

70 Willow Street, Brooklyn Heights, New York

A Brief History of Ownership, Personalities, and Events

Brooklyn Heights was settled as a desirable suburban retreat for the wealthy merchants and businessmen who owned the ships, warehouses and businesses that made their fortunes from the sea trade. By the 1830's, large, spacious houses were springing up on streets named for those successful landowners and businessmen. Thanks to the foibles of Mrs. Middagh, one of the doyennes of the Heights, some of the streets were named after plants and fruits instead of prominent people. 70 Willow Street lies in the middle of the block bordered by Pineapple and Orange Streets. Before street numbers were the identifiers of property, the house is listed in the records as "Lot 16, 50' from Pineapple. 50x101."



Built in 1839, the same year photography was invented, 70 Willow's style is high Greek revival and influenced by plantation architecture, as many architects went south to build antebellum mansions for wealthy New York merchants. Much of the interior detail was inspired by a pattern book from Minard Lafever, a celebrated local architect of St. Ann's church, among many other creations.

Adrian Van Sinderen, a member of one of Brooklyn's important Dutch settlement-era families, built the house, and lived here until his death. (He had been living around the corner at Columbia Heights and Orange Street, in a large house with a cupola and stable that he had built in 1828; 70 Willow originally had a garden that stretched back to Columbia Heights). The house was left to his grandson, also named Adrian Van Sinderen, who lived there until 1858. Grandson Van Sinderen appears to be the same man who was a socially prominent and well-connected lawyer, in both Brooklyn and Manhattan during the mid to late 1800's. In 1864, his law partner and close friend William Lawrence died, appointing him as executor and trustee of his million dollar estate.

According to the *Brooklyn Eagle* and the *New York Times*, over the years that followed the heirs began to receive less and less from the estate, and finally sought an investigation into Van Sinderen's handling of the trust. In 1886, an investigation and law suit against Adrian Van Sinderen revealed that he could not account for the loss of the money, as he had kept no records whatsoever, and he was ordered to provide restitution. Van Sinderen, heavily mortgaged, could not do so, and fled the country and his family in Brooklyn, and escaped to Europe. Already in his 60s at the time, he eventually returned to Brooklyn, a disgraced and broken man. He had been living at 178 Columbia Heights, a building no longer in existence. He ended up in New Lots, shunned and avoided by all of his former family and friends, where he died in 1892.



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70 Willow Street was listed as being for sale as early as 1853 in the *Brooklyn Eagle* and was sold to a Dr. Forbes. He then sold it to a Mr. Squire from Manhattan, all as per the recollections of Mr. Oscar Coles, writing about Brooklyn Heights in the *Eagle* on January 6, 1889. The records for this time are not clear. Census records for 1850 provide no clues, as addresses were not listed in the records. The house seems to have become least partially a boarding house for the Forbes. The *Eagle* has an ad posted on September 11, 1869 for second and third floor boarders, and another on October 6, 1869, advertising “Board - one large handsome furnished second floor room for gentleman and wife, or gentlemen willing to room together; also third floor room. References.”

The 1880 census shows the Forbes family in residence at that time. In the house are listed Robert Forbes, 59, a shipping merchant, his wife Hannah, 47, their children William, 23, a clerk for his father, Hannah, 14 and Agnes, 21. Also in residence were three Irish servants; Norah Sheehan, 27, Ellen Shanley, 26, and Emma Gilroy, 26.

In 1886, 70 Willow Street was bought by William Allen Putnam, a wealthy banker and philanthropist. Mr. and Mrs. Putnam and their three children and extended family lived in the house for the next fifty years. William Putnam was the last of a line of merchant vessel commanders who sailed between New England and China. He went into banking and the stock market and was a partner in the firm of Homans and Co. of Wall St. During his lifetime he was a trustee and vice president of the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Science, now the Brooklyn Museum. He and his wife, Caroline, donated paintings, china and other objects to the museum over the years, including a collection of Rembrandt etchings and a rare and superb collection of Royal Copenhagen porcelain. He was also a member and trustee in many prominent clubs and associations throughout Brooklyn, Manhattan and Southampton. His wife, Caroline Haines Putnam, appears often in both the *Brooklyn Eagle* and the *New York Times*, as a hostess for, and leader in, the Anti-Suffragette Movement, an organization of women who were against women having the vote. In 1894 this group, whose members included many prominent Brooklyn society women, began meeting at 70 Willow to oppose universal suffrage. They contended that women neither wanted, nor needed the vote, as their husbands could represent them adequately. They stated that women had too much to do in the home to involve themselves in the political process, and that what was needed was not more people voting, but a better quality of voters and that did not necessarily mean women. This organization ran strongly, receiving press in the papers. They held frequent meetings with speakers and supporters from all over, including like-minded sisters in England, which was also considering a woman's vote. There is no record of whether their organization lasted until the passing of the 19th Amendment, granting women the vote in 1920.

The *Eagle* also catalogued the engagements and weddings in the family, as well as their advertisements for domestic help and lost pets. Weddings: M. Vryling Putnam married Lawrence B. Dunham on June 10, 1915 at the house, and her sister, Carolyn Putnam, married Dr. Henry T. Chickering on June 1st, 1921, also at a ceremony and reception at 70 Willow St. Mrs. Putnam's sister, Lillian Magie Haines married Walter Hayden Crittenden on November 5, 1897. There are many ads asking for domestic help, and the Putnams seem to have had trouble holding on to their dogs. An ad in the *Eagle* on October 26, 1891, offers a reward for the return of a lost fox terrier, and ads beginning on November 4, 1902, offer a reward for a bull terrier puppy. These ads ran for several days.



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The census for 1920 lists the following people residing at 70 Willow Place: William A. Putnam, 72; Carolyn Putnam, 63; son A. William Putnam, 24; Carolyn Putnam, 34; W. H. Crittenden, brother-in-law, 48; and five Irish servants: Sarah Cochrane, 29; Kathleen Reynolds, 44; Annie Brady, 34; Bertha Bolton, 42; and Katherine McGowan, 40. Ten years later, in 1930, the census show the following: William A. Putnam, 83; Caroline Putnam, 74; and four servants: Gudren Thiesen, 51 a Norwegian nurse; Emma Wiegler, 60, from Sweden; Hannah Duggan, 38, from Ireland; and Rose McGuire, 29, from Northern Ireland.

William A. Putnam died at the age of 88 on February 28, 1936. His wife Caroline lived in the house until her death at the age of 86, in 1940. The house remained empty for four years, at which time the Putnam children donated the building to the Red Cross. The *New York Times* notes in an article on October 14, 1944, that the house, despite being as old as it was, had electric power and a fairly complete kitchen with both a modern gas stove and “an enormous old-style coal burner.” The Red Cross had no specific plans for the building other than to open it for volunteer group meetings, first aid classes and the like.

In 1950, the Red Cross sold the building to Gladys James. In 1951, Gladys James sold 70 Willow Street to Charles Nagel, who in turn sold it to Oliver Smith, the deed being recorded on June 15, 1953.

Oliver Smith was one of the most important stage and set designers of the 20th century. Throughout his long career, he designed for theatre, dance, opera and film. A list of his productions is a catalogue of greats: “Brigadoon”, “West Side Story”, “My Fair Lady”, “Camelot”, “Hello Dolly”, “Flower Drum Song”, “Candide”, “Paint Your Wagon”, and “Auntie Mame” on Broadway, “Rodeo”, “Fancy Free”, “Fall River Legend” and other masterpieces for Agnes DeMille, Jerome Robbins and Eliot Feld, and productions of “La Traviata”, “Martha”, “Naughty Marietta”, and “The Tender Land”, for the Metropolitan Opera and New York City Opera. He won several Tony awards, Donaldson and Critics Choice awards, as well as numerous other awards and accolades. He was inducted into the Theatre Hall of Fame in 1981.

Mr. Smith was a tremendous encourager of talent. While living at 70 Willow Street, he worked from his studio on the top floor, and often rented out rooms, or invited guests to stay. Theatrical director Sir Tyrone Guthrie was such a guest. His most famous tenant was writer Truman Capote, who lived at 70 Willow Street for ten years, between 1955 and 1965. During that time, from his basement apartment, Capote wrote his best works: Breakfast at Tiffany's; a short story called “A House in the Heights”; and of course, his masterpiece, In Cold Blood.

Oliver Smith died at home, at 70 Willow St, on January 23, 1994. The house passed to Martha Dillman in October of 1994, who in turn sold it to the present owner, in 1998. Today the house remains a must-see for lovers of Brooklyn’s history and architecture, as well as a popular destination for walking tours of the area and Brooklyn Heights writers’ tours. In 1966, New York City designated most of Brooklyn Heights as its first Historic District, protecting 70 Willow Street from being torn down or significantly altered on its exterior. We can still see the fine brick house Adrian Van Sinderen built as his retreat, the house in which the Putnam family engaged in philanthropic and cultural good works, while raising a family and conducting business. We can see Oliver Smith’s incredible imagination and talent, and encouragement of the talents of others, poured through the windows and walls, years later, and that of the current owner, who now shares this history and his own talents and aspirations with the community. 70 Willow Street is an example of the best of what Brooklyn has to offer.

Suzanne Spellman

Brooklyn, NY
April 13, 2010



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Timeline

- 1839 House built by Adrian Van Sinderen
- 1843 Property willed to AVS grandson, also named Adrian Van Sinderen, who lives here until 1858.
- 1853 House on Market, as advertised in Eagle.
- 1858 Sold to a Dr. Forbes, as per recollection of Mr. Oscar Coles.
- 1869 Eagle advertisements for boarders on two floors.
- 1880 Census shows Forbes family of 5, and 3 servants in residence
- 1880's Property sold to a Mr. Squire, from Manhattan, as per recollection of Mr. Oscar Coles
- 1886 70 Willow St. becomes home to William and Carolyn Putnam, 3 children, and servants.
- 1920 Census shows Mr. and Mrs. Putnam, their son and one daughter, a brother-in-law, and 5 servants in residence.
- 1930 Census shows Mr. and Mrs. Putnam, a nurse and three other servants living in the house.
- 1936 William Putnam dies. Carolyn Putnam remains in the house.
- 1940 Carolyn Putnam dies. House remains empty for four years.
- 1944 Putnam children donate 70 Willow to the Red Cross as a meeting space.
- 1950 Red Cross sells house to Gladys James.
- 1951 Gladys James sells house to Charles Nagel.
- 1953 Charles Nagel sells 70 Willow St. to Oliver Smith.
- 1955 Truman Capote moves into basement apartment.
- 1965 Truman Capote moves out.
- 1966 Brooklyn Heights is declared New York City's first landmarked district. 70 Willow is protected from tear-down or exterior alteration.
- 1994 Oliver Smith dies. House sold to Martha Dillman.
- 1998 House is sold to current owner.