

THE STORY OF CHARLTON STREET

Charlton Street Block Association

By Richard Blodgett
© 2018 Richard Blodgett

Charlton Street is one of the great historic streets in New York City and indeed one of the extraordinary residential blocks in the United States. On Charlton Street, American history comes alive.

Charlton Street was developed in the 1820s by fur trader John Jacob Astor on the grounds of a majestic country estate. The north side of Charlton between Sixth Avenue and Varick Street today contains the longest unbroken row of Federal and early Greek Revival homes extant in New York City. These dwellings, together with the four houses

Charlton Street is located in Lower Manhattan, just south of Greenwich Village. The homes were built in the 1820s through the 1840s. Pictured is the north side of Charlton between Sixth Avenue and Varick Street. (See map on page 2.)

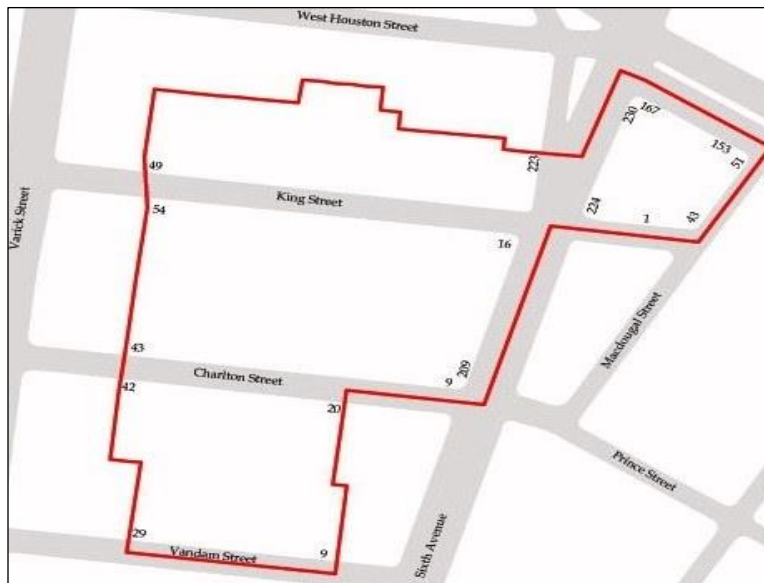


on the south side of the street, are the remnants of a great procession of homes that once lined both sides of Charlton from MacDougal Street nearly all the way to the Hudson River. All the homes west of Varick were demolished years ago. In contrast, many of those east of Varick have defied the odds to survive for nearly two centuries. They are among the oldest buildings in the city.

In recognition of the neighborhood's historic and architectural importance, in 1966 the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission designated Charlton Street – together with King Street immediately to its north and Vandam Street immediately to its south – from Sixth Avenue to Varick Street, as the Charlton-King-

Vandam Historic District. This designation protects the remaining buildings from demolition and requires that any alterations to their façades be approved by the commission.

In 2006, *TimeOut New York* named Charlton Street one of the 10 best residential blocks in all of New York City, based on aesthetics, amenities, trees, parks, waterfront



The Charlton-King-Vandam Historic District is outlined in red.

access and other factors. Charlton Street is like a small town in the big city, a town where people know each other and give a helping hand when needed.

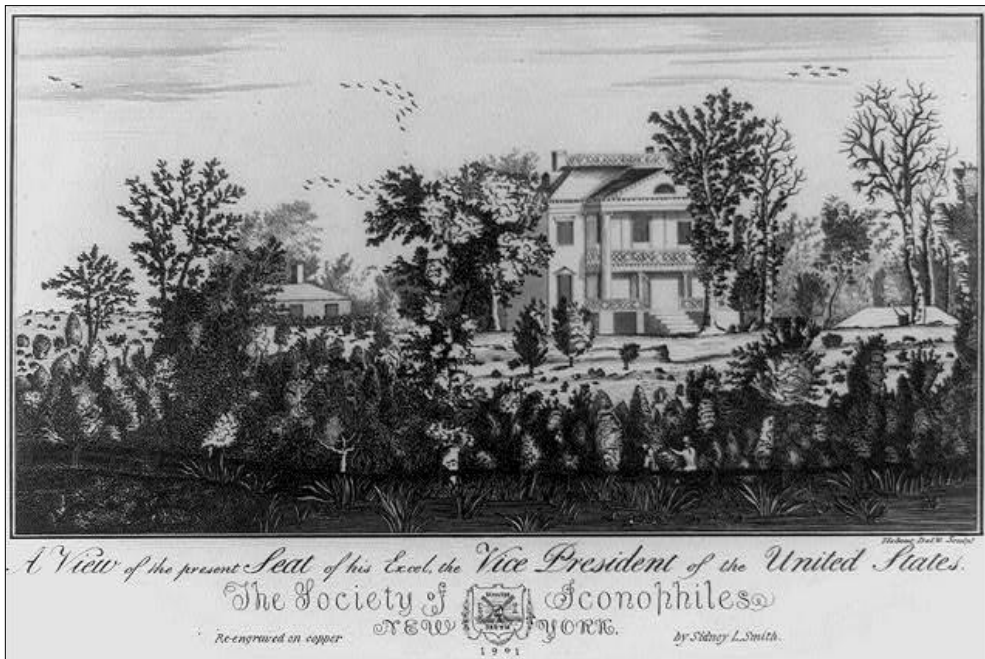
Early History: the Lenape, the Dutch, Queen Anne and Richmond Hill

If you could go back in time and stand on Charlton Street 400 years ago, you would find yourself in a pristine forest interspersed with marshes and streams. The area was a favorite hunting and camping ground of the Lenape, a Native American group. Deer, flying squirrels and other wildlife abounded.

Matters began to change in 1624 when the first Dutch settlers arrived. Soon, the Dutch had cleared much of the land south of the neighborhood for farming. Four decades later, in 1664, the British captured the city. And four decades after that, in 1705, the neighborhood was transformed forever when Queen Anne of England gave a large expanse of land along the Hudson River – between today's Christopher and Fulton streets, including all the land on Charlton – to Trinity Church, an Episcopal parish at Broadway and Wall Street. To this day, the church is the largest property holder in Lower

Manhattan and the wealthiest parish in America, owning more than 25 prime commercial sites on Varick, Hudson and other nearby streets. The church's real estate holdings, all of which date back to that 1705 royal grant, are worth nearly \$4 billion.

Unlike the land still owned by Trinity Church, the land on Charlton between Sixth and Varick came into the hands of the residents in a lengthy, circuitous manner. The chain of events began in 1767 when the church leased 26 acres – including all the land on today's Charlton Street – to a British major, Abraham Mortier, to build a country mansion. Called Richmond Hill, the mansion stood on a low hill overlooking the Hudson River, just west of today's intersection of Charlton and Varick. The residents of



The homes on Charlton, King and Vandam were built on the grounds of the 26-acre Richmond Hill estate. The estate mansion, one of the finest in colonial New York, stood on a low hill overlooking the Hudson River.

Richmond Hill, and thus early residents of the neighborhood, included Founding Fathers and other luminaries of the time.

George Washington seized the mansion in 1776 and used it as his Revolutionary War headquarters in the summer of that year. He was living at Richmond Hill when the Declaration of Independence was proclaimed on July 4, 1776. In September 1776, British troops drove Washington's army from the city, and the mansion was occupied by Sir Guy Carleton, commander-in-chief of British forces in North America.

Following the war, Richmond Hill became the vice presidential home of John and Abigail Adams in 1789-1790, when New York was the nation's first capital. Adams

loved the estate with its beautiful grounds and sweeping views of the Hudson. “Never did I live in so delightful a spot,” he wrote.

Aaron Burr, an attorney and U.S. senator, acquired the Richmond Hill mansion and the church lease on the land in 1794. He entertained lavishly at Richmond Hill, hosting dinner parties for politicians, foreign dignitaries, writers, artists and others. At the same time, he viewed the property from a commercial perspective. In 1797, as residential development pushed northward from the southern end of Manhattan, the Richmond Hill estate stood in its path. To capitalize on the opportunity, Burr filed plans with the city to

This is what Charlton Street looked like in 1926, viewed from MacDougal Street, looking west toward the Hudson River. The six homes on the far left and five on the far right were torn down one year later when Sixth Avenue was extended through the middle of the neighborhood.

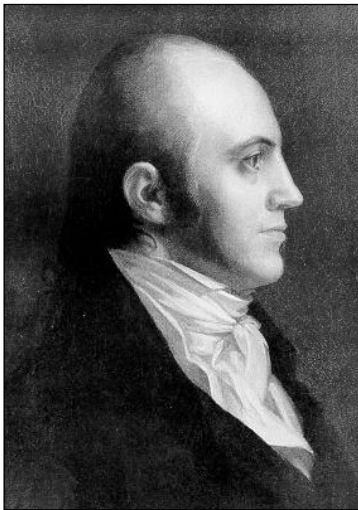


subdivide the estate’s grounds for what we would today call tract housing, although his idea of tract housing was considerably more elegant than the tract houses of our time. His plans called for the creation of three streets running west from MacDougal Street to the river. (Because Sixth Avenue did not yet exist, Charlton Street originally began at MacDougal.) He named the proposed streets Burr for himself; King for Rufus King, a signer of the Constitution and fellow U.S. senator; and Vandam for Anthony Van Dam, a wealthy importer and city alderman.

Although the city approved Burr’s plans, he was pressed for money and did not proceed. In 1802, he tried to sell the estate for \$150,000, but few could afford the price and he took it off the market. Then on the morning of July 11, 1804, Burr – now vice president of the United States – arose from his bed at Richmond Hill and departed for

Weehawken, New Jersey, for his infamous duel with Alexander Hamilton. After wounding Hamilton, Burr returned home for a leisurely breakfast. But his pleasant life at Richmond Hill ended suddenly the next day when Hamilton died.

Burr was charged with murder and fled the city. He eventually made his way to Louisiana, where he was arrested in 1807 for allegedly plotting to capture southwestern regions of the United States and form a separate country. Although acquitted in a



We can thank politician Aaron Burr (1756-1836), left, for conceiving the idea of Charlton Street, but we can thank fur trader John Jacob Astor (1763-1848) for making it happen. The Richmond Hill land was owned by Trinity Church, an Episcopal parish on Broadway at Wall Street. Burr acquired the mansion and a church lease on the land in 1794 and filed plans with the city to subdivide the estate, creating Charlton, King and Vandam streets. However, he suffered financial reversals before he could put his plans into action. Subsequently, Astor purchased the mansion and the church lease and opened Charlton, King and Vandam in the 1820s.



sensational trial, popular opinion condemned him. New York City now expunged the name Burr Street from its maps and rechristened the proposed roadway Charlton Street in memory of Dr. John Charlton, a prominent surgeon and founding president of the Medical Society of the State of New York, who had died several years earlier.

John Jacob Astor and the Development of Charlton Street

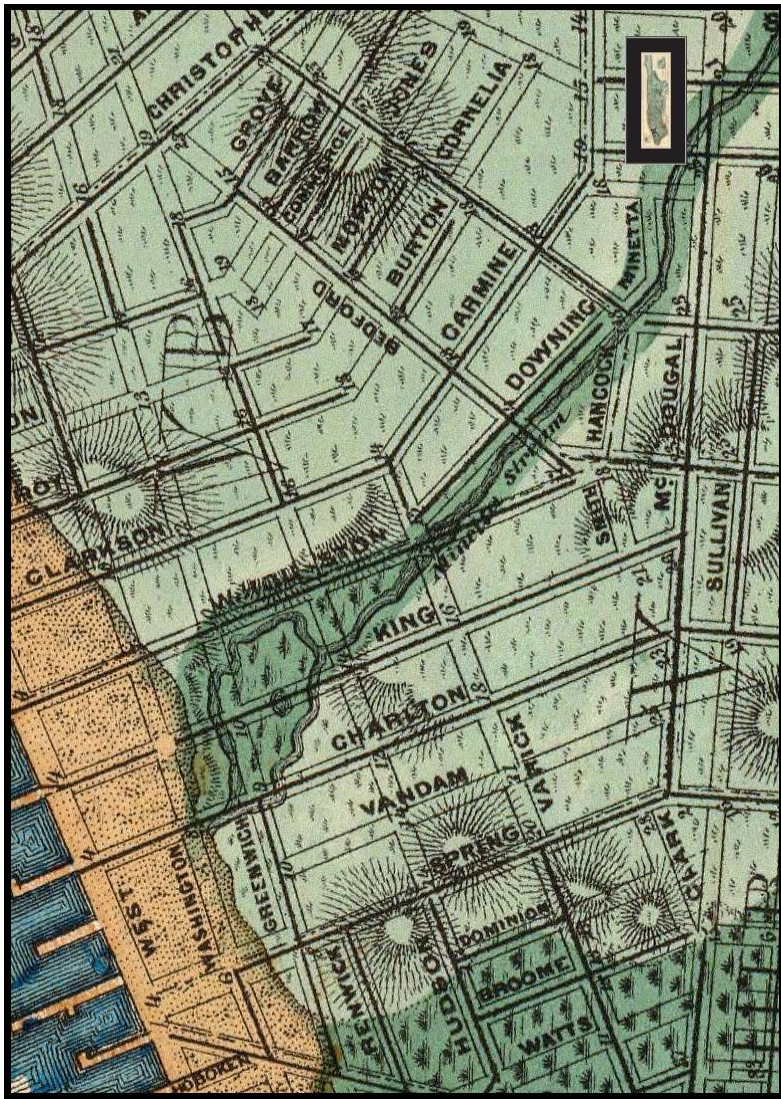
Burr ultimately lost the estate to creditors, who sold the mansion and the Trinity Church lease to John Jacob Astor. Astor revived Burr's plans and brought them to fruition. The development of Charlton, King and Vandam launched Astor on a real estate career that would make him the wealthiest man in America.

New York boomed in the early 19th century as its population swelled from 65,000 in 1800 to 250,000 in 1820, creating tremendous demand for housing. In 1820, Astor had the Richmond Hill mansion rolled downhill on logs to the southeast corner of Charlton and Varick, the site of today's WNYC Greene Space. However, the move was delayed

briefly by a saboteur's dirty tricks, as spelled out in a newspaper ad placed on Christmas Day 1820 by Simeon Brown, who was hired by Astor to supervise the move:

The public is respectfully informed that the house of Richmond Hill, owned by J. J. Astor, Esq. which was advertised to be removed on Wednesday last, was postponed on that day in consequence of some evil disposed person having put obstructions on the ways; but on the following day it was actually removed a distance of 55 feet in 45 minutes, with chimnies standing and without the slightest injury to the house or fixtures.

Once the relocation of the mansion to the corner of Charlton and Varick was completed, Astor turned the building into a fancy tavern with gardens to lend tone to the

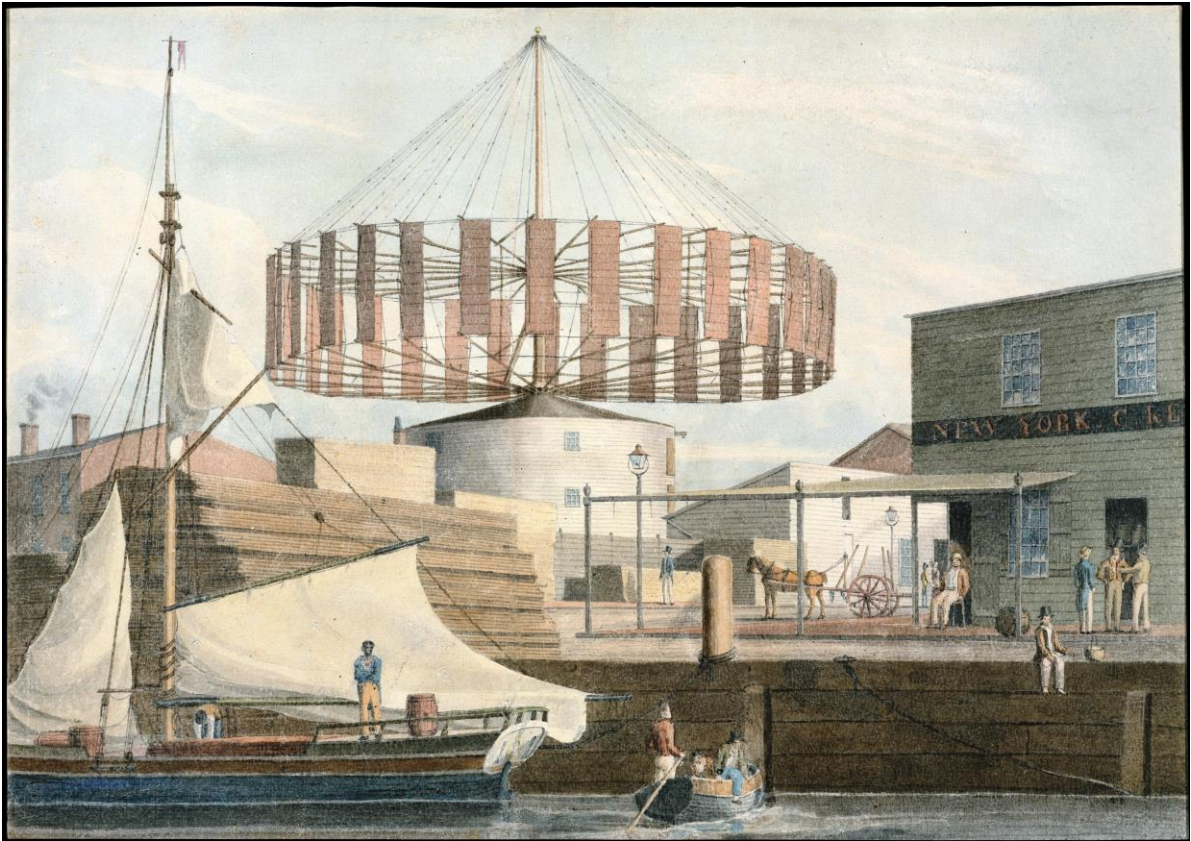


An 1865 map shows the topography of Charlton-King-Vandam and the surrounding neighborhood in the early 19th century before the homes were built, superimposed with the 1865 street grid. The Hudson River is blue; landfill is brown; marshlands are dark green; and hills are indicated with wavy lines. The black lines show which streets were connected to the city sewer as of 1865: Charlton and King were connected, Vandam and Varick were not. Minetta Stream (also called Minetta Brook) ran through the neighborhood; according to lore, it still flows deep beneath the streets.

new neighborhood. The structure later became a theater and was torn down in 1849. In 1822, after leveling the hill on which the mansion had stood, Astor opened the three

streets and divided the land into individual building lots. He then sold church leases on the lots to carpenters and masons, who built the houses and lived in them or sold them to merchants and professionals.

Most of today's homes on Charlton, King and Vandam are Federal-style houses constructed in the 1820s and 1830s. The Federal style draws on Roman ideals of beauty and proportion. However, the homes at 15, 17, 19 and 21 Charlton are Greek Revival



This watercolor – titled “Circular Mill, King Street, New York,” by 19th-century artist John William Hill – depicts King Street at the Hudson River in 1830. Based on the stacks of lumber, the mill is almost certainly a saw mill – which makes sense, since lumber was needed for all the houses being built on Charlton, King and Vandam. However, it’s anybody’s guess what the large circular contraption is and how it worked. The image offers a charming view of the local waterfront nearly two centuries ago.

structures built after the original homes on those sites were destroyed by fire in 1840. The Greek Revival style, popular from about 1840 to 1860, is characterized by columned entrances and other features suggestive of Greek temples.

The early residents owned their homes but paid ground rent to Trinity Church. As of 1874, the typical ground rent on a Charlton Street lot was \$400 annually, according to a newspaper account of the time. It was not until the 1910s that the church sold the residents the land on which their homes stood.

Clement C. Moore, who wrote *The Night Before Christmas*, was the most famous original resident of Charlton Street, living briefly at 1 Charlton (now demolished) with his wife, Catherine, and their nine children. Although Moore came from a well-to-do family, Charlton Street was not a rich person's block. As shown in the 1830 city directory, Enoch Armitage at 12 Charlton was a hosiery merchant, Noah Camp at 17 Charlton a carpenter, Samuel Darling at 24 Charlton an accountant and Jared Pope at 32 Charlton a rigger. Nearly all the residents had English or Dutch names, and for good reason: the city's population was still predominantly of English and Dutch stock.

If we are to judge by the 1830 U.S. census, Charlton Street attracted many families with young children, as might be expected of a new neighborhood. The census shows scores of children under ten. Of course, families were bigger then. It also shows that the majority of adults were under 40, suggesting that many of the original residents were relatively young and up-and-coming in their careers.

Horse Manure and Riots

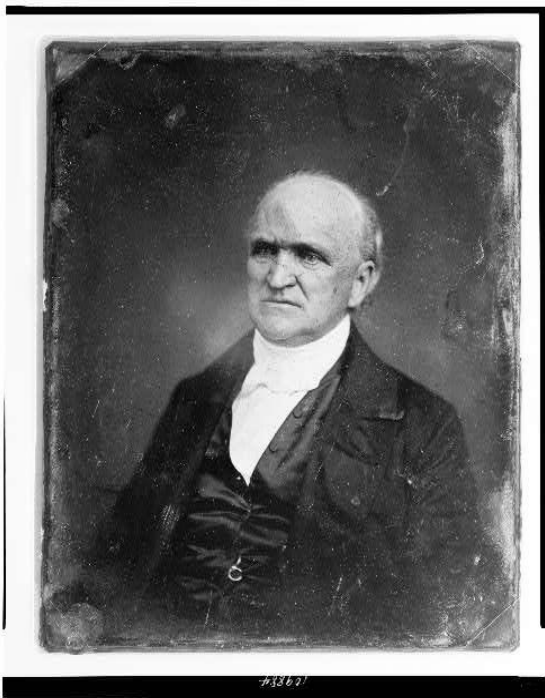
New York was a wonderful place to live in the 19th century, as it is today. One observer said the city "possesses a combination of leisurely charm and relatively unsophisticated flamboyance." Yet, life was primitive by modern standards. Because Charlton Street was initially a dirt road and horses were the primary means of transportation, boots became covered with mud and manure. Nearly two centuries later, many of the homes still have their original cast-iron railings with boot scrapers. Early maps show outhouses in the backyards. Running water and indoor plumbing did not arrive on Charlton Street until the 1860s. Electricity made its debut in the 1890s.

Today fires are a rarity and seldom jump from one building to the next. In the 19th century, by contrast, they were a constant threat because of the use of fireplaces, candles and oil lamps. Moreover, they could spread rapidly because of the rudimentary

firefighting equipment of the era. The biggest fire in the history of Charlton Street, in 1828, destroyed six homes on the north side of the block.

Perhaps the single worst day in the history of Charlton Street was July 10, 1834, when the block was overrun by a racist mob seeking to harm the Rev. Dr. Samuel H. Cox, a Presbyterian minister who lived at 3 Charlton. Cox was an abolitionist in an era when abolitionists were viewed as radicals and troublemakers. Days before the mob invaded Charlton Street, he had preached that Americans should have sympathy for the

This formidable looking gentleman is the Rev. Dr. Samuel H. Cox (1793-1880), one of the original residents of Charlton Street. He was a Presbyterian minister and outspoken opponent of slavery. Not only was his house attacked in 1834 by an anti-abolitionist mob, but a woman in Georgia wrote, "I wish he would come to Savannah. I should love to see him tarred and feathered, and his head cut off and carried on a pole." He left Charlton Street after the attack on his home and subsequently toned down his anti-slavery views, making enemies among the abolitionists who once were his friends. The photo was taken in about 1855 by Matthew Brady.



plight of slaves because Jesus "was a colored man... probably of a dark Syrian hue," a description that infuriated many whites.

As tensions mounted, a mob attacked an abolitionist meeting on Chatham Street on July 9. The following day, rioters smashed the windows of Cox's church on Laight Street and swept north to Charlton, breaking into his house and looting it. Fortunately, Cox and his family had fled. Rioters returned the next day and looted the house again. Mob violence spread quickly throughout Lower Manhattan and continued for three days, targeting the homes, churches and shops of blacks and abolitionists. Shaken by these events, Cox moved upstate to teach theology.

Decline, Rediscovery and Renaissance

Lower Manhattan was filled with Federal and Greek Revival homes in the 19th century. In that era, Charlton-King-Vandam was just another middle-class neighborhood in a vast sea of three- and four-story houses. The ever-irascible James Fenimore Cooper even claimed that the homes on Charlton were “second-rate genteel houses” in comparison to the then-majestic residences near the intersection of Bleecker and Thompson, where he lived briefly in 1833.

That may have been true in 1833. But my, how times do change! The intersection of Bleecker and Thompson is today largely commercial, and the 19th-century homes on



During the second half of the 19th century and into the opening years of the 20th century, most homes on Charlton were coal heated. This cast-iron coal chute cover, circa 1845-1850, in front of 19 Charlton is a rare relic of that era. It was made by Cornell's Iron Works, one of New York's best-known foundries of the period, and has been trod upon by generations of passersby for more than 160 years.

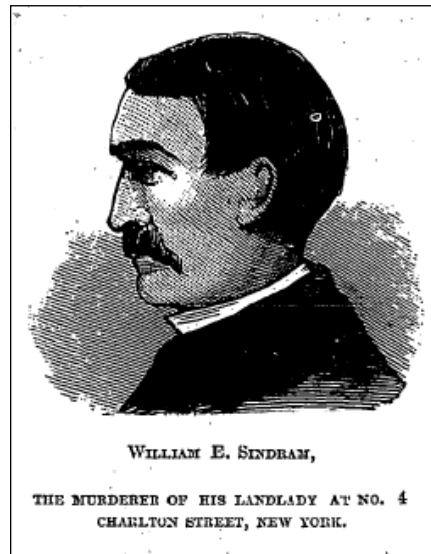
many other nearby streets are gone. But Charlton between Sixth and Varick survived to become the choice address it is today. The story of this special block, tucked away among the tall buildings of Manhattan, is one of decline, rediscovery and rebirth.

Living conditions and property values on Charlton began to worsen in the 1850s when many residents departed for larger, more stylish accommodations uptown. As they left, individuals of more modest means bought the buildings and turned them into boarding houses. Consequently, Charlton Street became much more densely populated in the second half of the 19th century. No house illustrates this change more dramatically than number 43, the last house on the north side at the western end of the block. In 1830, James Montgomery, a grocer and flax dealer, lived there with his wife, their eight

children and two servants, a total of 12 people. By 1880, number 43 was a boarding house owned by Levi Heyser, a butcher, and his wife, Phoebe. They shared the home not only with their five children and four servants, but also with 22 boarders, a total of 33 people! How nearly three dozen people managed to coexist in a four-story house is hard to imagine. Today, by contrast, two people reside at number 43.

At the same time, the surrounding neighborhood degenerated to a degree we would find alarming. Drunken brawls in local saloons sometimes spilled out onto the

Crime and violence were common in the neighborhood in the late 19th century. William Sindram, Charlton Street's most notorious murderer, is pictured in the Police Gazette. Sindram was a 28-year-old printer who lived in a boarding house at 4 Charlton (now torn down, on the site of Father Fagan Park). In 1881, he shot and killed his landlady when she sought to evict him for failing to pay his \$1 weekly rent. He was convicted and hanged.



sidewalks, and murders took place in the Charlton-King-Vandam area with clock-like regularity every three to four years.

Charlton-King-Vandam west of Varick became a slum populated by impoverished immigrants who worked on the docks. Many of the women took in washing, with the result – according to a *New York Times* article in 1874 – that the gutters of Charlton west of Varick were filled with discarded wash water, “sending forth an offensive odor on a warm day.” Trinity Church not only owned most of the land west of Varick but also more than 300 tenements and small multi-family dwellings. However, it let its buildings fall into disrepair. The *Times* called Trinity “the worst landlord in New York,” while the *World* said its tenements were “ramshackle and filthy.” Moreover, the city Board of Health fined Trinity repeatedly for failing to provide running water on each floor of its buildings, as required by law. Trinity claimed the law was unconstitutional but

lost in court in 1895 and paid the fines, after which it began to improve its properties. In 1909, Trinity announced it was getting out of the residential real estate business. Over the next two decades it demolished its tenements and put up the commercial buildings that stand west of Varick today, ending one of the more sordid episodes in the history of the neighborhood.

More recently, the area west of Varick – from Houston to Canal streets, including the western blocks of Charlton, King and Vandam – was renamed Hudson Square and

Charlton-King-Vandam was a middle-class neighborhood with pockets of severe poverty a century ago. Social reformer Jacob Riis photographed "The Old Gribbon Sisters" in 1895. The Irish-born sisters, Margaret and Harriet, lived in a tenement at 5 Vandam Street, which stood on the southern half of the site now occupied by 2 Charlton. Riis wrote, "There was before them starvation or the poorhouse. And the proud spirits of the sisters, helpless now, quailed at the outlook. For them there was nothing left but to sit and wait." But photography can be very powerful. After seeing the picture, philanthropist Emily Vanderbilt Sloane gave the sisters a small pension to help them get by.



was rezoned in 2013 to permit conversion of many of the commercial buildings to residential use. As a result, in a surprising twist, the area west of Varick, which years ago was a slum, is again becoming residential, this time with upscale condos.

In the 1870s, trolley tracks were laid along Charlton Street, further eroding the quality of life. The horse-drawn cars ran east on Charlton and Prince streets and returned west on Houston Street. The trolley made Charlton Street more accessible, but also caused it to be a less desirable place to live because of the noise and dirt of the cars and horses.

Tammany Hall to the Rescue

The economic fortunes of Charlton Street reached low ebb toward the end of 19th century. Property values were decimated by the presence of the slum west of Varick. At that point,



Some of the differences between Charlton Street a century ago and today are shown in a 1914 photo looking east from Varick Street. Trolley tracks ran down the center of Charlton. The street was littered with horse manure. The high school building (the light-colored building on the right with arched top-floor windows) was then a church. Rudden's Stable was located on the site of today's 2 Charlton. There was not a single tree on the block; today there are approximately 25. Varick Street was being widened to build the Seventh Avenue subway – hence the vacant lots on the left and right where buildings had just been razed.

the houses on Charlton between Sixth and Varick might well have been bulldozed to make way for commercial buildings and tenements, as happened to so many nearby streets. Almost miraculously, however, the homes survived and the block bounced back.

As unlikely as it may seem, one reason the homes were saved was the influence of Tammany Hall, the Democratic Party political machine that controlled New York City's government and courts in the second half of the 19th century. The city's Eighth Ward

election district stretched from Canal to Houston west of Broadway. And within the ward, few streets matched the beauty of Charlton. As a result, beginning in the 1870s, nearly every local ward boss – that is, the Tammany leader for the Eighth Ward – lived on the block. Tammany operatives chose to reside on Charlton, according to an 1893 article in the *New York Sun*, because of its “wide street” and “spacious, old-fashioned houses.” Charlton Street “makes some strong claims to political aristocracy,” the newspaper declared. Although Tammany Hall was legendary for its corruption, it did wonders for Charlton Street: no developer dared incur the wrath of Tammany Hall by knocking down the homes.

All told, nearly a dozen Tammany Hall functionaries resided on Charlton in the 1880s. They included Peter Mitchell, a city alderman and later a municipal judge, at



Congressman Amos J. Cummings (1838-1902) was the most powerful of the many Tammany Hall politicians who lived on Charlton Street in the 1880s and 1890s. He was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for bravery during the Civil War and then became a newspaper reporter, but was fired by the New York Sun after ignoring repeated warnings to stop cursing in the newsroom. An outspoken friend of organized labor, he was first elected to Congress in 1886 on the Tammany ticket with labor backing and was reelected seven times. Cummings lived at 32 Charlton from 1879 until his death in 1902 and also owned 26, 28 and 30 Charlton as investment properties.

3 Charlton; Patrick Ryder, a city alderman, at 16; Amos Cummings, a “sachem” (one of the top leaders of Tammany Hall) and eight-term U.S. Congressman, at 32; and Michael Norton, an alderman, then a state senator and later a district court judge, at 42.

High-ranking Tammany politicians got rich from graft but inevitably claimed they were hardworking and cash-strapped just like everyone else. In 1872, Michael Norton – the state senator who lived at 42 Charlton – lost an elegant diamond tiepin while walking from Charlton to Bleecker. “The Senator is a poor man and can ill afford to lose so large a diamond,” the *New York Evening Telegram* insisted. “He will pay a liberal reward for its return.”

The Monticello Club – a Tammany clubhouse for the Eighth Ward – was located in the townhouse at 37 Charlton. Tammany officials socialized there and dispensed patronage from behind its closed doors. In 1901, a policeman overheard Ignatius Dugan, a Monticello Club habitué, brag that he had voted four times for Tammany candidates in the previous election: in his own name and in three fictitious names, including “Joseph Dayton, 28 Charlton Street.” Prosecutors soon discovered that Dugan had not only voted multiple times himself, but had bribed 25 men who lived on Charlton and Vandam to do the same. Dugan was arraigned with much fanfare. After an appropriate wait, with the media no longer interested, the charges were quietly dropped.

Congressman Cummings was the most important of the Tammany officials on Charlton Street. He also was the largest property owner on the block. In 1879, he bought number 32 for a residence and later purchased numbers 26, 28 and 30 for investment. By 1902, however, when Cummings died, Tammany Hall’s love affair with Charlton Street was over. Most of the Tammany operatives on Charlton had by then either died or moved elsewhere.

The Italian-Americans

As the Tammany officials – mostly of Irish descent – departed, a new group came to Charlton Street: Italian-Americans. They began arriving in force in about 1900, purchasing and treasuring the homes. Number 43 Charlton was acquired shortly after the turn of the century by Joseph Persineni, a liquor importer, who lived there with his wife, Angeline, and their five children. Number 33 was purchased by Dr. Domenick DiMilta, who moved to Charlton from Broome Street with his wife, Mary, and their three children.

Charlton-King-Vandam became an Italian-American enclave and would remain so for more than half a century. Not only were many of the homes on Charlton owned by first- and second-generation Italian-Americans, but three important Italian-oriented social service institutions took root on the block. In 1904, the St. Raphael Society for Italian Immigrants purchased the homes at 8 and 10 Charlton (since knocked down) at the eastern end to provide temporary lodging and other services for newly arrived Italian

immigrants. At the western end, a wealthy socialite named Annie Leary bought the homes at 51 and 53 (also now gone) and turned them into an art school and



Rocco Pasquilocchio and Luisa Corisi were married in 1913 in the chapel of the St. Raphael Society for Italian Immigrants at 10 Charlton. Italian-Americans found a home on Charlton Street in the early 20th century and helped save many of the buildings from destruction.

daycare center for the children of Italian immigrant working mothers. Mid-block, the New York City Mission Society built a church and mission house at 40 (today's high school building) to serve the religious and social needs of local Italian-Americans.

Then Came the Doctors

As the block rebounded, physicians started buying homes on Charlton for use as offices/residences. Doctors may have chosen to live and practice on Charlton not only because of the beauty and affordability of the houses, but also because the trolley made the block accessible to their patients.

By 1940, nearly one-third of the homes on the block were owned by physicians. Several of the buildings, such as 42 Charlton, even had surgeries. Arthur Bence and Anne Murphy, who owned 42 before selling it to Elisabeth Irwin High School in 2007, still recall their surprise when a friend visited and looked at their bedroom. The friend told them that her father's appendix had been removed in that same room years earlier when it was the surgery of Dr. Giuseppe Tomasulo.

In addition to Dr. Tomasulo, the many physicians practicing on Charlton included Dr. Forest and later Dr. Mecca in number 1, Dr. Stivers in number 3, Dr. Calvano in

number 4, Dr. Partridge and later Dr. Giliberti in number 13, Dr. Ross in number 17, Dr. DiMilta in number 33, Dr. Hillis and later Dr. Wilson in number 35, Dr. Cesare



This 1927 photo looks south toward Charlton from Sixth Avenue and Carmine Street. The diagonal ramp in the center of the photo, with a truck traversing to the right, is at Bleecker. As the photo makes clear, the construction of the subway and lower Sixth Avenue was like a tornado in its path of destruction. The corridor in the photo was previously filled with homes, apartment buildings and shops. First, the structures were leveled. Then, a trench was dug for the subway, and wooden ramps were built over the trench to permit the flow of street traffic. A year after the photo was taken, the trench was covered to provide a roadbed for Sixth Avenue. Charlton Street is located at the third horizontal ramp in the distance.

Tomasulo (Giuseppe's brother) in number 41, Dr. Harris in number 45 and Dr. Bush in number 47.

Dr. Antonio Garbarino in 37 Charlton was the last doctor to have an office/residence on the block. He charged a mere \$2 for an office visit in the 1960s. The interior of the house was so exquisite, Rose Marie O'Leary of 30 Charlton recalls, that

neighbors used to say it was worth the \$2 just to see the moldings. Dr. Garbarino sold his home in 1968 and retired, concluding a period when Charlton Street was a doctors' row.

The Extension of Sixth Avenue

Few events brought greater change to Charlton-King-Vandam than the extension of Sixth Avenue and the building of the subway through the heart of the neighborhood in the late

Here is another view of the construction of the subway and the Sixth Avenue extension. The picture was taken in 1927 from what is today the northwest corner of Charlton and Sixth, looking north up Sixth. The boys at left are perched on the site where a house at 7 Charlton had stood a few months earlier.



1920s. This massive project resulted in the destruction of homes, apartment buildings and stores, the reconfiguration of streets and the creation of parks. What is it like to have a subway line and four-lane roadway blasted through your neighborhood? The residents of Charlton Street learned first-hand.

The southern terminus of Sixth Avenue was originally at Carmine Street, just above Bleecker. Beginning in 1925, the city acquired more than 100 buildings – including 11 on the eastern end of Charlton – to extend the avenue south to Canal Street. It leveled the buildings, dug a trench for the subway and then covered the trench to

provide a roadbed for Sixth Avenue. In the process, nearly 10,000 residents were uprooted from their homes and apartments and had to move. “These are poor people



The Sixth Avenue extension was opened to traffic on September 18, 1930, with a parade of cars, trucks and buses. The photo looks north up Sixth from Canal Street. The festivities began when Mayor Jimmy Walker cut a ceremonial ribbon at Carmine Street. He then hopped into his limo and led the parade to Canal, where he cut another ribbon. In the photo, he is surrounded by a crowd as he cuts the second ribbon. Note the bunting on the buildings and the spectators lining the parade route. Today it's hard to imagine such a grand ceremony for the dedication of a new roadway.

down here and they are not finding it easy to get new apartments with cheap rents,” one local merchant complained.

After four years of din, dirt and disruption, the Sixth Avenue extension opened in September 1930. People in the neighborhood breathed a collective sigh of relief when the project was finally completed and life returned to normal.

On the north side of Charlton, the first house today is number 9. That's because number 1, which was at the corner of MacDougal Street, and numbers 1½, 3, 5 and 7

were torn down to make way for Sixth Avenue, as were numbers 2, 4, 6, 8, 10 and 12 on the south side of Charlton. It may be hard to imagine, but when you cross Sixth Avenue on the north or south side of Charlton, you are walking where people's homes once stood.

The neighborhood had virtually no parks prior to the completion of the Sixth Avenue extension. To address this situation, nearly a dozen small parks were established along Sixth Avenue from Carmine to Canal, some in oddly shaped spaces such as the



Some homeowners on Charlton put up backhouses – small brick or wooden structures – in their backyards to generate income and maximize the value of their land. These two, photographed in 1915, were located on the north side of Charlton, probably behind numbers 37 and 39. Backhouses, which were fairly common throughout Lower Manhattan a century ago, were rented to immigrants or used as workshops or servants' quarters.

sliver-like Charlton Plaza at the northwest corner of Charlton and Sixth (where 7 Charlton previously stood). To carve out Father Fagan Park at the southeast corner of Sixth and Prince, the city razed two houses and closed MacDougal south of Charlton.

Varick Street

Varick Street was originally a narrow dirt road opened in 1822 when Charlton, King and Vandam were cut through the grounds of the Richmond Hill estate. It was named for Richard Varick, a Revolutionary War hero. After the war, Varick was elected mayor of New York and became one of the most respected and influential individuals in the city.

For many years, Varick Street went north only as far as Carmine Street, while Seventh Avenue came south to 11th Street, leaving a half-mile gap between the two. With

the building of the Seventh Avenue subway in 1913-1918, Varick Street was widened and connected to Seventh Avenue through the construction of Seventh Avenue South – requiring, as in the case of Sixth Avenue, the obliteration of all the buildings in its path.

Famous Residents... and Real Estate Prices

Some of the famous people who have lived on Charlton Street include poet Edna St. Vincent Millay, who resided at 25 Charlton in 1918; singer/actor/social activist Paul

Paul Robeson (1898-1976) and his wife, Essie, owned and lived at 24 Charlton in the 1930s and 1940s. Robeson was one of the most remarkable and talented individuals of his era – an All-American college football player, lawyer, actor, singer and social activist.



Robeson, who owned 24 Charlton in the 1930s and 1940s; singer Mary Travers of Peter, Paul and Mary, who grew up in 39 Charlton in the 1940s and early 1950s; actress Linda



Poet Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950) lived at 25 Charlton in 1918. Biographer Daniel Mark Epstein has said, “How she managed to write many of her greatest works in that roar and tumult from Charlton Street to MacDougal, from theater rehearsals to all-night ‘bull sessions,’ how and where she slept or found sufficient quiet for reflection, remains a mystery.” She is pictured during her freshman year at Vassar.

Hunt, an Oscar winner for her performance in *The Year of Living Dangerously* and a star of TV’s *NCIS: Los Angeles*, who lived at 39 Charlton in the 1980s; and husband-and-wife actors Matthew Broderick and Sarah Jessica Parker, who lived at 17 Charlton from the 1990s until 2002.

New Yorkers love to talk about real estate values. In that regard, we all should be so lucky as to have bought a house on Charlton Street years ago. In the decade after World War II, a house on the block between Sixth and Varick – in those rare cases when one came on the market – typically sold for \$15,000 to \$25,000. By the 1970s, the Charlton-King-Vandam area was still an out-of-the-way neighborhood where homes could be purchased for \$100,000 to \$150,000, inexpensive by New York standards of the time. Since then, with the general escalation of real estate values and the growing recognition of the beauty of the block, homes and co-ops have skyrocketed in value. A house on Charlton sold for \$8.6 million in 2011, which seemed stunningly high until another sold for \$11.5 million four years later. The homes on Charlton Street are not only

charming in their own right; all of them have backyards, a prized amenity in New York.



Charlton House (2 Charlton Street)

Charlton House (left), completed in 1966 at the corner of Charlton and Sixth, is the newest and largest building on the block. The original 2 Charlton Street was a small house, with a drugstore on the ground floor, at the corner of MacDougal. It was torn down in 1927 when Sixth Avenue was extended through the neighborhood.

Today's 2 Charlton rises on a plot that was numbered 12 through 18 Charlton. Number 12 was a vacant lot where a three-story house had stood prior to the construction of Sixth Avenue. Number 14 was originally a five-story stable and furniture manufacturing plant (photo on page 23). Subsequently, the top three stories were demolished, a not-uncommon practice during the Great Depression to reduce a building's property taxes; the remaining two stories were then converted to a truck depot (photo on page 24). Numbers 16 and 18, two of the other properties on the site of today's 2 Charlton, were three-story homes with dormers, similar to the three homes that still exist at 20 through 24. In the 1960s, a real estate developer named Harry Nessler acquired the vacant lot at 12 Charlton, the truck depot at 14 and the homes at 16 and 18 – together with a seven-story tenement at 5 Vandam and a house at 7 Vandam – and tore down the

buildings to erect today's 2 Charlton. Alarmed by this major change in their neighborhood, nearly half the homeowners on Charlton, King and Vandam petitioned the city to landmark the district – and to do so as quickly as possible – to prevent any further

The large building, with manufacturing on the top three floors and Rudden's Stable on the bottom two, was located on the site of today's 2 Charlton. The photo was taken in 1927. The building was chopped down to a shorter size during the Great Depression of the 1930s when the top three floors were demolished to reduce the property taxes. The bottom two floors were then converted to a truck depot (photo on page 24). The four homes immediately to the left of the building stood on what is now Sixth Avenue. The two homes to the far left were on the site of today's Father Fagan Park.



destruction of its historic buildings. The city's Landmarks Preservation Law was brand-new in 1965. The city agreed with the homeowners, creating the Charlton-King-Vandam Historic District in 1966. Today there are more than 60 landmarked historic districts in Manhattan. Charlton-King-Vandam was the very first. Originally a rental property, 2 Charlton became a co-op in 1981.

Other Buildings on Charlton Street

Some of the other buildings on Charlton Street include:

9 Charlton. This house at the northwest corner of Sixth was originally a single-family home and subsequently a boarding house. Sometime prior to the 1920s, the



A commercial truck depot – comprising the bottom two stories of what had once been a five-story building (photo on page 23) – is pictured in 1940. Developer Harry Nessler acquired the depot, the vacant lot to its left, the two homes to its right and the seven-story tenement behind it to build today's 2 Charlton. The entrance to 2 Charlton is located approximately at the word "Motor."

carriage house (visible down the driveway), which until then was freestanding, was connected to the main building. In about 1930, the stoop was removed and the building was renovated into rental apartments, as it is today. Aaron Copland, one of America's



*Composer Aaron Copland
(1900-1990) lived at 9 Charlton
in 1951-1952*

greatest composers, lived on the top floor of the carriage house in 1951-1952. Copland is known for his ballet music, symphonies, chamber music, film scores and other works, but

not so much for his operas. He composed only two of them, including *The Tender Land*, which he wrote while living at 9 Charlton. “I’ve been writing opera music, the Lord help me,” he said in a letter from 9 Charlton to a friend. Actor Fred Gwynne, famous for his



The northwest corner of Charlton and Sixth was photographed in about 1950 by Berenice Abbott. Number 9 Charlton is on the corner, with a Kleenex billboard on its side where Charlton Plaza park is located today. The twin homes at 11 and 13 – later combined, rebuilt and refaced with tan brick to create today’s 11 Charlton co-op – are immediately to its left.

comic portrayal of Herman Munster on TV and his role as the judge in the movie *My Cousin Vinny*, lived at 9 Charlton in the 1980s.

11 Charlton. Behind the tan-brick front of this co-op are the remains of twin townhouses, numbers 11 and 13, owned by doctor brothers named Giliberti. Today’s number 11 was built in the 1950s over the shells of the two houses, adding a fifth floor and extending the structure to the rear. In 1911, Daisy Lopez Fitze, a 24-year-old newlywed, lived at 11 Charlton and worked at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company near

Washington Square. When the factory caught fire, she jumped nine stories into a net and was severely injured. Tragically, she died two days later, one of 146 workers to perish in the disaster.

Daisy Lopez Fitze was born in Kingston, Jamaica, and came to New York as a young woman, finding an apartment at 11 Charlton Street. She worked as a seamstress at the Triangle Shirtwaist factory and died in 1911 when the factory caught fire in one of the worst industrial accidents in American history. She was just 24 years old.



23 and 25 Charlton. The door at 23 (with the lovely oval window above it) leads to a stable in the rear, converted to residential use. In a 1966 report, the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission called 25 “a rare survivor of its period and neighborhood,” not only because of the beauty of the house but also because of the existence of the stable. Charlton Street is often described as tree-lined, and indeed it is. But there was not a single tree on the block until a young couple – Paul and Colette Douglas – bought 25 in the 1950s and planted one in front of their house, setting off a trend. Today the block is lined with about two dozen trees thanks to the efforts of many homeowners, beginning with that first tree (still there) planted by the Douglasses six decades ago.

29 Charlton. The Landmarks Preservation Commission singled out 29 Charlton as “a perfect example of the simple ‘genteel’ house of the Federal period.” It said 29, and its architectural companions at 27, 31, 33 and 35, are noteworthy for their “low entrances and simple narrow doors, typical of the less opulent houses of the Federal period.”

37 and 39 Charlton. The commission’s 1966 report said, “Perhaps the two most important houses in age, richness of style, scale and perfection of preservation are the twin Federal buildings, 37 and 39 Charlton. The entrances are particularly handsome and large in scale.” Number 37 was built by John V. Gridley, one of the important figures in the early history of the neighborhood. Gridley listed himself as a “carpenter” in the city



Pictured are the ornate doorways of 37 Charlton, right, and its architectural companion at 39, left. Number 37 was built in 1827 by John V. Gridley. He is believed to have built 39 as well.

directory... until he bought leases on several lots on Charlton-King-Vandam and erected houses on the lots, after which he moved up in the world and became a “builder.” In fact, he was one of the most active builders on the three streets, putting up at least five homes. He loved the new neighborhood, living with his family in a house he built at 44 King and



Many of the homes on Charlton are impeccably maintained, with stunning interiors. The parlor floor of 39 Charlton is shown in a 2017 real estate listing.

then in one he built at 51 Vandam. On Charlton, his role as the builder of 37 is well documented. The brickwork on the façades of 37 and 39 is continuous, suggesting with reasonable certainty that he was responsible for 39 as well. Gridley was a superb

craftsman with an eye for detail: 37 and 39 are among the finest examples of Federal/Greek Revival residential architecture in the city.

South Side of Charlton

Although the south side of the block once had an unbroken row of homes built in the 1820s and 1830s, only four of them – numbers 20, 22, 24 and 42 Charlton – still exist. Among the now-gone houses, number 26 (one of the four homes owned by Congressman



In 1918, there was an unbroken row of nine homes on the south side of Charlton. At the far right is a sliver of today's Elisabeth Irwin High School building, then the Charlton Street Memorial Church. Next to the church are the four houses at 26 through 32 Charlton once owned by Congressman Cummings. The four homes were bulldozed in the late 1920s to build today's 30 Charlton apartment house.

Cummings at the turn of the 20th century) was owned in the 1850s by Joseph Evans, a member of the Order of United Americans, a secret society that opposed Catholics and immigrants – exemplifying the worst instincts of the human race. Many years later, actress Katharine Hepburn's aunt lived at 26. Hepburn wrote that, tragically, her older brother, Tom, to whom she was especially close, committed suicide at 26 Charlton while

visiting the aunt in 1921. Number 32 (another Cummings house), was owned in the 1840s by John Endicott, a businessman who was a founder in 1843 of the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, one of the nation's first social service charities – exemplifying the best instincts.

30 Charlton (below left). The four Cummings homes were torn down to erect today's red-brick apartment building at number 30. The new structure was completed in October 1929 just as the stock market crashed. Intended as a luxury apartment house, its early amenities included a white-gloved concierge stationed in the lobby and an in-house



caterer for residents' dinner parties. Rents ranged from \$50 to \$100 per month, equivalent to about \$500 to \$1,000 today after adjusting for inflation. The tenants, as shown in the 1930 U.S. census, included



lawyers, writers, teachers, clerks, mechanics, stenographers and artists, among many others. Two of the tenants were airplane pilots, a daring occupation at the time, and three were musical comedy actresses. However, many apartments remained un-rented with the onset of the Depression, and the landlord was happy to lease an entire half of the first floor to Dr. Attilio Favorini, another of the many doctors who practiced on Charlton Street. After Dr. Favorini died in 1962, and with housing demand again robust, his office and surgery were divided into four apartments.

40 Charlton (above right). There once were four homes on this site, but they were flattened in 1911 by the New York City Mission Society to build the current structure, originally an evangelical Protestant church as evinced by the crosses on the façade. The church – which held weekly services, sponsored clubs and classes, and had a gymnasium, library, bowling alley, roof garden and other amenities – was dedicated to “the physical,

moral and spiritual welfare of the multitudes of Italians in the neighborhood.” The church competed with the St. Raphael Society for the souls of Italian-Americans: the church at 40 Charlton tried to bring Italian immigrants into the Protestant fold while the society at 10 Charlton urged them to remain true to their Catholic faith. The church closed in the late 1930s as the local Italian populace began to diminish, after which Little Red School House, a private school at Sixth Avenue and Bleecker Street, acquired the building and opened its upper division, Elisabeth Irwin High School, there in 1941. The high school continues to occupy the building today.

Imagine That!

And to think, all these events – the granting of land to Trinity Church; the occupancy of the Richmond Hill mansion by George Washington, John and Abigail Adams, and Aaron Burr; the building of townhouses in the 1820s through the 1840s; the riot of 1834; the influence of Tammany Hall in the decades after the Civil War; the arrival of Italian-Americans at the beginning of the 20th century; the creation of the Charlton-King-Vandam Historic District in 1966; and the emergence of the neighborhood in recent years as one of the more popular areas of the city – took place on what is now our sedate little block.

In 1943, when this photo was taken on a misty winter day, there was a cop on the corner to make sure kids got home safely from school, and the streets in the neighborhood were cobblestone. The view looks west down King Street from Sixth Avenue. The two boys have just left Public School Eight at 29 King. The school was converted to a residential condo in 1981.

