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5 Montague Terrace, Brooklyn Heights, NY

A Tale of Room and Board

The Neighborhood and the Architecture

The end of the Civil War in 1865 was the beginning of Brooklyn's great period of expansion and growth. Many war related industries had their headquarters and factories in Brooklyn. The great shipping and warehouse piers on the Brooklyn side of the East River, busy all throughout the war, were still operating at full capacity, shipping out goods and produce, and receiving imports of foodstuffs, raw materials, and merchandise. The machinations of war turned back into the everyday routine of mercantile profit. Many of the shipping magnates, the merchant kings, their financiers and lawyers, called Brooklyn Heights home, as did their many equally prosperous

neighbors who worked across the river in Manhattan. By the 1860's, the fine brownstone row houses that now help define the Heights were replacing many of the earlier Federal wood frame houses. The finest of these brownstone houses can be found on Remsen Street, Columbia Heights, Montague Street and Montague Terrace.

The Italianate style dominates these rows. For many people, this is the quintessential brownstone, reproduced in so many sizes and variations, in so many Brooklyn neighborhoods, that it stamped the term "brownstone" on every row house in Brooklyn, no matter what the actual building material happened to be. The inspiration for the Italianate brownstone was the 15th century Italian city *palazzo*, a style with classical detail, elegance and gravitas deemed eminently suitable for conveying prosperity and social position in a limited space. Brownstone, as a building stone, gained popularity as an elegant and rich building material, and by the late 1840's through the 1850's, almost all of the new residential architecture, as well as churches and commercial buildings in Manhattan and Brooklyn were faced in this stone, praised for its "unostentatious magnificence. The brownstone face of almost imperceptibly seamed blocks of stone is flat, allowing the decorative features—the ornate doorway, hooded window frames and sweeping stairways—to dominate. A mid-19th century magazine, extolling the virtues of the Italianate brownstone, declared that, "the doorway is the most indispensable feature of the structure, and therefore calls loudly for adornment, and should generally be distinguished by more impressive decoration than any other feature." The doorways of the Italianate brownstone define the style, with their large pediment frames and the bold use of elaborately carved acanthus leaf brackets on either side of the door.

The Italianates of Brooklyn Heights are among the finest of the genre. First of all, they are wide. The average lot in the Heights is 22-25 feet wide. Other brownstone neighborhoods have a general range from 16-20 feet. Those extra few feet make a huge difference in comfort, and size and number of rooms. This is important to our story. The houses facing the river with their unsurpassed Manhattan and river views have always been highly desirable. Streets parallel to the water, including the short block of Montague Terrace, even without a direct river view, were excellent addresses, both then and now.

Numbers one to thirteen Montague Terrace were built as a group in 1866, as speculative housing. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, recording the Brooklyn Civic Council's hearings and commissions over the years, reports that Montague Terrace was slated for street paving and crosswalks in 1866, with "sewerage" voted on in 1867, along with fencing, and finally, flagstone sidewalks in 1868.

The People of 5 Montague Terrace

The first recorded owner/occupant is the Bolton family, who made the news in *The New York Times* in 1867 when their new home was "burglarized from top to bottom" when the family was out of town. In spite of that, the favorable economic climate made Brooklyn Heights a desirable place to live, as it was very convenient for commuting to Manhattan or working in the many businesses nearby. Yet not everyone wanted, or needed, an entire house. In the 1870's, there were no middle or upper class apartment buildings as of yet, the only multiple dwelling buildings took the form of tenements for the very poor. Genteel, respectable boarding houses were prolific in neighborhoods such as Brooklyn Heights, providing lodging and meals for everyone from senior widows and pensioners, to young married couples, to single gentlemen. By 1870, 5 Montague Terrace was a boarding house, offering the finest in accommodations to perspective tenants. At least a hundred ads were placed in the *Eagle* between 1871 and 1879, advertising rooms and suites for rent. In 1878, the landlady was a Mrs. James E. Jenkins. Her name appears on ads for boarders between 1878 and 1879. In January of 1879, Mrs. Jenkins placed her final ads, citing many unexpected vacancies, offering lodging for half price for the "remainder of the season." One of her tenants at this time was a Miss Dixon, embroidery and crocheting teacher, who advertised in the paper for genteel young ladies as students.

BOARD--ON THE HEIGHTS--NO. 5
Montague terrace; this finely located house has been put in perfect order, and newly furnished; handsome rooms, on suite or single, with choice and liberal table are offered to gentlemen and their wives, or single gentlemen. Parties desiring to make arrangements for the Fall and Winter will find it to their advantage to call.

BOARD--VACANCIES MADE UNEX-
pectedly at No. 5 Montague terrace, permit me to offer board at less than half price for the remainder of the season; references exchanged. Mrs. JENKINS.

TO LET--HOUSE--FURNISHED OR
unfurnished--5 Montague Terrace--The handsome 4 story brown stone front dwelling; contains 16 rooms; every convenience; perfect order throughout; will lease to private party only; immediate possession. D. & M. CHAUNCEY, 207 Montague st.

No other ads for the house appear for the next ten years. The house may have been sold or rented to a single family. In 1889, an ad in the *Eagle* offers 5 Montague to let, furnished or unfurnished. The ad reads, "the handsome 4 story brownstone front dwelling contains 16 rooms; every convenience, perfect order throughout, will lease to private party only: immediate possession. D&M Chauncey, 207 Montague St."

The new occupants would be the Ackerman family.

The Ackerman Family Drama

Wealthy businessman John H. Ackerman and his wife, Sarah, and two adult children lived in the house by 1890, when their daughter Emily married stockbroker Charles Gregory. The couple took up residence in the house after the honeymoon. Charles Gregory was a partner in a brokerage firm bearing his name with offices on Broad Street in Manhattan. The Ackermans had another child, son Henry H. Ackerman, who was 24 years old in 1882. Henry was a spoiled ne'er do well rich kid, from all accounts. In January of 1882, he was involved in a fatal shooting in a popular restaurant and saloon on Washington Street, called Engleman's. He had met John Peterson at a billiard room on Myrtle Avenue, and after a night of copious drinking, the two were headed to Engleman's to eat. An altercation in the street with some other young men would lead to Peterson being shot in the basement of the restaurant, supposedly when Henry Ackerman tried to take a gun away from Peterson, who wanted to go back and finish the fight. Henry would be arrested, but later cleared by a coroner's inquiry.

John Ackerman, the father, died in 1894, and the funeral would be held at 5 Montague Terrace. His wife, Sarah, would pass away in 1899. Before she died, her wayward son would give her even more grief.

By 1897, Henry had gotten married, and had two children. His wife was named Mary, and the family had moved to the Hotel St. George. Henry, as the *Brooklyn Eagle* would report on July 21, 1897, had no occupation. Captain Tunbridge, the builder and owner of the St. George, had come to their rooms to settle the bill, as Henry was very behind in his rent. Henry ordered the Captain out of his apartment. When Tunbridge threatened to seize some of the Ackerman belongings, Henry grabbed an ax and started to smash the furniture. When his wife tried to stop him, he drew a revolver and beat her in the head with the butt of the gun. He was disarmed and arrested, and arraigned for assault. He paid a fine and was let go. His wife, accompanied by Captain Tunbridge, took out a complaint and had him re-arrested and jailed, with \$1000 bond, which he didn't have. Mary Ackerman took her children and moved in with friends in Manhattan.



Hotel St. George, Clark St

Unfortunately, the story ends here, as the case was not reported on again. Henry must not have received very much punishment, as he next turns up at Surrogate Court, after his mother's death in 1899. John Ackerman must have bought 5 Montague Terrace at some point, because in 1901, title of the property passes to Emily Gregory from her brother, Henry Ackerman, for \$12,500. Henry got his hands on some money, and disappears from history.

The 20th Century: Change Comes to Brooklyn Heights

The house appears to have gone back to accepting boarders after the death of John Ackerman, in 1897, with notices once again appearing in the *Brooklyn Eagle*, advertising rooms in a fine house for discerning boarders. In 1899, the *Eagle* lists a Reverend A. D. Smith as a boarder there. By 1900, the head of the household is listed in the census as Mrs. Frances L. Reiner, the widow of Mr. Charles Henry Reimer, who lived there with two daughters and a sister. They had two African-American women and two Irish women as live-in servants. No one else is listed on the census.

By 1910, the house was filled to capacity, with twenty-eight people listed in that year's census record. Landlady Cora Turner, listed as a teacher, ran the house with her brother, Charles, an inventor whose occupation was listed as "invention promotion." They had two African-American butlers, and an Irish and a Scots maid living there. In addition, there were six couples— three married, two mothers and daughters, and one who were sisters. There was also a family of three; a mother and two daughters. In addition to them, there were also three single women and four single men. Some of these single people would have to be living with some of the couples, or sharing a room, as there are only 16 rooms in the entire house, and at least one of those was the dining room for the boarders. The ages of people ranged from the 21 year old Scots maid to a 71 year old woman who lived with her 70 year old husband.

With a house filled with that many people, it is no wonder there was tragedy. In August of 1910, the boarders were at breakfast when they heard a shot. Mrs. Haydee Troy, the wife of William Troy, who was the manager of the Columbia Lubricating Company in Manhattan, shot herself in the heart, dying instantly. The Troys were English, and had only moved to Brooklyn in May. She was a newspaper writer, fluent in several languages, and interested in New York City life, according to *The New York Times*. Her husband travelled to Europe a great deal, leaving her alone, and it appears that she began to be homesick and despondent. Her husband wanted his teenage children from a former marriage to move in to keep her company, and they had quarreled that morning. She told him she did not feel well, and would not be having breakfast, and when he went downstairs, she shot herself. She was only 29 years old.

The census of 1920 showed considerably less people in the house. No one who lived there ten years ago was still there. The boarding house was run by Charles Balfour and his wife, Celesta. There were two other married couples in the house, one with an adult daughter. The four other boarders were all men, one a Navy Yard worker, and the other three, 26 year old students—one medical, one law, one a medical resident. There were also three maids living in the house.

By 1930, the census showed the changing face of Brooklyn Heights. Single gentlemen stockbrokers, senior citizens with independent incomes, and managers of companies were being replaced by more middle class occupants. There were no live-in servants. By this time, the occupants were simply tenants, cooking meals in their rooms, or eating out. Herbert and Hilda Dunn were the supers. He was also listed in the census as an electrician at the shipyard. An older couple, Robert and Jennie Shields, also lived in the house. The remaining tenants were three young siblings from Germany—Alexander, Irving and Edna Richter, an architectural draftsman, college student and bank secretary. Glennard Smith, 33, was listed as a personal assistant, and two Polish speaking brothers also had rooms—17 year old Benjamin Wolfe, a telegraph messenger, and his older brother, 25 year old Joseph Wolfe, a clothing worker.



Thomas Wolfe Lived Here

Into this disparate group of people would come the most well-known person to live at 5 Montague Terrace, another Wolfe, hailing not from Poland, but from Asheville, North Carolina. The prolific American author, Thomas Wolfe, lived in two rooms on the fourth floor, between 1933 and 1935. Born in Asheville in 1900, he spent the first part of his life in a home that was run by his mother as a boarding house. He lived in the house she called “the Old Kentucky Home” until he was 16. Today, the house is the Thomas Wolfe Memorial. After graduate school at Harvard, Wolfe moved to New York City to become a Broadway playwright. He wasn’t as successful as he wanted to be, his plays were just too long, so he decided to switch to prose. In 1926 he wrote

his first novel, *O Lost*, which would become his breakthrough novel, *Look Homeward Angel*, published in 1929.



During one of his several stays in New York City, between European sojourns, Thomas Wolfe lived at 5 Montague Terrace and wrote. He was a very tall man, 6’5” tall, and must have been cramped in a fourth floor apartment. Sanderson Vanderbilt, a writer for the *New York Herald Tribune* interviewed Wolfe at his apartment on Feb. 17th, 1935. Wolfe was over an hour late to his appointment, but had left a note for the super to let the reporter into his rooms. Vanderbilt would later write, “Mr. Wolfe’s ‘place’ turned out to be on the fourth floor of a five-story brownstone in Brooklyn Heights – one which formerly commanded a view of the harbor, but which now has become simply dismal, what with larger apartments that have been built between it and the water. In the creaky old building the author has two rooms for which he pays \$45 a month and considers it a bargain.” (*Thomas Wolfe Interviewed 1929-1938* by Aldo P. Magi)

Wolfe would write his novel *Of Time and the River* here, before moving on.



Three years later, Wolfe would die at Johns Hopkins University Hospital of military tuberculosis, just 18 days shy of his 38th birthday. The fact that he lived here, wrote one of his finest novels here, as well as his classic Brooklyn story, *Only the Dead Know Brooklyn*, while living at 5 Montague Terrace, insures his presence in the pantheon of great Brooklyn Heights based writers.

We have no census records available after 1930, but 5 Montague Terrace would continue to be small apartments for many years to come, eventually falling under the rent control guidelines set up by the City of New York in 1943. In 2005, the property was purchased by the current owner, who brought the “creaky old building” closer to its former state as a family home, something it hadn’t been since the turn of the century. It is now a two-family home, now as much a Brooklyn Heights norm as the boarding house once was. What a far cry from the days when this building once housed twenty-eight people. Oh, the tales Thomas Wolfe, the son of a boarding house owner, could have spun from 5 Montague Terrace!

--Suzanne Spellman

Photographs: Montague Terrace buildings by lumierefl on Flickr. Photographs of Thomas Wolfe by nchistoricsites.org. Advertisements from the Brooklyn Daily Eagle. Headline from the New York Times. St. George Hotel from author's collection of historic Brooklyn postcards.

