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# Walking Titanic's Charity Trail in New York City: Part One, Gramercy Park and Madison Square Park

Eric C. Cimino Ph.D.

Molloy College, [ecimino@molloy.edu](mailto:ecimino@molloy.edu)

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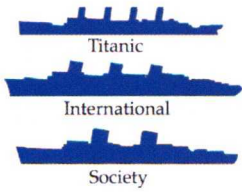
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# Walking Titanic's charity trail in New York City

## Part One: Gramercy Park and Madison Square Park

By Eric C. Cimino, Ph.D.

Molloy College

On an overcast Friday morning toward the end of September 2018, I ventured from my apartment in Queens to trace the paths of *Titanic* survivors in New York City. Over 100 years ago, the ocean liner *Carpathia* had brought 712 survivors to New York. The survivors from second- and third class were met at Pier 54 on the Hudson River by the Women's Relief Committee and representatives of St. Vincent's Hospital. Members of the press were also there, including reporters from Philadelphia's *Evening Bulletin*, who had set up a make-shift newsroom in a nearby barbershop. Throughout the evening of April 18, 1912, the Women's Relief Committee and its affiliates provided immediate aid to survivors and escorted them to lodging facilities and hospitals. In the coming weeks and months, survivors' long-term needs were tended to by a joint committee of the American Red Cross and the Charity Organization Society.

Carrying a pocket journal, a digital camera, and some maps, I sought to document the sites and environs of Manhattan that *Titanic* survivors would have encountered. Another aim was to find the buildings where the relief agencies planned and conducted their efforts. I had done some basic research and knew that some places associated with *Titanic* still stood in New York City, while others, like St. Vincent's Hospital, were

gone. To maintain an element of surprise, I kept myself in the dark about the status of a few other *Titanic* spots, such as the barbershop that doubled as a newsroom. My walk was not meant to be a tourist jaunt; I planned to carefully observe and engage with the neighborhoods I passed through.<sup>1</sup> I gave myself from the late morning to the early evening to cover Manhattan's Gramercy Park, Madison Square Park, the West Village, and the Meatpacking District.

Starting in Gramercy Park, I planned to search for Sarah Amelia Hewitt's mansion, where the first meeting of the Women's Relief Committee was held. I would also visit the storied United Charities Building, central to the development of social welfare policy in New York City. Its most prominent occupant was the Charity Organization Society.

My goal at Madison Square Park was to photograph one of the city's first skyscrapers, the Metropolitan Life Insurance Building (1909), known for its clock tower that stands sentinel over the park. Here, a day after *Carpathia*'s arrival, both the Women's Relief Committee and the Red Cross/Charity Organization Society set up temporary headquarters to meet with survivors and coordinate their care.

The last leg of the walk would be in the West Village and the Meatpacking District. I would lunch in the Village and, once replenished, walk to Pier 54 at the Hudson River. From there, I would find the American Seamen's Friend Society Sailors' Home and St. Vincent's Hospital. The latter institution treated 117 survivors and gave them shelter. I anticipated that the hospital would provide the emotional apex of my walk, not only because it was the scene of so much pent-up and released grief among survivors, but also



"Love and Wisdom." (Author's photograph)

because the hospital, a neighborhood institution, had recently been demolished.

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I took the number 7 train from Queens to Manhattan's Grand Central Station (42nd Street), transferring there to a downtown number 6 train. I exited at 23rd Street and walked south on Lexington Avenue toward the site of Sarah Amelia Hewitt's mansion at 9 Lexington Avenue. The first building to catch my eye, however, was the Sage House, with its grey and red-tinted sandstone façade, designed by architect Grosvenor Atterbury in the style of an Italian Renaissance palazzo. It was built the year after *Titanic*'s sinking and served as the headquarters of the Russell Sage Foundation, a philanthropic organization founded by Mrs. Russell (Olivia) Sage that championed the emerging field of social work. Its location off Gramercy Park was deliberate, as the park was then the main artery of New York's charity milieu.

Inscribed on the northern face of the Sage House, above its arched entrance, is the foundation's mission statement, written in all caps: "For the improvement of social and living conditions." Below the slogan is an intricately carved relief depicting two robed figures, a man and a woman, representing "love and wisdom." They are standing behind a pedestal labeled "service" and seem to be gently urging citizens to serve humanity through charity and education. Huddled below "love and wisdom" are the suffering masses so desperately in need of aid. This expectation that the city's leading citizens should dedicate themselves to uplifting those below was shared by Sarah



Sage House is on the right. (Author's photograph)<sup>2</sup>



A view of Gramercy Park through its gates. (Author's photograph)

Amelia Hewitt and the other elite members of the Women's Relief Committee.

I stared across the street, wondering if Hewitt's home was still standing. There was a large apartment building directly across from the Sage House on Lexington Avenue. Also nearby stood an imposing modernist tower housing an art gallery run by New York's Baruch College. There was definitely no early 20th Century mansion here. I crossed the avenue and faced the apartment building. On its wall was a small plaque announcing that eminent New Yorker Peter Cooper had lived here from 1850 to 1883. Cooper, an inventor and philanthropist, is best known for founding the school that bears his name, The Cooper Union, which provided free higher education to working-class students.

After scouting out the area, I determined that the Hewitt mansion must have been located very close to Peter Cooper's house. Weeks later, while researching for this article, I made a surprising discovery. It turns out that Sarah Amelia Hewitt, known as Amelia, was Cooper's daughter, and for a time, she and her husband, New York City Mayor Abram Hewitt, shared the house with her father. When Cooper died in 1883, the couple and their six children inherited the property. Amelia lived there until her death in August 1912 at age 82.<sup>2</sup>

As pictured and described in Stephen Garmey's book *Gramercy Park*, the Cooper/Hewitt home at 9 Lexington Avenue was massive, occupying a plot of land significantly larger than that of the typical Gramercy townhouse. The mansion's most unique architectural feature was its

cast-iron window crowns.<sup>3</sup> When Abram became New York City mayor in 1886, he had a pair of "mayor's lamps" installed in front of the house, a tradition that dates from when the city's early leaders required access to light in case of an emergency in the middle of the night.<sup>4</sup> The home was only a block away from Gramercy Park.

Inside, the house reflected the height of Gilded Age luxury. Peter Cooper had modest tastes, but not so his daughter and son-in-law, who commissioned renowned architect Stanford White to redesign the interior when they took over the property. White installed marble stairways and carved oak walls dating from 1633. He filled the rooms with furniture and decorative items that represented the "best of any period," though he seemed to have a particular fondness for Renaissance ornamentation.<sup>5</sup>

According to a *New Yorker* reporter who gained access to the house in 1938 before its demolition, the second floor contained the main rooms: the blue library, green parlor, red drawing room, ballroom, and music room.

On the third floor were the bedrooms as well as a private library for Amelia Hewitt's adult daughters Sally and Eleanor. The library was rumored to include "the most extensive" collection of pornographic books in the city, what their brother called "Sally's indecent library."<sup>6</sup> One wonders how much of this collection Sally had amassed by 1912 and whether the Women's Relief Committee founders were aware of its scandalous content.

Twenty-five society women had gathered in the Hewitt mansion's music room on Wednesday morning, April 17, 1912 to establish a committee that would lead the city's initial relief efforts for *Titanic* survivors. Among the attendees were the sisters Sally and Eleanor Hewitt; Sarah Rodgers Henry, philanthropist and wife of the Surveyor of the Port of New York; Alice Claypoole Vanderbilt; and Anne Morgan, noted labor activist and daughter of the banker J. P. Morgan. The first order of business was to settle on the committee's mission. The women agreed to focus their attention on third-class survivors and to provide for their immediate needs upon arrival in New York. They pledged "to house, to feed, to cloth and furnish financial aid...[to] find suitable employment for those wishing it, and to provide transportation when desired."<sup>7</sup> Next, they elected Amelia Hewitt "Honorary Chairman" and Sarah Rodgers Henry the "Chairman." After a few more items of business, the meeting adjourned.

The next morning, the Women's Relief Committee met again at 9 Lexington Av-



A Gramercy Park fashion shoot. (Author's photograph)



*United Charities Building, home of the Charity Organization Society. (Author's photograph)*

enue in anticipation of *Carpathia's* evening arrival. Overnight, membership had soared to 150 people and the new members filled Hewitt's home.<sup>8</sup> The plans mapped out the previous day were finalized, and the committee announced that because of its successful fundraising (which included a \$500 donation from Olivia Sage), "Each third-class survivor would be given a complete outfit of clothing and a purse sufficiently large for a month's maintenance."<sup>9</sup> Preparations continued throughout the day until 8:45 p.m. By then, the Women's Relief Committee's emergency station on Pier 54 was fully staffed and stocked with clothing, food, and hot coffee.

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I left the site of the Cooper/Hewitt home and headed south down Lexington Avenue toward Gramercy Park. It was 11:30 a.m. and a light rain had begun to fall. The rain did not deter a willowy fashion model in a black floral dress from having her picture taken outside Gramercy's gates. There were eight people attending to her and participating in the shoot. A striking red call box, resembling a giant chess piece, bore quiet witness. I also observed for a bit and then moved on.

Trying to ignore the light drizzle, I circled the park, stopping once on its west side

to peer through its eight-foot gate. Built on former swampland, Gramercy Park spans two acres between 20th and 21st Streets and has the feel of a charming London square. It is closed to the public, however; only occupants of buildings with "frontage on the park" can claim the special keys needed to enter and exit.<sup>10</sup> Inside are bench-lined winding paths that lead residents around the "graceful trees [and] shady lawns."<sup>11</sup> In the distance, I spied a monument to the

park's founder, Samuel Ruggles. I also admired the red brick row houses at Gramercy Park West, which feature "lacy" cast-iron verandas to an extent usually not seen outside of New Orleans.<sup>12</sup>

My next destination was the United Charities Building, headquarters of the Charity Organization Society, on the corner of Park Avenue and 22nd Street, just north

of Gramercy Park. I was startled to find the entire building encased in scaffolding, apparently undergoing a gut renovation. It was difficult to clearly make out the façade, though a sign posted outside showed its future luxurious appearance. Set for completion in December 2018, the United Charities Building would hit the market offering prime commercial and retail space. (Similarly, the Sage Building that housed charities' administrative offices lost its connection to social welfare when it was converted to private residential use in 1975.)

In 1912, the building's purpose was quite different. It stood at the center of Gramercy Park's reform community and housed the city's principal charities. The building was built for the city's two leading Protestant relief agencies, the Charity Organization Society and the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor. Other groups, buoyed by a 20 percent discount given to all nonprofits, rented space in the building as well. The occupants of the United Charities Building included the National Consumers' League, the New York School of Philanthropy, and social work magazine *The Survey*. The Russell Sage Foundation sought an office there, too, in 1912, but there was no space left. Instead, it settled at its nearby Lexington Avenue location, from which it could easily channel funding to the organizations headquartered in the United Charities Building.<sup>13</sup>

When news of *Titanic's* sinking broke, leaders of the Charity Organization Society



*Artist's rendering of the United Charities Building, 1891 (Library of Congress)*



*Metropolitan Life Insurance Tower from Madison Square Park. (Author's photograph)*

and the American Red Cross immediately volunteered their services to New York City's Mayor William Gaynor. Robert de Forest and Edward Devine of the Charity Organization Society and Frank Persons of the Red Cross met with the mayor on April 18 at City Hall, where they discussed taking charge of survivors' permanent financial needs.<sup>14</sup> Their work would complement the temporary aid provided by the Women's Relief Committee. The Charity Organization Society and Red Cross had previously joined forces in response to the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in 1911, and their efforts on behalf of fire victims had only just ended. Now the trio of de Forest, Devine, and Persons hoped to reorient the Red Cross Emergency Relief Committee of the Charity Organization Society toward the *Titanic* disaster. They made a compelling case and Mayor Gaynor accepted their offer of assistance.<sup>15</sup>

I decided to cross the street to get a closer look at the Charity Organization Society's former space. The scaffold-clad structure had its own geometric beauty that caught me off guard. I admired the zigzag pattern of the temporary stairs that ascend-

ed to the roof. I also noticed a wide-open double door. Here was a chance to peer into the United Charities Building to see if anything remained of its original interior and maybe glimpse the work in progress. Just then a construction worker walked out, glared at me, and promptly shut the doors.

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The Metropolitan Life Insurance Tower faces Madison Square Park at 23rd Street, a short walk northwest from the United Charities Building and Gramercy Park. When it went up in 1908, it temporarily stole the spotlight from the iconic, though smaller, Flatiron Building that also borders the park.<sup>16</sup> The Metropolitan Life Tower is an elegant giant; it is 700 feet high, but its graceful design is pleasing, not intimidating. It was here, the day after *Carpathia's* arrival, that both the Women's Relief Committee and the Red Cross/Charity Organization Society opened temporary offices.

The Women's Relief Committee relied on Mrs. Henry Ollesheimer, whose husband was a director at the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, to secure a suite of eight offices on the sixth floor, which were outfitted with telephones donated

by the New York Telephone Company.<sup>17</sup> The offices quickly became sites of constant activity. Aid inquiries ("by person and phone") came in at a clip of one every three minutes. Clothing donations were so numerous that committee members could hardly keep up with all the sorting and stockpiling.<sup>18</sup> A *New York Times* reporter at the Metropolitan Life Tower noted that a typical third-class survivor could expect to receive "a suit, an extra skirt, a long cloak, a pair of high shoes, a pair of low shoes, two sets of undergarments, six pairs of stockings, a good hat, and then a package of such treasures as hairpins, hatpins, safety pins, combs and the like."<sup>19</sup>

While the Women's Relief Committee was busy on the sixth floor, the Red Cross/Charity Organization Society Emergency Committee conducted its work from an office in the building's vast first-floor arcade. The committee stayed in the Met Life Tower until May when the rush of clients ceased; then it decamped back to the United Charities Building to conclude its administrative work.<sup>20</sup>

Departing Madison Square Park, I took the number 6 train to 14th Street, then the L train across town to the West Village. A short walk from the subway station is the "maddeningly tangled" intersection of 8th Avenue, Jane Street, and West 4th Street.<sup>21</sup> Two of the neighborhood's most beloved restaurants, the Corner Bistro and Tavern on Jane, are here. Known for its inexpensive burgers and unpretentious vibe (and the occasional visit from Bruce Springsteen), the Bistro is a village institution that I was anxious to try for the first time. I sat at the wooden bar and ordered the bistro-burger (a bacon cheeseburger), which arrived with fries on two no-frills white paper plates.

While at work on my burger and dark ale, I heard the bartender and two patrons puzzling over something going on outside. They were staring out one of the bistro's windows at three "handmaids" dressed in identical red dresses and white bonnets strolling down 8th Avenue. The women were in costume as characters from the Hulu Network's jarring drama *The Handmaid's Tale*, about a revolutionary Puritan society of the future. Some women since the inauguration of President Donald Trump have dressed as handmaids to protest present-day threats to their civil rights and sexual freedom. A day earlier, the country had been riveted by the Dr. Chris-



Metropolitan Life Insurance Tower's arcade (Metropolitan Life Insurance Co. [NY 1914] p. 52)

tine Blasey Ford/Judge Mark Kavanaugh Senate Judiciary Committee hearing. The vote to get the conservative judge out of committee was set for 1:30 p.m. today. It was now 1:24 p.m. The three handmaids must have been *en route* to a Kavanaugh-related protest. I watched them move in unison into the distance, settled the bill, and reoriented myself to finish the last portion of my *Titanic* walk.

Part Two of Dr. Cimino's *Titanic* trek will appear in *Voyage* 108.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>I recently had read Robert Caro's multi-part biography of President Lyndon Johnson and was impressed with the breadth of the author's field research. Caro immerses himself in places like the Texas Hill Country and the chamber of the United States Senate, studies every relevant detail, and then vividly recreates them for the reader. At work on a book about disaster relief for *Titanic* survivors, I wanted to take a similar approach in my own writing. Robert Caro, *Master of the Senate* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003); Caro, *The Passage of Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012). Another influence was Iain Sinclair's walks through London chronicled in his book *Lights Out for the Territory* (London: Granta Books, 1997). After finishing a draft

of this article, I came across *Waterfront: A Journey Around Manhattan* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2004) by Phillip Lopate at a used bookstore. We have a similar take on walking the waterfront, though his book has little to do with *Titanic*.

<sup>2</sup>Stephen Garmey, *Gramercy Park: An Illustrated History of a New York Neighborhood* (New York: Balsam Press, 1984), 71-72, 77-79.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 77; *The WPA Guide to New York City: The Federal Writers' Project Guide to 1930s New York* (New York: The New Press, 1939, 1992), 196-97.

<sup>5</sup>Garmey, *Gramercy Park*, 77.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 78-79.

<sup>7</sup>Women's Relief Committee, *Report of the New York Women's Relief Committee for the Survivors of the S.S. Titanic: April 16<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup>, 1912* (New York, 1912), 3-4. Edward Marshall, "Society Women are Often-er Bees than Butterflies," *New York Times*, August 11, 1912, SM2.

<sup>8</sup>"Speed Relief Work for *Titanic*'s Saved," *New York Times*, April 19, 1912, 9.

<sup>9</sup>Women's Relief Committee, *Report*, 4; "Women to Care for Steerage Survivors," *New York Times*, April 18, 1912, 6.

<sup>10</sup>Jamie McDonald, *No Access New York City: The City's Hidden Treasures, Haunts, and Forgotten Places* (Lanham, MD: Globe Pequot, 2018), 135-36; *WPA Guide*, 191.

<sup>11</sup>Garmey, *Gramercy Park*, 7.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 55

<sup>13</sup>Mike Wallace, *Greater Gotham: A History of New York City from 1898-1919* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 508-509.

<sup>14</sup>"Purses of the Nation are Open to Aid the Suffers," *New York Herald*, April 19, 1912, 8; Red Cross Emergency Relief Committee of the Charity Organization Society, *Emergency Relief by the American Red Cross After the Wreck of the S.S. Titanic, April 15, 1912* (New York, 1913), 6; Jacob Schiff to Mayor Gaynor, April 18, 1912, Mayor William Gaynor Records, Series III, Box 19, Folder 213, Roll 10 – *Titanic* Disaster Relief Fund, New York City Municipal Archives.

<sup>15</sup>Charity Organization Society Central Council, Minutes, May 8, 1912, Community Service Society Archives, Series V: Charity Organization Society, Box 206, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

<sup>16</sup>*WPA Guide*, 204-205.

<sup>17</sup>Women's Relief Committee, *Report*, 5, 12.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 6, 12.

<sup>19</sup>"More than Enough Gifts for Survivors," *New York Times*, April 22, 1912, 7.

<sup>20</sup>Red Cross Committee, *Emergency Relief*, 8-9.

<sup>21</sup>Robert Kahn, ed., *City Secrets: New York City* (New York: The Little Bookroom, 2002), 62.



The tangled intersection near the Corner Bistro, in the West Village. (Author's photograph)