Walking Titanic's Charity Trail in New York City: Part Two, The Meatpacking District and West Village

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Manhattan’s Pier 54, where Carpathia docked carrying 712 survivors of Titanic, is located on the outskirts of the Meatpacking District. Walking along West 13th Street toward the Hudson River, one sees how much this area has changed in the past hundred years. Mixed in with the early Twentieth Century brick warehouses and meatpacking plants are luxury condos of metal and glass. Close to the High Line, a spectacularly landscaped park built atop an old elevated freight rail line, are high-end establishments specializing in expensive-looking furniture, fashion, technology and “world-class dining.”

Crossing under the High Line, I caught a glimpse of Pier 54’s rusted metal arch. I walked to the intersection of West 13th Street and 10th Avenue, across from the pier, where I knew there once had been a dilapidated tenement building with a connection to the Titanic disaster. Reporters from the Philadelphia newspaper Evening Bulletin had used a barbershop on the building’s second floor as their command center from which they covered Carpathia’s arrival on April 18, 1912. The barber, a Mr. Henry Stoul, had agreed to rent out his space to the newspaper for $10. His shop was “large and roomy” with an “excellent view of the pier,” and had the added benefit of being above a saloon with a telephone.1

When word came that Carpathia was about to dock, the Bulletin sent its reporters out into the field. Two made their way to the pier with their special access permits; two others stood within the police lines just outside the pier; the lone woman journalist, Dorothy Bauer, worked her beat in the crowded nearby streets, putting together a “heart interest” story. Throughout the night, they worked to track down notable Philadelphia survivors, often calling in their stories to the saloon’s first-floor telephone. At the barbershop, journalists hand-wrote articles while lounging in the barbershop’s upholstered chairs, sustained by a constant flow of sandwiches and black coffee. All told, despite operating out of a barbershop, the Bulletin’s staff managed to produce almost 20,000 words of copy for the next day’s paper.2

The barbershop is gone now. In its place is a vacant lot blocked off by a graffiti-covered green fence. Hovering over the lot was a new glass tower and an older hotel of concrete and glass. The hotel’s windows were so large that you could watch the cleaning women at work from the street far below. I walked up and down the street several times, studying the graffiti. On the fence hung a small wooden sign that displayed two provocative questions written

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1 Not mentioned in the text.

2 Not mentioned in the text.
in white paint:

Anthropocene!? Do you think society should incorporate a long term mentality to be aware of climate change? Should art too?

Back at the 13th Street/10th Avenue intersection, I photographed another politicized message scrawled on a plastic traffic blocker: “Deport Trump! Approved by Barkin [sic] Obama.” Next, I crossed the busy West Side Highway at West 14th Street and made for Pier 54 and the Hudson River. Like the nearby barbershop, the pier is no more. Its decrepit shed was demolished in 1991 and the pier itself, which had been slowly sinking into the river, was taken down only recently. The rusted metal gate and arch are all that remain.

To get a sense of what the pier and its two-story shed (“a train station on water””) would have looked like, I turned north to view the intact Marine & Aviation Pier. Before it was demolished, the New York Times called Pier 54’s shed a “great green hulk.” Similarly, the neighboring Marine Pier contains a long green building that stretches its entire length; I stared at it and imagined Carpathia docking.

A few minutes later, standing directly beneath Pier 54’s gate, I admired its size. In 1912, it would have looked quite different.

Back then, it was encased in a decorative stone façade topped by a large triangular cornice. The solid exterior is gone and now you can stare straight through the metal beams to the construction taking place behind it. What will eventually emerge from the river in Pier 54’s place is an estimated $250 million “futuristic cultural park,” dubbed Pier55, that will feature an “amphitheater and two open landscaped areas for staging performances.” All of this will be mounted on pilings to form what will ostensibly be a “man-made island,” connected to Manhattan by two walkways.

On the day of my walk, construction was underway. It was impossible to escape the sound of two tall pile drivers at work. Their pounding noise rose above the motors and horns of the West Side Highway’s traffic to pierce the air.

I sat on a concrete barrier and watched as some tourists snapped pictures and joggers and cyclists sped by. I had hoped to use this time to absorb the pier’s aura, but my senses were on overdrive, which prevented my mind from traveling back in time.

Surprised that I had not seen a plaque or any kind of marker to commemorate Pier 54’s place in history, I walked to the chain link fence in front of the gate to get a closer look. There was no official signage anywhere. I was set to leave when I noticed an 8½” x 11” sheet of laminated white paper attached to the fence, hanging below two city-issued work permits. On it was written:

On April 18, 1912, the RMS Carpathia arrived on this pier with 710 survivors of the RMS Titanic which had sunk in the Atlantic Ocean three days before.

This is in remembrance to the more than 1,500 people who perished on the RMS Titanic and to the more than 1,198 people who lost their lives on the RMS Lusitania.

Placed on Pier 54 • April 18, 2018
By Peter E. (Age 8)

The memorial was inspirational. An eight-year-old boy, whether spurred to action by a school project or taking his own initiative with some help from his parents, had admirably stepped up to fill a void.

I left Peter’s memorial and walked south along the Hudson River Park to the Jane Hotel [photos, p. 168] at the corner of Jane and West Streets. The Jane was formerly the American Seaman’s Friend Society’s
Crowds gathered outside Pier 54, April 19, 1912. The pier’s façade and cornice are visible in the distance, behind the coal building. (American Press Association, Wikimedia.org)

Sailors’ Home, an evangelical reform organization with roots in the early Nineteenth Century. The Sailors’ Home occupied a five-story red brick building that was partially funded by a donation of $150,000 by Olivia Sage of the Russell Sage Foundation. Its mission was to improve “the moral and social welfare of seamen throughout the United States” by offering safe and affordable lodging to able-bodied seamen and a free home for those who were “destitute, sick, or shipwrecked.” Shaped like a lighthouse, it was a beacon in the midst of the waterfront’s squalor.

It was here that 200 of Titanic’s surviving crew, plus 20 stewardesses, came to receive much-needed clothing and toiletries on April 19. A smaller number also attended a memorial service for those who had perished. For the sailors, this outing must have been a welcomed break from their enforced seclusion aboard Lapland. Later that evening, according to one newspaper, some of the surviving mariners were rumored to have sold their new clothing and used the proceeds to drink at the neighborhood bars.

The crew’s stay at the Sailors’ Home was brief, as most left the next day on Lapland to return to England. Twenty-nine unlucky crewmembers, however, were served with federal subpoenas in the morning and later traveled to Washington, D.C., to testify in front of the Senate subcommittee investigating the disaster.

In the lobby of the Jane Hotel, I asked the desk clerk if he knew anything about the hotel’s connection to Titanic. He gestured to a fountain near the main entrance, which he said was built in tribute to the sailors who died. The writing on the brass plaque that lay on the floor below it had been worn off due to years of foot traffic, so it was impossible to confirm his claim. Before I left, I was able to convince a bellman to escort me upstairs to have a look at the hotel’s cabin-sized rooms (7 feet by 7 feet). Sailors would have spent 25¢ to spend the night in these cramped quarters; now, tourists pay $99 per night, which is still a bargain for Manhattan.

Exiting the hotel, I stepped out onto Jane Street, a quintessential West Village road, lined with trees and charming brick-row houses. I walked its entire length away from the river, then found my way to West 12th Street and 7th Avenue. Here is the former site of St. Vincent’s Hospital [photo, page 168], a venerable Catholic institution with roots in New York City since the mid-Nineteenth Century. The hospital has treated victims of the city’s most infamous disasters, such as the fire that destroyed General Slocum on the East River in 1904; the crashing of a bomber plane into the Empire State Building in June 1945, which killed 13 people and injured 28; the September 11th, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center; and, of course, Titanic. It also has nursed some of the city’s most famous residents including Governor Alfred E. Smith in 1944 and the poet Dylan Thomas in 1953. Thomas, who arrived in a coma after an epic bender of “eighteen straight whiskies,” died in the same ward (St. Joseph’s Hall) that had sheltered Titanic survivors years earlier.

Former West Village denizen Edna St. Vincent Millay, the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize in poetry, was named after the hospital. Her uncle, a longshoreman, was involved in a sensational accident the captivated the nation in 1892 and led to her naming. While loading cargo onto the vessel El Monte in New Orleans, Uncle Char-

The future site of the Pier 55 cultural park on the Hudson River. (Author’s photo)
lie decided it was a good idea to take a nap on some cotton in the ship's hold. Drunk and exhausted, he fell into a deep sleep. When he finally awoke, the ship was on its way to New York and he was trapped below deck without food or water. Ten days later, Charlie was discovered unconscious and promptly taken to St. Vincent's Hospital where, remarkably, he made a full recovery. Millay was born shortly thereafter in Maine and given the middle name St. Vincent, after the hospital that saved her uncle. Throughout her life, the bohemian Millay preferred to be called the masculine Vincent instead of the feminine Edna.

The hospital’s most noteworthy moment of the early Twentieth Century was its care for Titanic survivors. Two representatives, Teresa O’Donohue and Mrs. Thomas Hughes Kelly, attended the Thursday, April 18 meeting of the Women’s Relief Committee. Meanwhile, the nursing Sisters back at the hospital began their preparations for the influx of patients by stockpiling all the necessary medical supplies. At 8 p.m., a contingent of priests, nuns and benefactors departed the hospital for the pier. With them were seven doctors, three automobile ambulances and two horse-drawn ambulances. The volunteers worked closely with the Women’s Relief Committee all night and oversaw the transfer of 117 survivors from Pier 54 to St. Vincent’s Hospital. When the nurses returned, survivors were already in bed and “a few groups of reunited relatives and friends [were] saying a last good-night in the wards.”

By Sunday, most survivors had left, assisted by the Travelers Aid Society of New York in reaching their final destinations.

Among the patients at St. Vincent’s were 16-year-old Karen Abelson and her 26-year-old traveling companion Olaus, third-class passengers from Norway bound for California and South Dakota, respectively. From the hospital, Karen penned a letter to her father, which began, “Well, now I must try to write some words to you, so that you can hear that I am alive.” It was difficult for Karen to write because she was suffering from a terrible headache. In a nearby bed, her friend Olaus was having an even worse time. Sick with a cold, his discomfort was compounded by the loss of his brother-in-law on Titanic. “You should have seen how much he is crying sometimes,” wrote Karen. The mood at the hospital overall was one of despair: “Everything is so sad.” Karen also felt the stress of being a foreigner in a new country. Exasperated, she complained to her father, “They are only speaking English, every one.”

Unfortunately, St. Vincent’s Hospital fell into bankruptcy in 2010 due to financial mismanagement and a decline in the number of paying patients it treated annually. Developers paid $260 million in bankruptcy court to buy the building and announced plans to replace it with luxury condominiums. When I visited [see photo, page 168], the project was complete and units had already been sold. A 4,537-square foot apartment that spans the entire 8th floor went for $19 million in 2015.

The new building, a high-rise of brick and glass, is nice-looking but uninspiring. I walked toward its glass doors, which a doorman held open. Once inside, I asked him if he knew whether any of the original St. Vincent’s remained. He huddled with a colleague and together they explained that one section of the hospital was left intact on 12th Street. However, this was a more recent addition, dating from the 1950s, and had no connection to Titanic. Further down West 11th Street, though, I noticed a series of colorful brick townhouses that looked like they were from the late Nineteenth/early Twentieth Centuries. Survivors, upon their release from the hospital, would have glimpsed the same buildings.

I had hoped to see a few more places on my walk, namely the West 9th Street home of Sarah Rodgers Henry, chairwoman of the Women’s Relief Committee, and the Hebrew Sheltering House in the Lower East Side, but it was getting late and I needed to return to my own home. I grabbed a cup of coffee at the Bluestone Lane Café and caught the E train at West 4th Street back to Queens.

**Titanic Walk Locations**

**Gramercy Park and Madison Square Park**
(Part One)
Sage House. 4 Lexington Avenue
Hewitt/Cooper House. 9 Lexington Avenue
Gramercy Park. Between East 20th Street and East 21st Street
United Charities Building. 285 Park Avenue South
Metropolitan Life Insurance Tower. 1 Madison Avenue

**Madison Square Park.** Broadway, Madison Avenue between East 23rd Street and East 26th Street

**West Village and Meatpacking District**
(Part Two)
Corner Bistro. 331 West 4th Street
High Line. Entrance at West 14th Street
and 10th Avenue
Stoul’s Barbershop. 18 10th Avenue between Little West 12th Street and West 13th Street
Pier 54, West 13th Street and West Side Highway (cross at 14th Street)
Jane Hotel (former American Seamen’s Friend Society). 113 Jane Street
St. Vincent’s Hospital. 7th Avenue between West 11th and West 12th Streets

Endnotes
1“How the Bulletin Covered the Arrival of the Steamship Carpathia,” unpublished report (1912), 10-11, Lord-MacQuitty Collection, 7/3/2, National Maritime Museum, London. A grant from the Molloy College Faculty Scholarship and Academic Advancement Committee made possible a research trip to London to consult the Lord-MacQuitty Collection.
6Geberer, “The Dark History of Pier 54.”
7The West Side Highway and waterfront have long combined to create a noisy environment. The WPA Guide to New York City describes “a surging mass of back-firing, horn-blowing, gear-grinding trucks and taxis” that dominated the area in the 1930s (69).
8Lusitania left from Pier 54 on May 1, 1915.
10Jonathan Thayer, “Mythmaking and the Archival Record: The Titanic Disaster as Documented in the Archives of the Seamen’s Church Institute of New York and New Jersey,” The American Archivist 75 (Fall/Winter, 2012), 405-406.
12“Exploit Titanic Crew to Turn Penny,” New York Call, April 20, 1912, 2. According to the WPA Guide, the sailors certainly had their pick of bars: “Opposite the piers, along the entire length of the highway, nearly every block houses its quota of cheap lunchrooms, tawdry saloons and waterfront harbordsheries catering to the thousands of polyglot seamen who haunt the ‘front’ ” (69).
13Eaton and Haas, Titanic, 220-21.
16Walsh, With a Great Heart, 123-24.

Karen Abelseth to her father, April 1912, in On Board RMS Titanic: Memories of the Maiden Voyage, George Behe, ed. (Gloucestershire, UK: The History Press, 2012), 140. For brief bios on Karen and Olaus, see On Board RMS Titanic, 407-408. Nurses and other staff members questioned patients without relying on a translator, which the hospital’s final report noted with pride. In light of Abelseth’s comments, a translator seemed very necessary. Kelly, “Report of the St. Vincent’s Committee,” 5.


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