesake’s feast day at Cape’s Tavern. Newspapers reported that “mirth, harmony, and good humor was the characteristic of this happy set. . . . The dinner was remarkably excellent, and the wines delicious.” Within the span of one month, the German Society, the Conclave, and the Society of the Cincinnati—all associations of prominent men—also held meetings and dinners at Cape’s. The tavern hosted subscription concerts and balls “at which were present most of the principal Ladies and Gentlemen of the City;” one such gathering was called “a splendid exhibition of beauty and eminent performance.” Before long, Cape’s Tavern became identified with the city’s conservative, Federalist leaders; in 1785, the faction nominated their candidates for state legislature at a meeting held in the common room of Cape’s Tavern.

Annual commemorations of Evacuation Day offer special insight into the political potency of tavern sociability. For generations after the Revolution, New Yorkers continued to celebrate the day in 1783 that the last British regiments departed Manhattan. Wealthy merchants hosted banquets and balls in elite taverns throughout the city, which were often recounted in the next week’s newspapers. Evacuation Day in 1785, for example, was “joyfully commemorated by a select company of ladies and gentlemen at

---

42 Independent Journal, November 26, 1785.
43 Independent Journal, April 20, 1785.
the Coffee-house, to whom an elegant turtle [dinner] was presented.” A long string of “patriotic toasts” followed dinner, and “the elegant entertainment of the evening was concluded by a ball for the ladies.”

Clifton Hood notes that “upper-class New Yorkers’ willingness to honor evacuation and national independence privately and then use the press to communicate it to the rest of the population spoke volumes about their understanding of citizenship’s limits.” These exclusive celebrations used the language of nationalism to exalt a vision of social harmony beneath elite rule. In doing so, Evacuation Day fêtes joined a broader trend of public celebrations, parades, and spectacles organized by political factions—especially alliances of affluent, urban Federalists—to create a sense of unity through social order. Evacuation Day celebrations demonstrate a rough association between elite ideas and values and the refined tavern space. In celebrating the liberation of an urban seaport by disciplined Continental troops (rather than by ragtag colonial militiamen) with General Washington marching at the fore, these celebrations “signified that elite institutions had won the Revolutionary War,” thereby justifying Federalist-elite rule. And by locating these events and sentiments in a sturdy, ornate tavern like Cape’s—a landmark even within a well-developed neighborhood—Federalists conveyed a message of power and permanence.

---

44 New-York Journal, December 1, 1785.
Yet even the intensive stratification of New York tavern culture did not fully satisfy the elite’s desires for exclusivity. Within refined taverns, men created more layers of exclusivity in the form of clubs. These polite, voluntary associations coalesced around some common goal, interest, whim, or joke. With varying degrees of formality, elite men claimed a certain part of the tavern for themselves—a table, or in some cases a private room. They shared a bill for food and drink and engaged in refined conversation. The club might convene according to a weekly schedule and sometimes would meet expressly to play a certain game or to discuss a certain topic. If normal barroom discourse united taverngoers, discussion among members of a club distinguished them from other patrons. Clubs such as the Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge, which met at Cape’s Tavern and the Merchant’s Coffeehouse in the 1780s, facilitated intellectual exchanges of wit that constituted one of the great pleasures of high society. Through exclusivity, club members formed among themselves a closer bond.48

Taverns both displayed and reinforced economic, racial, and gendered hierarchies in eighteenth-century New York. Elite white men asserted their own power through the exclusivity of a stratified tavern culture. The city’s merchants demonstrated this process most explicitly when they convened at Fraunces Tavern and the Exchange Coffee House in May, 1774, excluding the city’s mechanics from the early phases of Revolutionary organization. Several weeks after those meetings, the “Committee of Mechanicks” met again at Edward Bardin’s tavern, and expressed discontent at their exclusion. “The

---

48 New-York Packet, January 6, 1785; New-York Packet, January 10, 1785; Daily Advertiser, December 14, 1785; Salinger, Taverns and Drinking in Early America, 76-82; Shields, Civil Tongues and Polite Letters, xiii, 175-208.
Committee of Merchants did refuse the Mechanicks a Representation in their Body, or to consult with their Committee,” they complained in a second broadside.49 By meeting within the exclusive spaces of refined taverns, the merchants strived to maintain the same elitism and political prerogative to which they were accustomed. The mechanics’ desire for a political voice would not be the only challenge to elite hegemony during the ensuing decades. As we shall see, continued challenges to traditional social hierarchy precipitated a shift in public accommodations, giving rise to the new nation’s first hotels.

Chapter Two

“For Salubrity and Prospect”:
Aesthetic, Culture, and Governance in New York’s First Hotels

The first hotels appeared along New York’s city streets during the 1780s. Only a handful of them existed at any given point before the 1820s, but they signaled important changes with broad implications for city life. As a cultural development, hotels were both progressive and conservative. They represented new aesthetic values and were places in which the elite cultural life of New York City could flourish. In the minds of their owners and customers, hotels symbolized and pursued the republican ethos that pervaded the new United States. But they sought to achieve this vision through a hierarchical model of elite control—a conservative social paradigm—especially evident in the relationship between hotels and political involvement. As architectural objects and social venues, hotels were meant to display and reassert wealth and power—to ennoble some and intimidate others. They allowed elites to become more clannish and insular within an exclusive realm of refined culture. From these spaces, the upper echelons of New York society sought to shape the city’s political, economic, and moral life.

Social Class in New York City, 1783-1820

Post-revolutionary New York remained an intensely hierarchical society. Men of higher economic and social strata—comprising a professional and mercantile elite—continued to expect political and social deference from the less wealthy, from women, and from racial minorities. “It is the strength of the culture of rank, not its weakness,” notes Stuart Blumin, “that stands out in the political and social history of the American port cities
during and after the revolution.”

In the new context of American sovereignty, wealthy men saw the city as their jurisdiction. Education, wealth, and fame, they assumed, endowed them with the mental and moral capacity to govern. Through a vocabulary of republicanism, the patriarchs of New York’s leading and long-established families asserted their concern for the common good. The select few governed for the many.

Despite the paternalist elites’ strong sense of their right to govern, deference was being increasingly questioned and contested in a manner that would culminate in the class struggle of the industrial revolution and the labor politics of the Jackson era. Amid an exploding and increasingly anonymous population, and following the popular empowerment of the Revolution, rank had become less clear and deference less automatic. An alternative interpretation of republicanism declared with swelling volume that egalitarianism was the surest way to pursue the common good.

New York’s mercantile elite, ever prone to being socially and politically aristocratic, reacted to these changes by becoming more clannish during and after the 1790s. Work and home inhabited increasingly separate architectural and geographic spheres. Offices and banks

---

1 Stuart M. Blumin, The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 64.
remained clustered near the waterfront and city hall, while merchants and financiers
began to build houses in the more spacious and airy periphery of the city, away from the
chaos of the wharves and beyond New York’s teeming slums (figure 6).⁴

During the first decades of American independence, a more horizontally stratified
social order came to characterize the population of “mechanics”—the middling artisans
and craftsmen of New York. As modes of production relied more and more heavily upon
unskilled labor, an increasing number of apprentices and journeymen saw fewer
prospects of becoming master craftsmen. Successful master craftsmen spent less time
crafting and more time managing, though they still would have self-identified as skilled
laborers. In standards of living and in social outlook, they drifted towards the nineteenth-
century model of a manufacturing bourgeoisie, increasingly asserting a socially dominant
but personally distant relationship to the middling orders. “They had begun to live in a
world quite different from that of the city’s small master craftsmen and journeymen wage
earners,” notes Sean Wilentz.⁵ Institutions that operated in the name of New York
mechanics—the Committee of Mechanics and the General Society of Mechanics and
Tradesmen—therefore became more exclusive in their upper echelons. Throughout the
first decades of the nineteenth century, the tone of master craftsmen’s republican
rhetoric—the language they used to situate themselves within the society and politics of a
new nation—drifted towards elite visions of social order and moral rectitude.⁶

⁴ Elizabeth S. Blackmar, “Rewalking the ‘Walking City’: Housing and Property
Relations in New York City, 1780-1840,” in Robert Blair St. George, ed. Material Life in
⁵ Wilentz, Chants Democratic, 42.
⁶ Ibid., 23-60. Paul Johnson describes similar processes, what he calls the emergence
of “merchant capitalism,” in A Shopkeeper’s Millennium: Society and Revivals in
Figure 6. Detail, Peter Maverick, “Plan of the City of New York,” 1808. Courtesy of the New York Public Library. Modified by the author.

H. Washington Hotel (1806)
I. Mechanic Hotel (1803)
J. Tammany Hall (1811)
K. City Hotel (1795)
L. Corre’s Hotel (1790)
M. Tontine Coffee House (1793)
N. New-York Hotel (1785)

Locations are approximate.
Hotels emerged from and embodied this hierarchical order. In architecture, in aesthetic, in the exclusivity of their cultural events, and in their implications for political involvement, hotels represented an attempt by social elites to render New York’s social hierarchy more firmly entrenched.

The First Hotels

Tracing the evolutionary emergence of the first hotels proves a somewhat difficult task. Though we can tell the difference between a tavern and a hotel in its fully matured form, it is difficult to get too specific about any individual business. The transition from tavern to hotel was incremental, and the sources are scant. Thus the distinctions remain blurry. But it is worth squinting through the haze to gain a rough sense of this history.

The earliest hotels differed from upper-class taverns in name only, but that name was significant. The first appearances of the word “hotel” in New York City newspapers demonstrate that the word was simply applied to some elite taverns in order to convey a sense of refinement with a European twist. In 1783, for example, two men advertised their public house in both English and French. The English advertisement listed the business as “the TWO FRIENDS . . . AN ORDINARY.” The French advertisement,

---

7 Here I disagree with Andrew Sandoval-Strausz. Surveying the broad sweep of the United States, Sandoval-Strausz classifies the emergence of the first hotels as “revolution rather than evolution.” On the ground in early New York City, however, I see the process as essentially evolutionary. Andrew K. Sandoval-Strausz, Hotel: An American History (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 30.

8 Andrew K. Sandoval-Strausz identifies the 1794 City Hotel as “the nation’s first functioning hotel.” I believe this statement represents a teleological interpretation. Any institution that called itself a “hotel” was a hotel, regardless of how different it was from our modern understanding of the word. And, in fact, the purpose-built City Hotel was much closer to eighteenth-century taverns than to any kind of hotel we know today. Sandoval-Strausz, Hotel, 25.
however, called the public house the “DEUX AMIS, HOTEL GARNIS,” which translates roughly to the “furnished” or “well-stocked” hotel. The Two Friends clearly sought to emulate European style with its foreign wines, *Vins Etrangers*, and French and American cuisine, *TABLE d’HOTE servie à la Françoise et à L’Ameriquaine.* Thus the word “hotel” entered American usage with clear cultural meaning but no architectural connotation.

Joseph Corre was the first proprietor to adopt permanently the new moniker. His New-York Hotel in Smith Street, open during the mid-1780s, advertised “genteel rooms furnished for the accommodation of lodgers.” He was especially willing to serve private clubs, which could be “accommodated by themselves, without the intrusion of any other company, but such as may be agreeable to them.” By 1790, Corre had moved to a more fashionable location near Trinity Church. We may even gain a glimpse of the attire worn by Corre’s customers, for in November of that year, two people placed an ad seeking two fine articles of clothing which they had misplaced during an evening at Corre’s Hotel. One man had lost “a gentleman’s large blue CLOAK with gold clasps and eye,” and one woman had misplaced “a lady’s black satin Cloak, with large black lace.” Such refined clothes indicate that Corre enjoyed the business of an elite base of customers. Despite his apparent success, however, Corre vacated the premises in 1794, and under new management Corre’s Hotel was once again known as a tavern.

The first purpose-built public house of this new generation was the Tontine Coffee House. In 1792, 125 New York merchants, ten lawyers, and a handful of other

---

12 *Daily Advertiser*, November 29, 1790.
13 *Daily Advertiser*, May 8, 1794.
affluent men purchased shares of a lottery to fund the construction and furnishing of a
grand new coffeehouse. After consolidating several lots near the intersection of Wall
and Water Streets, the Tontine Association invited submissions of architectural plans.
The cornerstone was laid on June 5, and the three-story building was erected and opened
for business within two years (figure 7). The Tontine Coffee House quickly became the
epicenter of New York’s mercantile world—in fact, the modern New York Stock
Exchange traces its origins to the Tontine. In its public rooms, on its front porch, and on
the street before it, the Tontine hosted a frenzy of auctions and sales of slaves, ships,
cargoes, and estates each day. The longevity of the Tontine Coffee House is a testament
to its truly monumental proportions and its success as an entrepreneurial endeavor.
Shortly after the building’s demolition in 1855, one New Yorker remarked that the
Tontine was “said to be nearly the only [building] left standing in Wall-street, erected
during the last century.”

The Tontine Association rented its building to a succession of proprietors who
operated it as a coffee house and hotel. John Avery, for example, ran the Tontine Coffee
House in 1796. Avery’s tenure perhaps suffered a financially unstable start when he

---

14 Once the coffee house became profitable, shareholders received annual dividends. Additionally, each subscriber identified a child or other young person as their “nominee.” When only seven of the original 203 nominees remained alive, the Coffee House was to become their shared property. This form of lottery is called a “tontine.” The Constitution and Nominations of the Subscribers to the Tontine Coffee-House (New York, 1796).
16 Daily Advertiser, June 6, 1792.
completely refurnished the Tontine’s bedchambers, informing potential lodgers that “every bedstead, bed and bedding are entirely new.” Avery remained at the Tontine Coffee House for just a few short months.\textsuperscript{18} James Bryden seems to have fared better; during his long engagement at the Tontine, he could afford to celebrate the building’s seventeenth anniversary with a free repast, “to which a general invitation is given to the merchants and other gentlemen of the city.”\textsuperscript{19} The Tontine represented a concerted effort by those “merchants and other gentlemen” to form for themselves a new kind of public house. This building not only would fit their needs for a spacious venue for mercantile

\begin{flushright}
\textit{Minerva,} May 18, 1796; \textit{Daily Advertiser,} May 23, 1797.
\textit{Evening Post,} April 30, 1810.
\end{flushright}
transactions, but also would suit their desires for refinement and exclusivity within a monumental edifice. More associations and proprietors soon followed their example.

In 1794, another tontine association purchased the City Tavern on Broadway and promptly tore it down, constructing in its place the 137-room City Hotel (figure 8). The new building included a tea room, card room, ball room, numerous bedchambers, and extensive cellars—even a wine vault “particularly calculated for the preservation of Red Wines.” Though innovative and elegant, the City Hotel’s design did not meet universal approval. In May 1795, James Wilson felt compelled to announce:

A Regard for my own reputation as an architect induces me to take the liberty of informing the public . . . that the plan on which the hotel and public rooms is now building in Broad way, is not a plan of mine.

---


21 *New-York Gazette*, May 9, 1800; *Morning Chronicle*, October 1, 1802.

22 *Daily Advertiser*, May 20, 1795.
Whatever the flaws in its design, the City Hotel became and remained the premier public house in New York for several decades. What the Tontine Coffee House was for New York commerce, the City Hotel became for New York social life.

A series of genteel hotels flickered throughout the city following the establishment of the City Hotel. The Mechanic Hotel, for example, sat upon expensive real estate on Broadway, just across from the park and City Hall. We will postpone the full examination of the Mechanic Hotel, Tammany Hall, and the Washington Hotel as political spaces until later in the chapter, and consider them here simply as members of the architectural family of hotels. One architectural description of the Mechanic Hotel describes a narrow, four-story, “genteel Hotel,” slightly smaller then the City Hotel further down Broadway, but just as elegant. With a coffee room, an assembly room with orchestra level, four private club rooms, and two floors of “commodious bed-rooms,” the Mechanic Hotel represented a compact but refined establishment. The Mechanic Hotel seems to have enjoyed a long period of success, but most of the first ventures to follow the City Hotel’s example appeared only briefly in New York newspapers and directories before fading into obscurity. Adam’s Hotel, Snow’s Hotel, Little’s Hotel, the Union Hotel, and a host of others all operated for a few years during the first two decades of the nineteenth century. But by 1820, the city directory still listed only ten hotels.

Two hotels—Tammany Hall and the Washington Hotel—aligned explicitly with opposing political factions in New York City. The Washington Hotel, center of New York’s Federalist Party, was sited on the city’s central common (figure 9). The

---

23 New-York Gazette, January 22, 1803.
Washington Hotel featured private rooms for clubs and meetings, and a large and “elegant BALL ROOM that will accommodate about 120 persons.” The business first opened in 1806 as the London Hotel—a public house conducted “in the true Old English Style, the principles of which are civility, cleanliness, comfort and good cheer.” The Anglophilic institution was intensely aristocratic; “Gentlemen of the first character and respectability only can be accommodated,” warned the proprietor. Within a few years, he changed the name to the more patriotic but equally aristocratic “Washington Hotel.”

Tammany Hall, home of the St. Tammany Society and headquarters of New York’s Democratic-Republican Party, was constructed in 1811 (figure 10). Though associated with the more anti-aristocratic faction, the hotel was no less refined than its fellow institutions. “The House is furnished in the best manner, and no expense has been spared,” claimed the proprietor. Beds and bedding were all “new and of the best kind.” Aside from the bedchambers, Tammany Hall included the typical large assembly room, a “spacious” dining room, a bar, a parlor, a “lodge room,” and the attendant cellars, kitchen, and ice house. The quality of Tammany Hall’s location was a matter of debate. While the hotelkeeper asserted that “for elegance of situation . . . [Tammany Hall] is not surpassed by any Public House in the U. States,” others disagreed. One visitor to New York decried the hotel’s proximity not only to the debtors’ prison and the almshouse—“two ugly brick buildings”—but also to “some lots of unoccupied land, where all the neighbours deposit the filth of their yards & houses.”

---

25 New-York Gazette, January 30, 1806; American Citizen, February 12, 1806.
26 Columbian, July 14, 1812; National Advocate, December 9, 1820.
These and a handful of other institutions emerged in early New York City as new and better places to dine, to drink, and to host visitors. Their connection to new standards
of hospitality is undeniable. But they bore deeper meanings—meanings aesthetic, cultural, social, and political in nature.

**Hotels as Aesthetic Spaces and Objects**

Dell Upton offers particular insight into the aesthetic context from which New York’s first hotels emerged:

> The new urban landscape of the early nineteenth century cannot be understood as a simple reflection or unconscious manifestation of a cultural synthesis. Rather, it was a critical response to the city as its builders understood it. . . . The prime movers of the most impressive metropolitan improvements were, necessarily, urban elites, and it is they whose concepts of a harmonious society and a systematically ordered landscape were most clearly articulated in public and private documents and in structures built and imagined.

The hotel did not emerge organically from the urban culture of early America. It did not embody the city as it was, but rather the city as some hoped it would become. The sturdy and elegant yet restrained façades of these buildings represented both a monument to some ideal aspects of the city and a critique of others. These were explicitly the opinions of those who possessed political, economic, and social capital. The story of hotels therefore must be told primarily as a story of elite, white men. We can only acknowledge along the way that, as aesthetic spaces and objects, these buildings and institutions were meant to—and did—affect the lives of the urban middle class and working poor, of racial minorities, and of women and children.

The well-ordered and decorous interiors of hotels, purpose-built to host refined gatherings and guests, represented a separate world from the festering detritus and

---

heterogeneous crowds of New York City’s streets. Hotels were a true realm apart, of the city—cosmopolitan, intensely urban, and populated with the city’s best residents and guests—but perhaps not in the city. To fully understand the nature of these sanctuaries, we must first understand the aesthetic mentality of New York’s refined refugees, and the urban conditions that caused them to flee.

Pictorial representations of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century city tend to diminish the actual chaos and crowdedness of city life (see figures 7 through 10). Though tiny in terms of square mileage, cities of the early American republic were, in fact, more densely packed than today’s urban centers. In 1800, New York occupied only one and a half of Manhattan’s twenty-three square miles. But at over 40,000 people per square mile, the population density surpassed that of modern New York City. Clinging to the ground in mostly two- and three-story buildings, early New York’s swarming population lived in even closer quarters than we would find there today.30

Despite such crowded conditions, New York residents rarely complained directly about the city’s population density around the turn of the nineteenth century. Concerns about crowding instead manifested themselves in a widespread anxiety about various social ills. New Yorkers penned their fears of poor sanitation, of epidemics, of the vices of the masses, and of the threat of fires. That is to say, simple crowdedness was not the problem. But the potential for disorder and social chaos that stemmed from overcrowding was something to fear indeed.31

31 Ibid., 523-527.
These fears were provoked by the city’s persistent siege upon the senses. On the whole, early American cities were foul places. Streets remained largely unpaved and had almost no drainage, so mud, feces, and detritus lingered in every gutter. In 1794, one French visitor observed that “the streets are not particularly clean, and it is not unusual to see animals of all sorts wandering about, chiefly cows and pigs. Although windowpanes and sidewalks are washed on Saturday,” he noted, “nobody bothers to remove the dead dogs, cats and rats from the streets.”³² Stenches emanated from waterfronts, ditches, and pools of stagnant water; anywhere that something could fester, something inevitably would. Heat, pests, noise, and pollution combined to create an intolerable and truly oppressive urban environment.³³

Popular perception held that such environmental factors bore a close relationship to health, morality, and social order. This association had long been entrenched in both popular and scientific understanding, but was renewed and revised by Enlightenment empiricism. The concepts remained intertwined and complementary in the minds of early Americans, who were attuned to the complex relationship between the human body and the world around it. Bodies constantly exchange solids, liquids, and gasses with their surroundings through breathing, eating, drinking, perspiring, and defecating. Thus the sensory environment was understood to shape not only physical health but also mental and moral faculties. A healthy person who lived in a healthy environment would naturally lead a moral life. The relationship was reciprocal; a moral person would also be healthy.

³³ Upton, Another City, 3, 41-48.
and prosperous.\textsuperscript{34} One proprietor tapped directly into this sentiment when he advertised the healthy situation of his hotel “on high ground.” Tammany Hall, he noted, was “as pleasant, airy and healthy, as a country village.”\textsuperscript{35}

Sight was equally as important as hearing, touch, smell, and taste in cities of the early United States. Manners, comportment, dress, and other performative standards of behavior remained essential markers of social rank in the early republic, just as they had been in prerevolutionary years.\textsuperscript{36} But during the first decades of American independence, gentility may have assumed a new internal purpose, as well. Dell Upton suggests that, as American society became more expansive and fluid in the 1790s and beyond, “a mannered posture, a carefully cultivated tone of voice, fine clothes, expensive furniture, could be more than signs of identity: they might \textit{become} identity.”\textsuperscript{37} The migration of refinement from external performance to personal identity may have reinforced the elites’ sense of their prerogative to govern. In the context of paternalist expectations, self-fashioning—the power to shape one’s aesthetic identity—should necessarily precede the power to shape others. Self-control enables control of others.

New York’s elite needed refuge from sensory overload. And they needed places to construct, display, and act out an increasingly class-based identity. Urban designers therefore sought to engineer sensory environments to “suit a consciously narrowed order that favored vision, with hearing muted and echoing the evidence of the eye—smell and

\textsuperscript{35} Columbian, July 14, 1812.
touch suppressed, and taste hardly considered.” That is, the senses that most often offended refined sensibilities were stifled, while those that complemented refined identity were cultivated.\textsuperscript{38}

The hotel pursued these goals in part by compartmentalizing city life and city people. As a whole building, the hotel was intended for a subset of the population: the affluent and respectable. Within, the purpose-built hotel facilitated a more careful sorting of people and activities than the tavern had allowed. Taverns usually featured a common room for eating, drinking, and socializing. High-end taverns might also have a “long room” for events such as balls, concerts, and special dinners. Hotels, however, often comprised several common dining rooms, private rooms for clubs and meetings, a bar room, a coffee room, and perhaps a game room. One ad for the City Hotel advertised its “elegant Ball Room, Tea Room, and Card Rooms.”\textsuperscript{39} Hotel employees and guests’ servants were relegated to cellars and outbuildings. Sleeping accommodations, too, became individualized. While taverns threw strangers into beds together, hotels rented separate rooms to individuals or families by the early nineteenth century. At the City Hotel, for example, “families travelling” could be “elegantly accommodated with lodging and sitting rooms.”\textsuperscript{40} The privacy offered by “apartments perfectly sequestered and retired,” noted the proprietor, empowered guests of the City Hotel “to seclude themselves from the noise and bustle the usual concomitants of public establishments.”\textsuperscript{41} This compartmentalization meant that, for the first time, respectable women could become

\textsuperscript{38} Upton, \textit{Another City}, 3.
\textsuperscript{39} \textit{New-York Gazette}, July 21, 1800.
\textsuperscript{40} \textit{New-York Evening Post}, April 1, 1802.
\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Daily Advertiser}, July 9, 1802.
overnight lodgers in public houses. Within the hotel, the private bedchamber provided a suitably domestic retreat from the public rooms.

The compartmentalization of hotel space was part of a nineteenth-century trend that encompassed all types of public buildings—the architectural manifestation of a broader culture of sorting and classifying that characterized much of the century. Federal buildings in the new capital city, for example, were conceived to house separate departments and officials in individual office spaces. Public markets were divided into commercial arcades, with separate retail space for each vendor. The one-room jailhouse grew into the more reformist and less punitive penitentiary. Even graveyards and burial grounds became individualized with the birth of modern cemeteries.\textsuperscript{42} This organizing concept appealed to the mercantile elites who wished to reshape both themselves and their city into a “single, centralized, rational order—a systematic landscape.”\textsuperscript{43} Such an easily comprehensible order would facilitate monitoring and manipulation in the interests of social cohesion.

Significantly, purpose-built hotels emerged just as order was being superimposed upon New York’s urban chaos through another method: the gridded cityscape, as set forth by the Commissioners’ Plan of 1811.\textsuperscript{44} The grid espoused some truly democratic

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{43} Upton, \textit{Another City}, 113-125.
\item \textsuperscript{44} Elizabeth S. Blackmar, \textit{Manhattan For Rent, 1785-1850} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 77, 94-99; Edward K. Spann, “The Greatest Grid: The New York Plan of
\end{itemize}
principles. By imposing squarely angled streets upon irregular lots of privately owned property, the Commissioners’ Plan subordinated landed interests to the common good. Republican simplicity demanded a more regular, reasoned, and healthy city than that constituted by the crooked and cramped streets of lower Manhattan. The design reflected classical principles of symmetry and geometry, and streets were numbered consecutively rather than named after New York’s aristocratic leaders. The grid offered no obvious sites for imposing mansions to dominate the surrounding neighborhood. Instead, rectangular urban lots lent themselves to “straight sided, and right angled houses,” which were “the most cheap to build, and the most convenient to live in.”

Hotels employed the same aesthetic of republican regularity and classical symmetry while rejecting the grid’s populism. Rather than weave New York’s elite more closely into the urban fabric as the grid sought to, hotels exalted them.

Height was another way in which hotels satisfied the aesthetic desires of elite New Yorkers. Some hotels were among the tallest buildings in the city, a story or more above everything else that surrounded them except church spires and ships’ masts. They offered an ability to see—to situate one’s self within the whole urban context—that appealed to republican desires. Indeed, expansive vistas became a selling point for some hotels. For example, one hotelkeeper boasted that his establishment’s “situation for salubrity and prospect is unrivalled.” Eight years after the City Hotel opened, its

---

46 Upton, Another City, 132.
47 New-York Gazette, January 22, 1803.
proprietor reminded customers of the unique views it offered of the surrounding topography:

THE CITY HOTEL, SITUATE in the most healthy and pleasant part of Broadway commands an extensive view of the whole city, New Jersey, Long Island, Staten Island, the Hudson and East Rivers, the Bay and the Narrows.  

The City Hotel’s four stories offered patrons a view of the city which they controlled—a surveillant vantage from which they could monitor, understand, and therefore more exactly govern their city.  

The façades of New York’s first hotels, built in the Federal style, suggested the social values of their builders and customers (see figures 7 through 10). As surviving images depict, hotels were symmetrical and regular. Interiors might have been elaborate and ostentatious, but exteriors carried a sense of restraint. In soliciting designs for the Tontine Coffee House, for example, the supervising committee emphasized the need for “solidity” and “neatness.” These were among the contemporary city’s most massive structures, but they lacked the heavy ornamentation that characterized the American Gothic Revival in later decades of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, hotel exteriors implicitly demonstrated the wealth and power of a social class that could afford to erect such edifices with singular artistic vision and in one coherent building campaign. Though modest, pediments or fan windows lent an air of republican dignity to the buildings’ main doors. In the absence of steeples or cupolas, dormers and chimneys created a sense of

---

48 Daily Advertiser, July 9, 1802.
49 See the discussion of bird’s-eye views of the city in Kasson, Rudeness and Civility, 72-80. Nineteenth-century bird’s-eye views were most often produced in the form of lithographs depicting the whole city from an imaginary airborne vantage. Kasson says that these drawings represent “efforts to rise above the disparate surfaces of the city, either literally or imaginatively, in order to read it as a coherent structure, its various parts subordinated to the whole.”
50 Diary, February 18, 1792.
verticality and thus supremacy. Keystones, jack arches of rubbed brick or stone, and other masonry details emphasized each aperture as a space that was individual yet part of a broader whole. The stacked stories of windows and doors, with the tallest openings nearer the ground and the smallest ones just beneath the eaves, subtly implied a social order in which the many supported the few. Both the visual effect and the social idea conveyed a sense of stability. Before a street brimming with filth and frenzy, the hotel represented the very model of elites’ ideal urban order.

The hotel articulated social desires in the form of both critique and response. It acknowledged the potential for social disorder and attempted to preclude it through careful sorting and the symbolic representation of hierarchy. It also recognized the chaotic reality of urban life and provided the affluent and refined with a refuge from such conditions. Thus elite public accommodations became more individualist and more compartmentalized through the emergence of hotels, while retaining the exclusivity that elite taverns had engendered through the rest of the eighteenth century. As aesthetic spaces designed for and by elites in a city that was becoming more populous, more democratic, and often more offensive to respectable sensibilities, hotels naturally came to play an important role in the cultural and political lives of wealthy New Yorkers.

**Hotels as Cultural Spaces**

Hotels became centers for elite cultural events and expression.\(^ {51}\) In the perpetual pursuit of refinement and self-improvement, elites both consumed and produced an urban cultural life—a calendar of educational and artistic events that constituted a “cultured”

\(^ {51}\) Sandoval-Strausz, *Hotel*, 33-36.
ethos—which found suitable venues in the city’s hotels. This cultural life comprised theatrical and musical performances, balls, dancing academies, travelling exhibits, and intellectual pursuits, and it created an insular community of well-to-do New Yorkers.

Both individual performers and cultural societies presented concerts, plays, and operas across late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century New York. Plays and operas gradually moved out of hotels as new theaters appeared across the city during these decades. But before roughly 1800, many performers had to make do in hotel assembly rooms. While staging Jean-Frédéric Edelmann’s opera, *Arianne dans L’Isle de Naxos*, one performer had to haul his elaborate set up to the assembly room of Corrè’s Hotel; he had “neglected nothing to embellish the scenery of the sea and the rock from which Arianne precipitates herself.”

Musicians presented European master works, pieces by local composers, and their own original compositions. Hotelkeepers were especially quick to advertise foreign talent and inaugural performances of various works.

These performances were truly decorous affairs. While visiting New York in 1801, Harriet Trumbull, a wealthy seventeen-year-old from the Connecticut countryside, excitedly wrote her mother about the concert she had attended at the City Hotel. “It is a very large elegant room, and full of Ladies and Gentlemen all splendidly drest,” she recounted. “We had some fine music and singing, a great many good things to eat, as cakes grapes almonds, &c a great deal of mirth and noise, and came home between eleven and twelve O Clock.” Anyone who violated the careful atmosphere of refinement was vulnerable to reproach. In 1798, for instance, one well-traveled audience

---

member praised an orchestral concert (also at the City Hotel) which he had attended the night before. “The dress of the Ladies was really elegant,” he wrote. “Perfect harmony pervaded the room.” Yet he was quick to criticize the conductor for forgetting, “in the third act, that he was in a respectable company.” After conducting out of time, “either with a view of being taken notice of, or to cover his own fault, [the conductor] stamped his feet” and accusatorily glared at the wind instruments, even though many of them were “far superior to him in their profession.”

A cultural event demanded self-cultivation and self-control, and this conductor had violated those expectations.

Concerts and plays often concluded with balls for the assembled audience, but frequently hotelkeepers devoted entire evenings to public balls, well-known throughout the city as elite affairs. One Italian visitor in the 1780s noted that, “for the amusement of the more well-to-do class of inhabitants, dances are held once a week during the winter in a hall of the city hotel.” The refinement of a ball at the City Hotel was enough to intimidate some who were not accustomed to urban standards of socializing. Another letter from Harriet Trumbull to her mother mentioned that she “had the pleasure of dancing with Mr Mumford who is really very polite indeed.” The tense decorum of the affair left Harriet nervous and skittish, especially in the presence of polite Mr. Mumford. “I am afraid he thinks me a great fool,” she worried, “for I am so unused to hearing fine things that the only reply I know how to make is either to hang down my head in silence and feel as ashamed as a dog—or else to look all around the room and begin to talk of

---

54 *New-York Gazette*, March 10, 1798.
something else as fast as ever I can.”

Harriet could not meet the stringent demands of New York’s unusually aristocratic level of refinement, among them an ability to carry polite conversation. To perform more comfortably at such events, she would need to further cultivate her conversational persona. The exclusivity of hotel sociability was rooted in precisely this high standard of refinement.

Some balls were intended for the sons and daughters of New York’s wealthy families, such as the “Practicing Ball” held at Tammany Hall in 1814, and the “Cotillion Party” at the City Hotel in 1819. Such events were frequently held as the culmination of a dancing academy—a series of lessons at one hotel under one master. In 1791, for example, one teacher offered youngsters the opportunity to learn “hornpines, the pidgeon wing, and other French steps; the common minuet, the court minuet, and the gavotte, the alemande, the martelytte, and French and English country dance.” He also pledged to “teach his schoolars [sic] to acquire an easy carriage and graceful address.”

Thus hotels provided not only a venue for the exclusive cultural world of New York, but also a point of entrée into it—for those who could afford tuition.

Along with a regular schedule of concerts and balls, hotels sometimes also accommodated more unusual cultural events. Traveling exhibits offered New Yorkers the opportunity to see foreign or even genuinely strange things. In 1791, Corre’s Hotel presented Mr. Donegani’s acrobatic company, which performed “a Variety of the most curious Feats of Activity, of Tumbling, Leaping, Jumping, Dancing, &c, &c. Also,

---

57 National Advocate, January 13, 1814; New-York Gazette, January 20, 1819.
58 New-York Daily Gazette, December 5, 1791.
Balancing and Walking on the WIRE.” The City Hotel hosted “the astonishing Exhibitions of the PHANTASMAGORIA, SKIAGRAPHIC, and the BRILLIANCES of PERRICO,” a series of optical illusions and magic tricks. The Washington Hotel offered its patrons the opportunity to meet Benoni Thomas, “the wonderful phenomenon of Nature,” deprived “of both legs and thighs up to his hip bones, and of an arm to the elbow.” Those who could pay admission were invited to be awed and enlightened.

Cultural life in early hotels extended beyond the artistic or the bizarre to the intellectual. Hotels became places to share important works and new theories. In 1802, for example, Hocquet Caritat founded a Literary Assembly and circulating library, open to subscribers at six dollars per year, on the ground floor of the City Hotel. The library included works both in English and in French, ranging from science to history to poetry, plays, and novels. The catalog of this vast collection ran fully 322 pages in length. Caritat coupled the eating and drinking that occurred in other parts of the hotel with his intellectual type of consumption, intended not only for amusement but also improvement. The man “who from reading has imbibed somewhat of a philosophic spirit,” wrote Caritat, “will manifest a more exact punctuality, a more pure disinterestedness, and a more perfect integrity.” Other groups held student lectures, poetry readings, and chess matches in hotels. In March, 1811, one G. Baron presented a “New Discovery, in

---

59 *Daily Advertiser*, January 6, 1791.
60 *New-York Gazette*, November 11, 1803.
63 *Diary*, January 1, 1793; *People’s Friend*, April 24, 1807; *Evening Post*, November 9, 1802.
Common Arithmetic”—a different method of mathematical proof—at the Washington Hotel. “This discovery,” he asserted, “is . . . one of the most useful, curious, and wonderful effects, that has been discovered in arithmetic, since the adoption of the present Arabian notation.”

Advertisements for these cultural events invited women into the sphere of public accommodations. Whereas most eighteenth-century tavern advertisements addressed only men, hotel ads encouraged “gentlemen and ladies” to dine or attend a performance together. The carefully assembled aesthetic of hotels suppressed the senses and promised not to overstimulate women, who men assumed were overly prone to wild passion and emotion. A tavern barroom would be too much for their delicate wives to handle. But hotel decorum created a more civil atmosphere in which women were welcome.

By making hotel spaces into a venue for exclusive events, elite New Yorkers found a place within the frenzied city to pursue their own cultural goals. In a space that mirrored their aesthetic preferences, amid lavishness and ostentation that more egalitarian sorts might deem “unrepublican,” elites could perfect themselves through learning and leisure. In accordance with a more hierarchical vision of republicanism, they could create the kind of refined community that they hoped would always govern the United States. Cultural events at the City Hotel, Corre’s Hotel, and other hotels were open only to New York’s well-to-do. That exclusive realm of culture, however, had political implications that extended beyond the ballrooms and coffee rooms to affect the city at large.

---

64 *Evening Post*, March 7, 1811.
Hotels as Political Spaces

The political world of early New York City was firmly embedded in the same public spaces that hosted the cultural life of the elite. The assembly rooms that accommodated balls, concerts, and literary clubs one night hosted political meetings and civil debate the next. This close association of hotels and politics affected the nature of political involvement in early New York City, and it demands investigation.

Political involvement in New York hotels presents a kind of paradox. Beginning in the 1780s and continuing into the nineteenth century, the Committee of Mechanics and the Democratic-Republicans met and organized in the city’s elite hotels. Historians have long defined these political associations in strict terms of class. New York’s Mechanics and (to a lesser extent) Democratic-Republicans, claim Staughton Lynd and Alfred Young, represented plebeian interest that was sometimes radical, often populist, and always shaped by the interests of a preindustrial, urban proletariat. These studies depict a politics in early New York that was sharply polarized according to class: the “have-nots” versus the “haves.” But how could such associations of lower-class political interest assemble in New York’s most refined rooms? Why would the “have-nots” organize their politics in spaces designed by and for the “haves”? This paradox may be resolved through a more nuanced understanding of faction and involvement in New York City politics than

---

has heretofore been obtained. I will suggest a solution, but first we must examine more closely the link between politics and public houses.\textsuperscript{66}

The close connection between taverns and government in New York City persisted through the emergence of hotels. Both hotels and taverns served as polling places. In each ward of the city, voters would converge on a designated public house to announce their vote or, several decades after the Revolution, to cast their secret ballot.\textsuperscript{67} Furthermore, hotel patrons engaged in civil discourse, both informally and in pitched debates. One such debate was held in 1820 when engaged New Yorkers met at the City Hotel to discuss “Whether Party Spirit is Beneficial in Any Government.”\textsuperscript{68}

Whether or not party spirit was beneficial, it existed—especially in hotels, which facilitated partisanship by giving it a place in which to congeal, to organize, and to campaign. Hotels and political parties developed at roughly the same point in American history, and in New York City, at least, they shared a special relationship. During the first decades of American independence, political factions and parties such as the Committee of Merchants, the Committee of Mechanics, the Federalists, the Anti-Federalists, and the Democratic-Republicans held nominating committees at hotels throughout the city. The Mechanics, for example, met at exclusive Corre’s Hotel throughout the 1790s to nominate candidates for state assembly and senate.\textsuperscript{69} Parties and factions advertised such meetings in local newspapers, and subsequently published the names of nominees with

\textsuperscript{66} Though he discusses the political importance of hotels, Sandoval-Strausz neither acknowledges nor resolves this paradox. Sandoval-Strausz, \textit{Hotel}, 36-39, 43-44.
\textsuperscript{67} Notices to this effect appear frequently in early American newspapers. For representative examples, see \textit{American Citizen}, August 26, 1801; \textit{Republican Watch-Tower}, January 5, 1805.
\textsuperscript{68} \textit{New-York Gazette}, February 4, 1820.
\textsuperscript{69} \textit{Diary}, April 6, 1792; \textit{New-York Daily Gazette}, April 10, 1794.
the standard announcement that “the following nomination was made, and resolved to be supported at the ensuing election.”70 Surely many of these nominations were hotly debated. In 1803, one announcement of a nominee for state senator included the caveat that “after considerable previous discussion” at the Adams Hotel, the candidate had been selected “with few dissenting voices.”71

Parties and factions conducted other political business in hotels, as well. They planned how best to campaign for votes. They communicated with other political bodies, as in 1800 when, during a meeting at the City Hotel, the Federalists resolved “to suggest to the Merchants of this city, the propriety of . . . cooperat[ing] with the other committees . . . to promote the election of the Federal Republican Candidates.”72 Others lobbied Congress, such as the Republicans who met at the Tontine Coffee House in 1794 to enter “into some Resolutions, instructive to our Representatives in Congress, respecting the insults, embarrassments, and injuries offered to the Commerce of our Country by Britain and her savage allies.”73 Thus the link between government and public houses evolved beyond the tavern-table meetings of colonial legislative committees; hotels were central to the new party politics of republican New York.

The close association of hotels and partisanship meant that hotels could, at times, become politicized spaces. In the 1790s, for instance, the Tontine Coffee House became an occasional battleground between pro-France Democratic-Republicans and pro-England Federalists. When French Ambassador Edmond-Charles Genêt arrived in New York in June, 1793, a group of Francophiles installed a flag-like display called a “liberty

70 Diary, April 12, 1794.
71 American Citizen, April 14, 1803
72 Daily Advertiser, April 30, 1800.
73 Columbian Gazetteer, February 2, 1794.
cap” at the coffee room of the Tontine in celebration, much to the disproval of the Federalists. The liberty cap remained a point of contention in a politically charged atmosphere, but nobody dared to remove it until 1795. After a flurry of Democratic-Republican protest, the emblem was replaced “under military honors” with a “well designed, carved, Liberty-Cap, suspended on the point of an American Tomahawk, and the Flags of the Republics of America and France attached on each side.”  

The new installation remained until 1797 when, after a series of “disturbances occasioned . . . by inconsiderate individuals to gratify their private folly,” the Tontine’s proprietors removed the “emblematical figure.”  

A number of angry Democratic-Republicans assembled at the Tontine that night, demanding that the liberty cap be replaced. A “considerable tumult” ensued, ending with several people’s arrest. The symbolic significance of public houses had become so powerful that, when mixed with fiery party politics, it could lead to violence.

Finally, hotels also became politicized spaces when constructed for the explicit use of one political party. Three buildings—Mechanic Hall, the Washington Hotel, and Tammany Hall—were built for this purpose. Though these hotels accommodated social events, drinkers, diners, and lodgers, they also became the headquarters of a political faction. Mechanic Hall naturally was aligned with the Committee of Mechanics, while the Washington Hotel and Tammany Hall represented nerve centers of Federalist and Democratic-Republican politics, respectively. The Democratic-Republicans of New York

---


75 *Minerva*, March 15, 1797.

76 *Register of the Times*, March 17, 1797.
clarified the purpose of such a strategy when, three months into the construction of

Tammany Hall, they lauded “the rapid progress made in this republican building”:

We promise ourselves solid advantages from this Hall. It will be the rallying spot
where every firm citizen will assemble in the hour of peril, and where the
consolidated power of the republicans the [sic] will drive to shades the remains of
the turbulent and vindictive federalists who would [fain] lord it over the city—
where every citizen will meet in time of peace, and join with national festivity to
celebrate our National Anniversaries—when we shall brighten by unanimity [sic]
and affection, the chain which cements our union. 77

A building had real clout. A space could be made to mean and do what its owners
desired. By establishing a hotel to claim as their own, political factions sought to advance
their vision for American society.

So we return to the earlier question: the paradox of class-based politics and hotels.

How could the Committee of Mechanics and the Democratic-Republicans—political
factions which historians normally align with the lower classes—assemble in New
York’s most refined hotel spaces? The answer may be revealed if we slightly loosen our
grip on a strictly class-based understanding of political faction in early New York City. 78

Though the distribution of wealth and hierarchies of racial and gender constituted
a socially horizontal order, political belief in post-Revolutionary New York can be
envisioned according to a vertical model. Political alliances embraced both middling and
better voters, with a small set of office-holding elites guiding from above. Most of the
political issues that confronted the early United States did not pit class against class.

77 Public Advertiser, August 15, 1811.
78 The class-based interpretations of politics in early republican New York upon
which this discussion is based include Countryman, A People in Revolution; Lynd, “The
Mechanics in New York Politics, 1774-1788,” Wilentz, Chants Democratic, esp. 61-77;
whole, I do not disagree with these interpretations. I seek only to prompt careful
reconsideration through the nuanced perspective offered by the history of hotels.
Mercantile interests, for instance, could ally the merchants who owned ships with the sailors who worked on them. Both horizontal groups relied upon international commerce for their sustenance and welfare, and could therefore unite under the Federalist banner against, say, Jefferson’s 1807 Embargo Act. Furthermore, the occasional middling man could be elected to a minor municipal office which held little implications for government policy—tax collector, officer of the peace, or the like. But on the whole, paternalism pervaded the political process; the agenda was set by elites. The major offices—especially the mayorship and seats on the Common Council—remained firmly in the hands of the affluent until labor politics shattered this vertical model starting in the 1820s. And the vast majority of partisan organization was orchestrated by the paternalist figures who composed the party leadership. To be sure, the majority of New York’s very wealthiest men were Federalists. But we must reconsider the extent to which we define political factions along class lines. Political conviction was not based exclusively on social class. Political involvement was—and so was participation in the realm of hotels.

Thus, from the 1780s through the 1820s, hotels became spaces for the highest social and economic echelons of any faction—Merchant or Mechanic, Democratic-Republican or Federalist—to guide New York politics. Hotels demonstrate that social hierarchy operated not only upon political factions and hierarchies, but also within them. From the assembly rooms of choice public houses, the city’s moneyed men debated policy, orchestrated political campaigns, and worked to shape the city around them.

Culture, class, and political involvement were inextricable in early republican New York and across early America at large. Within this context, the first hotels emerged as socially
conservative institutions which intended to preserve elite control of the surrounding masses. Hotels provided both cultural and aesthetic ways for New York’s upper orders to enjoy the fruits of their wealth, thus reassuring them of the validity of their rank in the face of burgeoning egalitarian sentiment. By locating the work of party politics within that same refined hotel setting, wealthy New Yorkers reiterated and legitimated their role as the governing class. The hotel, a thoroughly modern development, was at first oriented to preserve the political and social status quo.

Yet retreat into hotels would not suffice. To maintain social order as they knew it through the first decades of the nineteenth century, elites would also have to launch an offensive against the unvirtuous, uncultured sort of public house: New York’s lower-class taverns.
Chapter Three

“Nurseries of intemperance, disorder and profligacy”: The Humane Society and New York’s Lower-Class Taverns

The Road to Ruin was a sordid and salacious tavern of the lowest sort (figure 11). Located on Murray Street, this nasty hole was situated within a slummy neighborhood of prostitution and riotous taverngoing that, thanks to the abundance of both brothels and faculty clergymen from nearby Columbia College, had long been punningly known as “Holy Ground.” A visitor described the scene there one night in 1809. Just inside the front door was “a Circus dance room for the Lewd women and others,” where a band played while people danced and perpetrated “many other evils of an Immoral tendency.” The band itself was a specter of social disorder, presenting an intolerable mix of nefarious persons including

the Leader of the Band of the second Regiment of artillery (a French Jacobin) . . .
the Trumpeter of the Artillery another French Jacobin, an English Deserter, [and] a Jew Fiddler who passes by various names in this City.

After a suggestive glance or two across the room, prostitute and customer could retreat to one of the “Spring Rooms were many married women many Daughters and many Servants are introduced and Seduced.” Amid the smell of sweat, smoke, and grog, taverngoers squandered their meager income on billiards and card games in five gambling rooms. The business was steeped in corruption; the tavernkeeper evaded the eyes of the law by paying “the constables and Marshalls . . . two dollars a night” to look the other way. He counterfeited money to foot the bill.

With abhorrence and a tinge of terror, one “well wisher to the community” wrote an anonymous letter to Governor De Witt Clinton complaining about the Road to Ruin.
His fears mirrored those of New York’s elite. This tavern and hundreds of others across New York City hosted such gatherings each and every night. Unsanitary conditions, immoral and irresponsible behavior, crime, and the unbridled mixing of races and sexes combined to create an atmosphere that was downright unrepugnant. The fiddling Jew didn’t even have a reliable name! Yet the complainant was not concerned about the moral health of these underlings so much as the welfare of their superiors. “Many Merchants Clerks are ruining their employers Many Sons their parents and many Apprentices their masters,” he wrote, imploring “Friends of Humanity and men who call yourselves Christians” to stop this rampant immorality. If left to fester long enough, the incontinent debauchery of the plebeian foundations of society would surely disrupt the city’s entire social order, including elites comfortably perched atop the hierarchy.¹

Figure 11. “Learning to Smoke and Drink Grog.” A nineteenth-century depiction of a lower-class tavern, likely similar to the scene at the Road to Ruin. Note that the soldiers or sailors sit upon trunks rather than chairs. Courtesy of the New York Public Library.

Why this staunch moralist had visited the Holy Ground at all remains unclear. But the fact stands that his fears were shared by New York’s elite. While the hotel was emerging as the resort of wealthy New Yorkers, taverns became increasingly associated with the city’s grimy underclass. Though they would not dare to venture inside working-class taverns, wealthy New Yorkers nevertheless used these public spaces much in the same way they used hotels: to try to preserve their republican vision for their city and their new nation. Well-established in the present, these men saw themselves as stewards of New York’s republican future. Elites cultivated themselves within comfortable hotel settings while attempting to impose restrictions upon lower-class tavern culture, which they deemed a threat to social order. The methods by which they used taverns to shape society are best explored through the Humane Society of the City of New York, which launched a small-scale temperance movement in 1810.

The Humane Society’s literature and activities embodied the rhetoric of health and morality discussed in the previous chapter. During the early years of the American republic, Dr. Benjamin Rush popularized the perception that liquor was detrimental to health and morality. In 1810, the Humane Society published a tract condemning liquor and the petty taverns in which it was sold to lower-class New Yorkers, foreshadowing the more democratic temperance movements that swept the nation in the 1820s, 30s, and 40s. The Society’s early motion for temperance reform represents an attempt by patrician New Yorkers to harness their own power to preserve a republican vision that they saw beginning to falter.

---

The Humane Society operated during a period whose importance has often been minimized by historians of American reform. Most studies focus on the height of evangelical fervor during the Second Great Awakening, roughly 1825 to 1840. The composite picture that emerges from studies of antebellum reform paints these movements as a reaction to rapid societal change wrought by the concurrent industrial and market revolutions and the nascent capitalist economy. The responses, both secular and religious, drew energy from all levels of society and pursued myriad goals. These studies often hint at but give short shrift to early stirrings of reform, which predated the majority of social change that fed later movements. But the history of this early reform movement offers insight into the methods of social control and the crucial link between


4 In fact, historians of antebellum reform have not acted alone in neglecting the years of the early republic; social and cultural historians of the last generation have, on the whole, focused their efforts either on the years up to and including the Revolution or after roughly 1820. Sean Wilentz, for example, says that the period 1788 to 1825 “is best seen as prelude to what was to come.” Daniel Walker Howe’s new synthesis of “the history of the young American republic” begins in 1815 with the Battle of New Orleans which, Howe contends, “symbolized America’s deliverance” from the Old-World model of “traditional class privilege.” In framing his work, Howe does little to dissuade us from a sense that America remained static through the first four decades of independence. Yet any historian recognizes that no era is without conflict and change. We simply have yet to discuss the early republic fully on its own terms. Sean Wilentz, Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 19; Daniel Walker Howe, What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 18.
The Humane Society: A Model of Paternalism in Early New York City

The Humane Society grew out of the Enlightenment legacy and paternalist outlook of the elite segment of New York’s Revolutionary generation. In January, 1787, citing the need for an organization to benefit “destitute debtors in prison,” ten wealthy New Yorkers “formed themselves into an association under the name of a ‘Society for the Relief of Distressed Debtors.’” Responding at first to the overcrowding of debtor prisons, the group’s purpose was to “administer to the comfort of prisoners, by providing food, fuel, clothing, and other necessaries of life,” and to “procure the liberation of such [prisoners] as were confined for small sums.” In time, the association grew from a relief organization with a single charitable purpose into the Humane Society of the City of New York, a group which broadly influenced the city through numerous initiatives including debt relief, support for the poor, public health, and temperance.5

Unlike the reform organizations that proliferated in the 1820s and 1830s, many of which drew membership from across class boundaries and from both sexes, the Humane Society consisted entirely of wealthy, white men—the same ones who socialized and politicked in New York’s new hotels. Of the twenty-five members in 1814, the occupations of seventeen appear in the New York City directory for that year. Eleven

---

were merchants and three were attorneys. Several served as directors of New York’s most important banks and insurance companies. A handful of others were involved in city government; the mayor himself, De Witt Clinton, was a member of the Humane Society. A learned bunch, four belonged to the American Academy of Arts and four to the Literary and Philosophical Society of New York. One was a professor at Columbia College and several more held doctorates or law degrees. They lived on the most fashionable streets in New York—places like Pearl, Water, and Wall Streets—or at large estates along Greenwich Street, the Bowery, and Broadway, just beyond the city limits. They controlled many of the city’s other institutions, “benevolent” and otherwise: the New-York Historical Society, the New York Hospital, the City Dispensary, the New York Free School, and the Canal Company of the State of New York. For funding, the Society relied solely upon “the casual bounty of individuals, which fortunately kept pace with the increasing demands on its charity.”

Though they first operated through the modus of individual relief rather than legislative reform, the Humane Society was not driven by purely “benevolent” intentions. Raymond Mohl contends that the “unfortunate condition of these imprisoned debtors”

---

6 Names from A Sketch of the origin and progress . . . , 17; cross-checked with American National Biography Online, s.v. “Clarkson, Matthew,” “Clinton, De Witt,” “Eddy, Thomas,” and “Hosack, David;” David Longworth, Longworth’s American almanac, New York register, and city directory, for the thirty-ninth year of American independence (New York: David Longworth, 1814). According to Michael Meranze’s reinterpretation of culture and governance, such involvement in the city’s cultural institutions was central to social and political status. See Michael Meranze, “Culture and Governance: Reflections on the Cultural History of Eighteenth-Century British America,” William and Mary Quarterly, Third Series, vol. 65, no. 4 (October 2008), 713-744.

7 A Sketch of the origin and progress . . . , 5-6.
elicited “attention and sympathy” from wealthy New Yorkers, motivating their relief and reform. Benevolence may indeed have been one motivating force behind their actions, for the Society padded its work in a language of compassion. But the more important motive was a self-preserving conservatism—the same tenacity to a social status quo exhibited by New York’s first hotels. These men saw the flooding of debtor prisons as a threat to the social order which supported their own prosperous and comfortable lifestyles. To maintain New York as they knew it, they had no choice but to alleviate some of the city’s most threatening crises.

The same self-serving paternalism motivated an expansion of the Society’s efforts to include a soup kitchen, the administration of medical care and “wholesome water” to prisoners, and the strategic installation of apparatuses for the “resuscitation of persons apparently dead from drowning.” The Society increasingly moved beyond charity and relief towards reform, drawing upon the wealth and political clout of its members to provoke the government to action. Motivated neither by democratic mandate nor by divine purpose, as later reformers were, these wealthy paternalists sought to preserve the social order that supported them by “procuring such alterations in the system of our laws as experience had convinced them was most proper.”

Elite Perceptions of Lower-Class Drinking and Citizenship

The Society’s efforts were shaped by the pervasive ideology that closely linked notions of health and morality—the same perceptions that necessitated the new hotel aesthetic. While the hotel reflected this ideology within elite life, the Humane Society emphasized

---

9 *A Sketch of the Origin and Progress . . .*, 3-8.
the implications of health and morality for republican citizenship among the lower classes. Because sensation and passion impeded reason, disease and poverty could be attributed to immorality and vice. At the heart of this interpretation of public health laid the notion that human nature was malleable, and that the leaders of society could preserve republican order through careful stewardship of their countrymen. The Humane Society and other elite groups placed health and morality at the center of American personhood by emphasizing its relevance to the social duties of a citizen.

Benjamin Rush, a prominent statesman, a physician, and a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, most clearly articulated this sentiment in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.\(^\text{10}\) He became a vocal antiliquor agitator and contributed to the reshaping of American perceptions of alcohol in the decades following the Revolution.\(^\text{11}\) Rush linked alcohol to the intertwined concerns of health and morality on the first page of his widely read pamphlet, *An Enquiry into the effects of spirituous liquors on the human body, and their influence upon the happiness of society*: “Since the introduction of spirituous liquors into such general use,” he reported, “physicians have remarked that a number of new diseases have appeared among us.” Rush went on to deprecate the effects of liquor upon the “lives, estates, and souls” of his “fellow creatures.” One of Rush’s contentions might have seized the attention of New York’s

\(^{10}\) Jacquelyn C. Miller, “Passions and Politics: The Multiple Meanings of Benjamin Rush’s Treatment for Yellow Fever,” in *A Melancholy Scene of Devastation: The Public Response to the 1793 Philadelphia Yellow Fever Epidemic*, ed. J. Worth Estes and Billy G. Smith (Philadelphia: Science History Publications/USA, 1997), 79-95. Miller concludes her article with the note that Rush’s medical philosophy “reveals a strand of social conservatism that has largely gone unexplored.” I believe that the Humane Society embodies a similar strand of social conservatism.

Humane Society: “Among the inhabitants of cities, [spirits] produce debts—disgrace and bankruptcy.” To a readership that struggled through the Revolution and strove to protect and propagate its legacy, Rush’s most sobering warning must have been that “a people corrupted by strong drink cannot long be a free people.”  

With this forceful treatise, grounded in science, Rush laid an entirely new notion before an America that was drinking unprecedented amounts: alcohol was not a positive good, but rather was unhealthy and irresponsible, and threatened the Revolutionary legacy.

The first edition of Rush’s pamphlet appeared in Philadelphia in 1784. Though no New Yorker printed it as a stand-alone publication until 1811, it was appended to a 1786 tract, published in New York, which condemned theatrical productions as unchristian. Printers turned out other editions through 1814 in Boston; Philadelphia; New Brunswick, New Jersey; Brookfield, Massachusetts; Middlebury, Vermont; and even New Market, Virginia. The proliferation of new editions implies that Rush’s ideas were widely consumed and discussed. To condense his argument for a popular audience, Rush appended “A Moral and Physical Thermometer” to later editions of the pamphlet, visually linking the relationships between drink, health, morality, and consequence (figure 12). No national movement had yet taken up the cause of temperance, but Rush’s

---

12 Benjamin Rush, An enquiry into the effects of spirituous liquors upon the human body, and their influence upon the happiness of society (Philadelphia: Thomas Bradford, 1784), 242, 243, 249.


14 The Following extracts from the writings of pious men, of different denominations, and at different periods of time, exposing the evil and pernicious effects of stage plays, and other vain amusements,— are recommended to the serious perusal of all who profess Christianity. To which is added, An enquiry into the effects of spirituous liquors upon the human body. (New York: Francis Childs, 1786).

Figure 12. A Moral and Physical Thermometer, representing the correlation between alcohol, health, and morality. From Benjamin Rush, An inquiry into the effects of spirituous liquors on the human body, to which is added, a moral and physical thermometer (Boston: Thomas and Andrews, 1790), 12.
ideas entered the public discourse and identified “ardent spirits” as not only detrimental to health and morality but also antithetical to republican virtue.

Lower-class drinking was, in fact, a topic of concern among respectable New Yorkers. In August, 1816, an English traveler named Richard Barrett dined at the home of aristocratic banker Charles Wilkes. Of the dinner conversation, Wilkes later wrote:

I was sorry to find that malt liquor [beer] is very little drunk by the lower orders in America . . . Stronger liquors, such as brandy, rum, gin, whisky are liked better— Malt liquors are certainly more wholesome than ardent spirits, & even when taken to excess the consequence is neither so dangerous to the drunkard or to those about him. But Spirits taken but in a proportionate small quantity maddens for the time & renders mischievous the person who indulges in them—& often a total loss of reason ensues— Malt liquors stupefy the passions rather than inflame them.  

Benjamin Rush did not wallow alone in his anxiety about the leisure activities of lower-class Americans. Madness, mischief, and inflammation of the passions—especially among the lowest orders of society—threatened to dislodge the status quo that had allowed New York’s elite to flourish. A stupefied underclass was preferable by far. Matters of social order therefore concerned every citizen of means and prestige in the early republic, and represented an oft-considered topic of polite conversation.

The Humane Society’s Movement for Temperance

In 1810, the Humane Society acted upon Rush’s sentiments and sparked New York City’s early temperance movement with the publication of a pamphlet entitled A report of a committee of the Humane Society, appointed to inquire into the number of tavern licenses; the manner of granting them; their effects upon the community; and the other

---

sources of vice and misery in this city; and to visit Bridewell. They had fully adopted Rush’s new perception of liquor, declaring without qualm or qualification that “the habit of drinking ardent spirits enervates the mind, sours the disposition, inflames the passions, renders the heart callous . . . and leads to the neglect and violation of the social duties.”¹⁷ There is no question that the members of the Humane Society took Rush’s sentiments straight from his own pen. In 1784, Rush wrote that “spirituous liquors destroy more lives than the sword.” Twenty-six years later, the Humane Society validated their temperance campaign with his very words: “By many whose opinions deserve weight,” they wrote, paying homage to Rush’s reputation as a scientist and intellectual, liquor “has been thought as destructive to the human species as the sword.”¹⁸

This early motion for temperance differed starkly from later temperance movements, and the differences illuminate the ways in which New York’s elite tried to control taverns and drinking in order to preserve their position atop society.¹⁹ Though later movements counted women and men of all classes among their membership and

¹⁷ A report of a committee of the Humane Society, appointed to inquire into the number of tavern licenses; the manner of granting them; their effects upon the community; and the other sources of vice and misery in this city; and to visit Bridewell (New York: Collins and Perkins, 1810), 8. Bridewell, the city prison, represented another potential source of urban chaos. In this pamphlet, the Humane Society excoriated Bridewell’s “corrupted and corrupting” conditions, including the confinement of blacks and whites within the same cells.

¹⁸ Rush, An enquiry into the effects of spirituous liquors upon the human body . . . , 243; A report of a committee of the Humane Society . . . , 4.

¹⁹ Richard Newman sees many of these same distinctions between early and later abolition movements. While abolition could never be considered conservative, Newman does demonstrate that early abolition societies—especially the Pennsylvania Abolitionist Society—drew upon the clout of elites, pushed for reform through legislation, and grew from a conservative interpretation of republicanism that asserted the right of the wealthy and virtuous to shape society for the common good. Richard S. Newman, The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002).
leadership, the Humane Society, as we have seen, was composed entirely of elite men. Aside from who was involved, the early movement also differed in how people were involved. Ronald Walters points out that “most people involved in [later] reform were not leaders.” Evangelical temperance crusaders worked door-to-door beneath an institutional leadership that was sometimes national in scope. In early movements toward reform, however, every active reformer was also a leader in civil society. The only way for women or the non-wealthy to participate in this movement was to consume its message and obey by leading temperate lives. The elite had the common good in mind, and sought reform in which “every good citizen of whatever rank, party, or condition is seriously interested.” Only the elite, however, could discern that common good.

Unlike later movements, the Humane Society directed its efforts entirely at the under classes. They aimed to curtail the business of “petty taverns” which were “situated generally in obscure streets.” Drinking among the upper classes was not seen as problematic. Rather, said the Humane Society, liquor “causes, or aggravates the misery and poverty of most of the labouring poor.” Drinking “fills the list of unfortunate debtors maintained by this Society; [and] crowds the alms-house, the hospital, the state, and the city prisons.” Ardent spirits and the taverns in which they were guzzled perpetuated social disorder. Thus, the lower class’s proclivity for strong liquor threatened not only their own health and welfare, but the American republic itself. Drawing upon their learnedness, the Humane Society wrote of the lessons offered by the past: “The annals of

20 Walters, American Reformers, 14.
21 A report of a committee of the Humane Society, appointed to inquire into the number of tavern licenses . . . and to visit Bridewell (New York: Collins and Perkins, 1810), 4.
22 Ibid., 7.
history attest,” they noted, “that almost every free state of antiquity lost its liberty in consequence of the corruption of the lower classes of its citizens.”

Additionally, the impulse to reform lower-class tavern-going did not arise from religious motives. The Second Great Awakening, a series of evangelical revivals that changed the way Americans thought about God and themselves, began in the 1790s. But its full fervor was not felt in the Northeast until the 1820s. Unlike those who tried to reform taverns in the 1820s and 30s, the Humane Society professed no millennial expectations and urged no crusade for religious conversion. In fact, the Humane Society’s pamphlet employs not evangelical but Deist language, referring not to Christ and conversion but to “Providence” and “the Great Governor of all.”

In the New York of 1810, most elites still attended Trinity Church on Broadway and had been reared in an Anglican or Episcopal congregation in which the Enlightenment framework of Christian Deism remained potent.

Perhaps the most telling difference between later temperance and early anti-tavern reform lies in the reformers’ methods. The Humane Society did not mobilize vast legions of door-to-door moral missionaries. They did not campaign to convert souls to a virtuous life in Christ. As Paul Johnson explains, in 1820s Rochester, ecumenical coalitions of wealthy conservatives attempted to reinforce their power “over a hopelessly godless multitude” through persuasion. Following the example of Lyman Beecher, these “worried gentlemen” wanted not to reform through their own arbitrary power, but rather to persuade their neighbors toward perfection and self-restraint. In Rochester, says Johnson,

---

23 Ibid., 9.
24 Ibid., 5.
“temperance men did not want to outlaw liquor or to run drunkards and grogsellers out of town. They wanted only to make men ashamed to drink.”

Wealthy New Yorkers, on the other hand, relied upon their own political power to enact top-down reform. They wanted to impede the propagation of vice by forcing tavernkeepers out of business through high licensing fees. The Humane Society operated not on the streets and in homes, but through and against institutions and public spaces, petitioning legislatures and seeking to restrict “the nurseries of intemperance, disorder and profligacy”—the taverns themselves. With that end in mind, the Humane Society submitted their petition to the municipal government, declaring that “with the wisdom of the Corporation of this city, and of the Legislature, this business must ultimately rest.”

Ronald Walters notes that “reform commitment inevitably depends on a peculiar resonance between the situation of the reformer and a broader problem.” For the earliest reformers, the broader problem was identical to that which gave rise to New York’s first hotels—an anxiety that the social hierarchy founded on paternalist republicanism was slipping away. The Humane Society, well-attuned to the city around them, elite but not aloof, possessed “a deepening awareness of the disordered conditions and the new requirements of American urban life.” New York was exploding in size and intensity. Between 1790 and 1800, the city’s population had doubled. It doubled again between 1800 and 1820, surpassing 120,000. The growing throng was more anonymous, more

---

26 A report of a committee of the Humane Society . . . , 10.
27 Walters, American Reformers, 15.
28 Mohl, Poverty in New York, 6, 136.
foreign, and more egalitarian-minded than ever before. Wealthy New Yorkers saw
great—perhaps insurmountable—challenges to their top-down republicanism.\textsuperscript{30}

The Humane Society responded to these threats by attempting to use the
municipal government to legislate health and morality. If the legislature would pass “an
act, so to enhance the expense of obtaining licenses, to retail spirituous liquors in the city
of New-York,” surely a more ordered, virtuous society would result.\textsuperscript{31} In this sense, the
eyear antiliquor movement was guided by a notion of progress. That is, it aimed to
improve society. It was not socially progressive, however, as so many later reform
movements were. Similar to contemporary academic and fine arts societies, museums,
universities, and especially hotels, the Humane Society reflected what elites understood
as their own duty to shape the new American nation into the exemplar of human promise.
The question remains as to why the Humane Society felt the need to publish its reasoning
in the form of a pamphlet for a wide readership, rather than simply to act upon it. One
explanation may be that elites were attempting to demonstrate their continued fitness to
lead. After all, they were not despots but rather paternalists. And though the paternalist
framework could rationalize social coercion, it also entailed a sense of responsibility.

\textbf{Response and Reaction}

So what came of the Humane Society’s efforts to restrict taverns? The New York City
government did respond, at least in part. In 1811, the Common Council purchased 2,000

\textsuperscript{30} On the challenges that met the republican vision of the first generation of American
Federalists, see Joyce O. Appleby, “The Personal Roots of the First American
Temperance Movement,” \textit{Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society}, vol. 141,
no. 2 (June 1997), 141-159. Appleby misdates the “first American temperance
movement” to the 1820s, but much of her political discussion remains useful.

\textsuperscript{31} A \textit{report of a committee of the Humane Society} . . . , 10.
copies of Rush’s antiliquor pamphlet to distribute among the slums of New York. They undoubtedly left more than a few copies at the Road to Ruin Tavern. How many slum-dwellers could actually read the pamphlets, however, seems not to have factored into their logic. Not until 1818 and 1821 would the mayor increase the cost of tavern licenses, and then only slightly. Elected officials hesitated to act because those who supported antiliquor legislation might lose votes, especially in a time of increasing enfranchisement. So when a bill finally appeared before the legislature in 1823, it was dismissed “without any cause being assigned,” despite the belief of the bill’s authors that “the reasonableness of the requirement would ensure its passage into a Law.”

The paradox of conservative reform, it seems, could be reconciled in the minds of elite New Yorkers. Strongly convinced of the malleability of human nature, the city’s governing class worked to shape the health and morality of the governed in order to preserve the social order that supported them. As an important public space and a perceived source of vice and mayhem, taverns became one medium through which affluent New Yorkers pursued their conservative reforms. Long after the egalitarian rhetoric of the American Revolution, and in the face of rapidly changing social and political conditions, elites looked to the degenerate tavern—the nursery of vice and profligacy—to buttress their faltering political and social hegemony.

---

33 Mohl, Poverty in New York, 218.
34 Minutes of the Common Council, 1784-1831, XIII, 301-303.
Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to illustrate the ways in which public houses fostered a community of elites and reinforced their sense of a right to govern from atop hierarchies of class and rank. It has shown the centrality of taverns and hotels to early American life, and argued that elites tried in various ways to exert power through these public spaces. It has cast the multifarious roles of upper-class taverns and hotels: refuges, monuments, and stages. It has demonstrated how taverns of a less refined sort became points of contention through which elites attempted to shape the city around them. But how does this history intersect with broader ways of thinking about human society?

Taverns and hotels offer a special opportunity to reflect upon the work of two twentieth-century philosophers: Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas. The ideas of these two thinkers present sharply divergent frameworks for analyzing structures of power. But the rather obscure history of public accommodations in New York City offers common ground upon which we might reconcile their philosophies to some small extent.

Michel Foucault

Michel Foucault holds that identifying and understanding power structures is the surest way to liberate ourselves from their oppression. Foucault examines structures of knowledge and power through such topics as hospitals, prisons, and sexuality, always seeking to make his readers aware of and discomforted by the influences that shape and control individuals. He seeks to instigate reflection and reaction.¹

Much of Foucault’s work builds upon the idea that we must “base our analysis of power on the study of the techniques and tactics of domination.” He was interested not in the why of power so much as the how. He therefore urged historians to investigate “how things work at the level of ongoing subjugation, at the level of those continuous and uninterrupted processes which subject our bodies, govern our gestures, dictate our behaviors, etc.” This thesis investigates one set of those “continuous and uninterrupted processes,” so it is fair to apply Foucault’s philosophy here. I think Foucault would acknowledge the cultural history of taverns and hotels as an important component of protracted structures of power in early New York City.

“Power relations,” notes Foucault, “are rooted in the whole network of the social.” Political, cultural, and economic conflict permeates the realm of sociability. Power structures are reinforced beyond the traditional spaces with which we identify them: the battlefield, the courtroom, the legislative chamber, and the merchant’s office. The murmurings of power relations are echoed and shared across a dinner table at Cape’s Tavern. They percolate beneath the chords of an exclusive concert at Corre’s Hotel. They reverberate throughout the text of an anti-tavern pamphlet. Leisure comes to reflect and ultimately to buttress those very power relations. Thus, what we might call “culture”—explored here both in an architectural and institutional sense—was manipulated to reinforce the right of rulers to rule. Put more pointedly, elite paternalism was constituted in and emanated from public houses.

---


3 “The Subject and Power,” in Foucault, Power, ed. Faubion, 345.
Foucault notes that eighteenth-century Westerners understood the far-reaching implications of architecture. “In the eighteenth century,” he writes, “one sees the development of reflection upon architecture as a function of the aims and techniques of the government of societies.”4 The ruling classes understood that both institutions and the architecture that housed them were crucial to those “continuous and uninterrupted processes” that lay at the foundations of social order. They became conscious of the inescapable influence of architecture—of the concept that buildings and rooms inevitably shape the way people feel, act, and interact. In turn, therefore, elites shaped architecture to reflect their notions of “what the order of a society should be, what a city should be, given the requirements of the maintenance of order.”5 Buildings both reflected and helped to construct that social order. They were political and social statements by those who could afford to build and modify them. And while rhetoric can be dismissed with ease, architecture is not so easily disregarded. Speech is fleeting. Architecture is not.

The events that occurred within refined taverns and hotels were just as important as the buildings themselves. To mingle with patrons of the city’s best barrooms, one needed to know what to order and what to say. Wit and literacy were valued, so a keen mind and broad education could make or break an afternoon at the tavern or coffeehouse. To attend a hotel dinner or ball and to socialize with the city’s elite, one needed to don appropriate dress, to be familiar with the protocol of refined dining, and to maintain a proper sense of decorum throughout the evening. Ideally, one could also dance well. In pursuit of the ideal republican society, the city’s aristocratic, governing tribe hoped for similar (if somewhat diluted) standards of behavior from their fellow New Yorkers. They

---

4 “Space, Knowledge, and Power,” in Foucault, Power, ed. Faubion, 349.
5 Ibid., 349.
attempted both to legislate social order and to lead by example. Lower-class taverns became a sort of cultural battleground for the regulation of behavior. By attaching people to certain standards of refinement and leisurely behavior, by rendering abstract social ideas material, and thus by solidifying identities loosely grounded in structures of class and status, hotels and taverns created truth. Their role as important public spaces in daily life made individuals subject to exertions of power grounded in that constructed truth.

These questions of power, social order, institutions, and architecture carried special significance in the early American republic. The new nation was rapidly assembling a unique form of government and new structures of power. The uncertain future of governance amplified the importance of social and cultural distinctions—the stuff of cultural history. Foucault asserts that “in the West, a certain type of power brought to bear on individuals through education, through the shaping of their personality, was correlative with the birth . . . of a liberal regime.” In the wake of imperial monarchy and floating atop the rising tide of commercial society and modern capitalism, the role of public accommodations in everyday life took on heightened importance not only in the perceptions of identity but also in the structures of local power and the mechanisms of social domination.

Thus refined taverns and hotels were a way for wealthy New Yorkers to literally construct the urban society they envisioned. Within the walls of these buildings, New York’s ruling class could enact that society in a private setting, well-removed from the

---


realities of urban chaos. But the statements that these buildings and institutions made were intended to expand beyond the Hudson and East Rivers. Foucault asserts that, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Western cities “served as the models for the governmental rationality that was to apply to the whole of the territory.”

Throughout the first few decades of American independence, elite New Yorkers envisioned an entire nation modeled upon their idea of the republican city. In the minds of many, cities were no longer a realm apart. They were instead the epitome of progress and human potential, and hotels embodied some of their most salient and desirable characteristics.

Jürgen Habermas

Public houses can also be interpreted as liberating, empowering institutions. The central theme of Jürgen Habermas’s work is a faith in the power of discourse and reason to achieve mutual understanding and a more just, humane, and egalitarian society. In The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, Habermas explores how civil discourse enables various groups of private individuals to relate to each other and constitute the “public sphere.” This political body, Habermas contends, has been a liberating force through the past four centuries. He identifies the coffeehouses and salons of eighteenth-century England and France as places where the public sphere produced a “communicative rationality” that empowered the bourgeois public to challenge absolutist authority such as that which emanated from royal courts like Versailles.

8 “Space, Knowledge, and Power,” in Foucault, Power, ed. Faubion, 351.
In the American colonies, the public sphere assumed a slightly different form and role than its European counterparts. Habermas identifies the European public sphere of the eighteenth century as a “parity of the educated” between the “bourgeois avant-garde of the educated middle class” and the “elegant world” of titled nobility. Across the Atlantic, however, only the truly wealthy could claim to be educated. And except for royal governors, no courtly society of nobles surpassed them in social rank. Thus the bourgeois public sphere of America was comprised of a single class of men. They filled governmental office, they comprised the leading families, they formed the intellectual community, and they took the reigns as America started down the road to independence.

In the wake of the American Revolution, the bourgeois public sphere became the locus of political sovereignty in the United States. Elite rhetoric was reoriented; the public sphere’s discursive exertions of power were no longer directed above, against the monarch and imperial Parliament, but rather below, to the swelling American masses. Habermas does consider the role of the bourgeois public sphere in the constitutional states of nineteenth-century Europe, so we may continue with this analysis along his reasoning:

The constitutional state as a bourgeois state established the public sphere in the political realm as an organ of the state so as to ensure institutionally the connection between law and public opinion.

---

10 This section attempts to respond to David Waldstreicher’s hope that “historians’ future appropriations of Habermas will move beyond invocations of the republican public sphere to probe its actual construction and reconstruction in early America.” Within the context of public accommodations, I attempt here to explore that construction. David Waldstreicher, review of Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, *William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, vol. 52, no. 1 (January 1995), 175-177.


12 Ibid., 81.
Comprised of paternalist republicans who felt a sense of duty to guide the citizenry, the public sphere became a governing force within the American constitutional republic.

We may add hotels and refined taverns to coffeehouses as venues for the actualization and empowerment of the public sphere in New York City, for they too represented a setting for the critical discourse and communicative rationality that constituted a new form of power in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As we have seen, government was closely tied to taverns, coffeehouses, and hotels. Both government committees and political factions held meetings in public houses. Furthermore, the many social and cultural events—concerts, balls, lectures, clubs, etc.—hosted at New York’s taverns and coffeehouses were well attended by the city’s governing men. We may assume that they did not check their political identities at the door, especially given the contentions of recent scholarship that culture and governance were closely linked in late eighteenth-century America.\textsuperscript{13} Habermas himself provides a model for the partnering of culture and governance:

```
Critical debate ignited by works of literature and art was soon extended to include economic and political disputes, without any guarantee . . . that such discussions would be inconsequential, at least in the immediate context.\textsuperscript{14}
```

Thus the transaction of a critically reasoned discourse was conjoined with the culture of leisure enjoyed by New York’s leading men in the city’s taverns and hotels.

The public sphere was exclusive by virtue of its performative nature; private society was publicly oriented. The leisurely realm of taverns and hotels was, to some extent, intended for an audience. Richard Bushman has stressed the performance aspects


\textit{\textsuperscript{14} Habermas, \textit{The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere}, 33.}
of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century culture. Genteel people moved, dressed, acted, and ate with the express purpose of being seen by others. Mastery of these patterns of behavior, argues Bushman, equated to social prestige and political clout.\textsuperscript{15} Habermas agrees. “The experiential complex of audience-oriented privacy,” he writes, “made its way also into the political realm’s public sphere.”\textsuperscript{16} To eat, drink, or attend an event at a refined tavern or hotel—to participate in the public sphere—was to be seen by others and assert one’s membership in the highest circles of New York society.

Habermas asserts that the European coffeehouse “embraced the wider strata of the middle class, including craftsmen and shopkeepers,” concluding that the bourgeois public sphere was therefore a liberating force that “disregarded status altogether. The tendency replaced the celebration of rank with a tact befitting equals.”\textsuperscript{17} The elite public houses of New York probably also had their share of the better sort of middling patrons; a well-established artisan or shopkeeper was welcome at Fraunces Tavern or at the Tontine Coffee House. But in both colonial and early national America, systems of paternalism and deference had long filled the void of a titled nobility, and continued to shape social interaction. Rank was not disregarded but, on the contrary, exalted. New York’s merchants and other wealthy professionals set the tone for assemblies within refined public houses. And when they wished for greater exclusivity than a barroom could provide, they formed a club and withdrew to a private table. Thus the public sphere existed and functioned as a foundation of power in early America, but may not have been as liberating an entity as Habermas’s European version.

\textsuperscript{16} Habermas, \textit{The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere}, 51.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 33, 36.
Synthesis

The reconciliation of Foucauldian oppression and Habermasian liberation lies in the notion that the powerful discourse and culture that liberates some can oppress others when appropriated by an exclusive subset of society. Power cannot function without discourse, which occurred within and was colored by the architecture, institutions, and cultural milieu of taverns and hotels. But at the same time, discourse is liberating—it bears potential to move entire societies forward. Although taverns and hotels might have been venues for the fermentation of civil society through discourse in early national America, they also contributed to Foucaultian power structures by making participation in that discourse exclusive. That is to say, precisely because taverns and hotels were important social and political institutions, central to daily life in early New York City, they represented an avenue through which elites could assert their political and social hegemony. Class-based patronage of taverns and hotels created the kind of power knowledge and arbitrary truth which, according to Foucault, sets the tone for the power relations that rule society. Aided by a stratified system of public accommodations, Habermas’s communicative rationality and the power knowledge it created crystallized paternalist hierarchy in the young American republic. By rendering social stratification into material and institutional forms through the spatial division of social worlds, public accommodations perpetuated class-based claims to political power in early America.

The relationship between taverns, hotels, culture, and governance in New York City sheds some light on a more general question that has long puzzled historians of early America: After the popular upheaval and egalitarian rhetoric of the Revolution, how could the new United States remain a society dominated by the political and social vision
of elites? Why did a rising tide of democratic change take a full half century to even barely breach the walls of hierarchy, much less to flood the new nation? Put another way, why was the Revolution less radical than its central documents would lead us to expect—and, in fact, less revolutionary than popular understanding holds? One answer lies in the association of elite culture and politics with public houses. Elites could maintain their status as leaders and rulers by shaping public spaces and institutions, and thus by molding political involvement and social behavior to serve their own conservative vision. In an era when “governance was up for grabs,” American elites actively fought to seize it. The history of taverns and hotels is the story of how they at first succeeded.

**Beyond 1820**

Even in 1820, New York counted no more than ten hotels. But as early as 1826, the previously aristocratic City Hotel had lost some of its former refinement. As Fred Fitzgerald de Roos, a lieutenant in the English navy, described, the City Hotel no longer struck a visitor as elegant but rather as crowded, sparse, and tattered:

> The house was immense and full of people, but what a wretched place! Floors without carpets, beds without curtains, neither glass, mug, nor cup, and a miserable little rag was dignified with the name of a towel. The entrance to the hotel is constantly obstructed by the crowds of people passing to and from the bar-room where a person presides at a buffet formed upon the plan of a cage. This individual prepares punch and spirits all day to strange looking men who come to the house to read newspapers and talk politics.

---

18 Meranze, “Culture and Governance,” 714.
This change foreshadowed the hotel’s evolution throughout the rest of the nineteenth century. In the 1820s and beyond, the number of hotels in New York City exploded. The hotel form became larger and more accessible, paralleling the movement towards a more democratized society. But it also became more compartmentalized and anonymous. The hotel lost its status as a community center and a home for constructing the public sphere. It increasingly reflected not elite desires but, instead, middle-class values and a capitalist ethos. Its role in power structures shifted away from a monument to the governing elite towards a monument to the supremacy of American consumerism.21 Thus the nuanced synthesis of Foucauldian and Habermasian philosophy with which we have concluded is not applicable to tavern and hotel culture in later periods, when structures of paternalism began to dissolve and New York City exploded into a modern metropolis. That story, however, lies beyond the scope of this thesis.

The effects of architectural space and social institutions upon our daily lives, however, do persist. Buildings still have the power to ennoble some and intimidate others. Culture and politics both remain central to our understandings of ourselves and the ways we interact with others. And each of these concepts can still be appropriated by a subset of the population and manipulated to constitute a form of power. I hope that this history encourages us to consider not only those concepts but also, more importantly, who wields that power.

Bibliography

Primary sources

Newspapers:

American Citizen
American Minerva
Argus
Columbian
Columbian Gazetteer
Commercial Advertiser
Constitutional Gazette
Daily Advertiser
Daily Advertiser
Diary
Evening Post
Independent Journal
Minerva
Morning Chronicle
National Advocate
National Advocate
New-York Evening Post
New-York Gazette
New-York Gazette
New-York Journal
New-York Morning Post

Accessed through the NewsBank database of Early American Newspapers.

Manuscript collections:


Published primary sources:


Elliott, John. *A selected, pronouncing and accented dictionary . . . . Being an abridgement of the most useful dictionaries now extant; together with the addition of a number of words now in vogue not found in any dictionary. . . for the use of schools in America.* Suffield, CT, 1800.

*The Following extracts from the writings of pious men, of different denominations, and at different periods of time, exposing the evil and pernicious effects of stage plays, and other vain amusements,— are recommended to the serious perusal of all who profess Christianity. To which is added, An enquiry into the effects of spirituous liquors upon the human body.* New York: Francis Childs, 1786.


Hunter, Robert, Jr. *Quebec to Carolina in 1785-1786, Being the Travel Diary and Observations of Robert Hunter, Jr., a Young Merchant of London.* Edited by Louis B. Wright and Marion Tinling. San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1943.


A report of a committee of the Humane Society, appointed to inquire into the number of tavern licenses; the manner of granting them; their effects upon the community; and the other sources of vice and misery in this city; and to visit Bridewell. New York: Collins and Perkins, 1810.

Rush, Benjamin. An enquiry into the effects of spirituous liquors upon the human body, and their influence upon the happiness of society. Philadelphia: Thomas Bradford, 1784.


Secondary sources


Blackmar, Elizabeth S. “Rewalking the ‘Walking City’: Housing and Property Relations in New York City, 1780-1840.” In Material Life in America, 1600-1860, edited


