

Members of today's Knickerbocker Greys at Manhattan's Park Avenue Armory. Bottom row, from left: James Ferguson, eight; Artemis Körpülü, nine; James McDermott, six; William Brothers IV, six. Above Brothers stands Robert Henry Scarborough IV, seven. Second row: Andrew Kumble, nine; Alexander Meech, ten; George Finn Clark, thirteen; Perrin Weddington Tomlin, ten. Third row: Quintin Blumka, twelve; Niamh Hoban, twelve; Matthew Ptucha, eleven; Joshua Klein, twelve. Top row: Shaw Worth, eight; William Cotter, eleven.



# THE KNICKERBOCKER GREYS

For decades, they have taught discipline and manners to generations of Vanderbilts and Rockefellers. But in an age where childhood is defined by soccer leagues, video games, and Facebook, does it still mean something to be a Grey?

*By Kristina Stewart Ward  
Photographs by Tom McCall*



*This page, from far left: James Ferguson and James McDermott; Quintin Blumka. Opposite, from left: Alexander Meech; a vintage Greys uniform diagram; Robert Henry Scarborough IV.*

**T**hey looked just like little toy soldiers,” says Nancy Fowler, recalling the 1978 Knickerbocker Greys Christmas Review, in which her son Cruger, a fourth-generation Greys legacy, sported his dress uniform of gray tunic covered in medals, starched white pants, maroon sash, white hat and gloves, and model rifle. A dozen of the eleven-year-old’s ancestors had been members of this Boy

Scouts-meets-ROTC troop for children aged six to sixteen, including his great-grandfather William Slocum Groesbeck Fowler, a Manhattan and Newport society fixture who joined the Greys in 1885. Under the vaulted ceilings of the Park Avenue Armory’s palatial drill hall, Mrs. Fowler sat alongside some of New York City’s most patrician families, watching as eighty pint-sized soldiers marshaled with ramrod posture to the accompaniment of a full marching band. It was a proud moment: after all, the city’s favorite sons were not only displaying discipline—they were carrying on the family legacy and, perhaps even more crucially, guaranteeing their own placement on “the list,” a compendium of nascent Who’s Whos maintained by the city’s prominent social secretaries and agencies like Tappin & Tew.

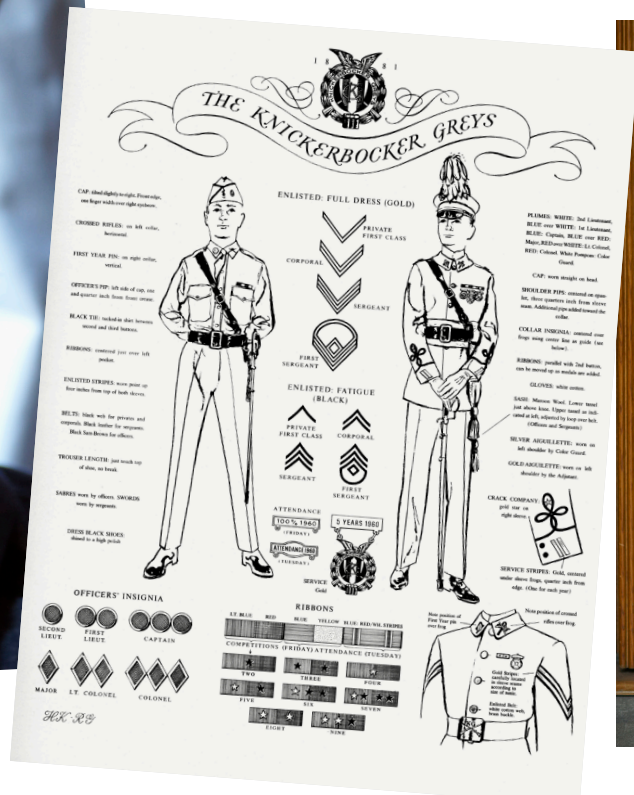
“The real benefit of the Knickerbocker Greys is the sense of character the children gain,” Fowler says today. “But of course, there was always a social component. The debutante balls all used the Greys’ roster as a foundation for their guest lists.”

Thirty-two years later, joining the Greys is not the canny social maneuver it used to be. To be fair, any American institution would have a hard time maintaining the prestige of its alumni list in our contemporary world. New York City mayor John Lindsay was a Grey, as were New York governor Nelson Rocke-

efeller, the children of several United States presidents, and no fewer than four Vanderbilts, six Mortimers, five more Rockefeller, eight Whitneys, ten Roosevelts, and twelve Morgans.

But recent history has been challenging to the Greys, whose membership once hovered around 250 and now numbers twenty-five. In the late 1960s, Vietnam War protesters picketed the Greys’ annual Park Avenue march. “Even more devastating to the ranks,” recalls Cruger Fowler, “was that the schools stopped allowing us to wear our uniforms to class. And then there was the fact that we all wanted to grow our hair longer than the military cut mandated for cadets.” During the height of antimilitary sentiment, dancing school replaced the Greys as the fast track to adult society in Manhattan. “I remember my mother saying she was taking me to Knickerbocker’s, and I thought I was becoming a Grey,” recalls Harry Davison, great-grandson of Groton School founder Endicott Peabody. “So imagine my surprise when we showed up in a room filled with girls in long gloves—she meant Knickerbocker dancing school!” (At Carolina Herrera’s fashion show this fall, Jennifer Creel and Gigi Mortimer both volunteered that their sons were Knickerbockers, only to sheepishly retract their statements a few minutes later once they realized the discussion was not about the dancing school.)

In the ’80s, the Greys had to contend with the headlines surrounding Robert Chambers, the “Preppy Killer,” who joined the Knickerbocker Greys in 1974 and advanced to the rank of lieutenant colonel before heading off to boarding school. Numbers continued to dwindle over the next fifteen years with the ever-increasing glut of after-school activities, despite the admission of girls to the group beginning in 1986. After 9/11, the Greys ceased meeting regularly for two years when their commander was sent to Iraq and the armory was reclaimed by the National



Guard for active military use.

True to their ethos, the Knickerbocker Greys are not giving up without a fight. The corps' current president, Betsy Rowe, a mother of two former cadets, is indefatigable. "We're very proud of the history of this organization, but we're equally pleased with how it's evolved over the years." Among the things she boasts of are the "thriving" Web site and Facebook page, meant to link alumni with current cadets; a membership that includes children of African, Indian, Jewish, Hispanic, and Asian descent; and (gasp!) more public-school than private-school students. "Our current size allows a much more collegial environment and the opportunity for one-on-one instruction," Rowe says cheerfully.

Today Rowe is standing in the Cadet Room of the Park Avenue Armory, where the Greys meet every Tuesday during the school year from 4:30 to 6 P.M. All around her, mothers are helping their cadets transition from their street clothes into the Greys' storied official dress uniforms, which are kept for them at the armory. "Which hat do you think fits Henry now?" asks one mother as she wriggles onto her son's head a selection of white caps adorned with the Greys' crossed-rifle gold emblem. "William needs a new sash," says another. Perrin Weddington Tomlin, a ten-year-old African-American cadet who attends the Lower Lab School for gifted students on the Upper East Side, is being sized up by his mother, Stephanie. "We came into the Greys with no sense of the social aspect," she says. "I just knew Perrin would thrive here because he wanted opportunities for leadership. When he was four years old, he came to me one day and said, 'What do I have to do to become the boss?'"

Lt. Colonel David Menegon, the commandant of the group for the last twelve years, still believes the Greys have the answer to that question. "We try to instill in our cadets a sense of belong-

ing, teach them how to be good citizens, to participate in a tradition that has shaped some of the most respected leaders in the city and the nation."

"The ability to give orders to and take orders from peers is one of the most important aspects of the Greys," says the strict but jovial Menegon as he wrestles with an obstinate jacket belt needing adjustments for its new wearer. "Twenty years from now, I'm going to see you at P.J. Clarke's, and you're going to owe me a drink for that," he says to the six-year-old cadet.

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IN 19TH-CENTURY Manhattan, before soccer leagues and computer-programming classes took hold of the after-school hours, Upper East Side mothers rallied around Mrs. Edward Curtis when she devised a way to channel their boys' energy in a productive, social pastime. With her husband being a famous Civil War doctor and her great-grandfather a member of George Washington's army, it was only natural that Curtis's program would have a military varnish.

Railroad magnate Stuyvesant Fish was among the earliest cadets and later wrote about the Knickerbocker Greys: "If our families happened to be swanky, we were driven there in a Brewster brougham with two liveried coachmen...and we could also walk, preferably without the escort of a governess or some older person so that we could fight the muckers en route, a thrilling experience which would start with a taunting 'Sissy

pants,' answered on our part by 'Muckers.'"

Addressing a group of Greys in 1982, film star and decorated naval officer Douglas Fairbanks Jr.—who had served as a Greys bugle boy—described the group in its 1920s heyday. "The intended function of the Greys was to keep that half-pint age group occupied for at least two afternoons a week. Most boys' families were expected to be included in the New York Social Register... a certain genealogy, real or tampered with, was considered helpful, as was an absence of scandal—the published kind only, of course."

Nowadays, admission to the Greys hardly requires blue blood; a \$500 check gets a child into the Tuesday gatherings, plus "strategy club" meetings at the armory on Saturdays, occasional rifle-range sessions in Greenwich, Connecticut, and an annual "sham battle" that rotates among locations like West Point. And though the cadets don't necessarily come from high society, membership in the Greys does give them a taste of it: they attend events hosted by the St. George's Society and the Sons and Daughters of the American Revolution. In 2007 the Greys staged a drill performance at the infamously excessive 60th birthday party of financier Steve Schwarzman, which took place at the armory. "It's good for the cadets to be in social settings," says Menegon. "I tell them, 'You can't eat any hors d'oeuvres until you have introduced yourself to at least five people, and you can't eat them while you're still wearing your gloves!'"

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And yet, for the parents of today's cadets, everything that the Greys used to be remains part of the appeal. There is the idea that once their child dons the historic uniform, he or she has claim to the organization's storied history. All you have to do is watch parents today as their children wriggle into the communal uniforms that are precise replicas of those worn in previous eras, when each cadet owned his own uniform, custom-made by the likes of Harry Lucker, the Greys' tailor from 1881 to the 1930s. "Lucker not only outfitted a cadet, but he kept track of him ever after, recording his engagement, marriage, divorce, remarriage, polo score at Meadowbrook, position in the Bermuda Cup Race," says Menegon. "'There's so-and-so,' he'd say, pointing to a photograph. 'Used to be fat. Thirty-eight-inch waist when he was ten. Slimmed down, though, when he was thirteen. Married a du Pont.'"

Menegon observes as the older cadets issue drill orders to their toy-rifle-toting subordinates. (Greys ascending to higher ranks within the corps are awarded the use of swords and sabers,

which are real and, like the miniature toy rifles, never pointed at fellow cadets.) The senior cadets affect stern voices that, much like Menegon's, are punctuated with humor. "Forward march... left face. Attention!" Sergeant William Cotter, eleven, waits a beat. "Random disco!" he orders suddenly, and the line of children erupts into gangly, riotous dance moves. "Attention! Dress, right, dress!" Order is restored.

Menegon zeroes in on one boy. "Alexander Meech may look every inch a sergeant now," he says, "but up until this year he had hair down to his waist!" Alexander smiles broadly and keeps marching. "I told him that I couldn't promote him to sergeant with his hair that long. I thought that would do it because everyone wants to make sergeant: that's when you get a sword." Lt. Colonel Menegon eventually realized he had to switch tactics. "I told him, 'Alexander, I'm going to make you a sergeant because you've exhibited all of the skills and leadership necessary for the role. And now that you are a sergeant, I know that you'll do the right thing and cut your hair as an example to the other boys.' He cut his hair." The boy's mother, Gail Ann Kizner, vouches for the power the Greys—and their illustrious history—have over her son. "You can't imagine how proud Alexander is when he wears his drill uniform to practice," she says, "and someone stops him on the street and says: 'You're a Knickerbocker Grey, aren't you? I was one year ago!'"

"Our current group of cadets has such an appreciation for what the Greys stand for," Menegon says, "and want very much to be a part of that tradition. And who's to say that their family names won't be the ones celebrated fifty or 100 years from now?"

Andrew Roosevelt was never a Grey but was recently reminded that ten of his ancestors were, including his distant cousin Archibald, son of the president Teddy. He recalls a story about the Greys that his father told him when he was a boy. "I don't know if he was referring to a family member," Roosevelt says, "but he told me how one of the Greys was leaving the armory still wearing his uniform after his weekly drill practice. Onto the street emerge three tough guys who had sized up this Grey as an easy target... Little Lord Fauntleroy wearing a uniform and a cape. They each pull out a knife, and this Grey, he pulls off the ultimate 'Crocodile Dundee' moment. He says, 'You think that's a knife?' and then reaches into his cape and draws out a three-foot saber. 'Now that's a knife.' He chased those guys down the street!" Roosevelt is still laughing at the thought of this scene when he's asked why he never joined the Greys. "I don't really know," he says, thinking about it for a moment. "My dad wasn't a member, and he never signed me up... I guess the window of opportunity just sort of disappeared." So would he consider having his own son, now only two, follow in the marching steps of his ancestors? "You know," Roosevelt says, suddenly turning serious, "I'm going to drop by the armory one of these Tuesdays and see what it's all about." ❖

And they all fall down:  
horseplay after drill practice.

