
The History of the Judson House Plot Up to 1899

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Before Europeans arrived on what is now Thompson Street, Lenape Indians lived in this area and called it Sapokanican, which meant “the tobacco plantation.” The focal point of this fishing and planting community was a landing on the Hudson River at the present Gansevoort Street. It was a good spot for landing canoes and became a post for trading with Hoboken and the southern tip of Manhattan. Sand hills and swamp also covered much of the area, with an overgrowth of brambles and rushes. A small stream, Minetta Brook, ran through the area. It began with two tributaries that joined near what is now 18th Street and flowed south to the northwest corner of the present park, then turned southwest and continued along today’s Minetta and Downing streets, emptying into a salt marsh near the foot of Canal Street.

During the Dutch period (1624–1664) there continued to be a tobacco plantation on land that had been cleared by the Lenapes. The name changed from Sapokanican to Nortwyck. The rich land around Minetta Brook attracted the attention of Wouter Van Twiller, second director general of New Amsterdam, succeeding Peter Minuit in 1633. Van Twiller took the entire Minetta basin, including Judson’s current property, as his personal country farm or *bouwerie*. His homestead was on a hill at present Eighth Street and MacDougal. Van Twiller pocketed the tobacco profits rather than turning them over to the colony. For this and other reasons he was recalled in 1638.

The West India Company, which ran New Amsterdam, had a handful of African slaves. Van Twiller’s successor granted some of

them a quasi-freedom in 1644 and allowed them to take up land on the outskirts of town. Some of these so-called Negroes' Farms were clustered in what is now Greenwich Village. At least one plot occupied the southwest corner of today's Washington Square Park; others ran along the banks of Minetta Brook.

During the British era (1664–1783) the name of the Nortwyck settlement became Greenwich and was the location of country seats of numerous well-to-do colonists. Many of these large estates survived the American Revolution but were soon subdivided into smaller farms.

After the Revolution, Greenwich gained enough people to become known as a village. In 1789, New York City decided that for the health of its inhabitants it would bury victims of contagious diseases out of town. At that time, Greenwich Village was several miles north of town. The City bought the present Washington Square, drained and filled in the swamp, and used it for burying not only the contagious but also the indigent. The park was a potter's field for the next twenty-five years or so. In addition, its trees would serve as gallows for convicts of Newgate Prison when it was opened in 1797 at the Hudson River and current Tenth Street.

In 1811 the City commissioned a street grid plan for Manhattan Island. Greenwich locals protested the redrawing of their streets which, naturally, followed property lines on which their houses sat, so the area west of Sixth Avenue was granted an exemption from re-orienting its streets to the axis set for the less developed part of the island. But Judson's plot, later subsumed by the Village, was subject to having existing roads rerouted to conform to the plan. For example, Amity Lane, which bordered the farm of which the Judson site was a part, was rotated about 30 degrees counterclockwise to become Amity Street, later renamed West Third.

A yellow fever epidemic in the port city of New York on the southern end of the island during the early nineteenth century caused an influx of people into Greenwich Village. When the crisis subsided, some of those people stayed, and this in part accounted for a rapid quadrupling of the local population and the conversion of the Village from small farms to streets of row houses by the mid-1820s.

Washington Square acquired its current name on the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1826, and for a few years it was used as a military parade ground. That

didn't work very well, however. Since some 22,000 bodies were buried there, heavy horse-drawn artillery sometimes fell through the graves. By 1850 Washington Square would have the configuration of paths that it has now, and in 1852 the first fountain was built.

The eastern and western parts of what is now called Greenwich Village had entirely different identities. The Village itself was originally the part nearer the Hudson and was a bustling area of small tradesmen and artisans. East of Sixth Avenue above the Square lived grander merchants and bankers, and they called their neighborhood "Washington Square," not "Greenwich Village." Fifth Avenue was not yet an address to boast about. Only in 1824 was it opened from the square to Thirteenth Street, covering over the Minetta Brook that continued, as it does today, to run beneath. Until 1825 much of the area immediately south of the square was still farmland, not yet divided into blocks in accordance with the 1811 grid plan.¹

As for the Judson House lot in particular, official land records at the New York City Register's Office show the Herring family as the first post-Revolution owners of the land that now includes Thompson Street. They had it surveyed in 1784. Four years later Elbert Herring sold it to William Ward Burrowes, who in turn sold it to John Ireland (called "gentleman" in the records). Ireland owned it for forty years before it was surveyed for parceling into lots in February 1825 (which suggests that this was when the 1811 street grid plan actually reached Thompson Street). Ireland began selling lots shortly after his survey. In fact, there was quite a flurry of real estate transactions in the next few years. From 1825 to 1832 the Judson House lot changed hands six times. Small businessmen such as grocers and bakers were among the early owners. During the next decade, ownership of the Judson House lot was divided into ninths, presumably by a will. In 1842 the shares were bought up and reunited under the ownership of Edward N. Tailer.

1. Useful secondary sources for the history of Greenwich Village include the following: Gold, Joyce, *From Trout Stream to Bohemia* (New York: Old Warren Press, 1988); Gross, Steve, *Old Greenwich Village: An Architectural Portrait* (Washington, DC: National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1993); Miller, Terry, *Greenwich Village and How It Got That Way* (New York: Crown Books, 1990); and New York Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Greenwich Village Historic District Designation Report* (New York: The Commission, 1969).

The selling price of the Judson House lot had gone from \$1,125 in 1825 to \$4,050 in 1842—not a surprising increase in a blossoming area. No buildings are mentioned in the land conveyances until the next sale of the lot seventy-four years later—the sale to Edward Judson on July 27, 1899. He bought it from Edward Tailer’s executor for \$30,000, and that conveyance does mention “land with buildings thereon” and that the sale is “subject to lettings to present monthly tenants.” For all these reasons, it seems likely that Edward Tailer erected three buildings sometime between 1842 and 1852 when they first appear on an atlas by Matthew Dripps.

Putting three small buildings on a standard 25- by 100-foot lot was unusual; virtually every other lot for blocks around had one house, typically at least half the depth of the lot. So this seems to have been rental property from the outset. Each of the three three-story brick buildings had approximately a 25-foot square footprint plus a small yard. The two northerly ones shared a party wall.

Lest the reader think this block remained a sleepy former *boulevard*, in the 1860s there was a two-way horse-drawn trolley line going along Thompson Street. In the 1870s an elevated steam railroad was added along Amity Street. Incidentally, West Third Street formed one long block from Thompson to MacDougal streets; Sullivan Street was not extended from West Third to the park until about 1903.²

In 1888 Edward Judson had purchased the four corner lots on Thompson and the park for the purpose of erecting a church that would be a memorial to his father and into which his Berean congregation would move from Downing Street. The next year he bought the two lots to the west and five years later one more lot to the west and eventually would lease yet one more lot. The result was not only the church itself with its tower, but an apartment hotel for income as well.

Edward bought the Judson House lot in July 1899 with a mortgage from the American Baptist Missionary Union, the organization that had been created to support his father in the mission field in Burma.

2. This information comes from various insurance atlases, e.g., by Matthew Dripps, William Perris, G. W. Bromley, and the Sanborn Map Company.