

Old York

Look Close, and in This Ever-New Town You Will See Traces Of the Past, Peeking Through.



By DAVID W. DUNLAP

WITH the possible exception of Judge Crater, nothing has ever vanished without a trace in New York.

The city is not so much a tidy pile of building blocks as it is a chambered nautilus with walls of palimpsest on which the etchings of the present never entirely obscure the patterns beneath. Forever visible behind the newest layer, no matter how faint, are remnants of the civic past. New York does not forget.

Paradoxically, such tantalizing glimpses are far more common when the city is most busily rebuilding itself, as it has been in recent years, and construction and renovation crews seem to swarm every other block. Each swipe of the sledgehammer, each tug of the backhoe has the potential to uncover another archaeological treasure.

Sometimes, history presents itself as the vague shape left over by a force that no longer exists. At other times, when the modern laminate is removed from a patch of cityscape, history reasserts itself with startling clarity.

Exigencies of time and money, not sentimental attachment, help save these traces. Why excavate a foundation when you can build on it? Why pull down a molding when you can cover it? Why obliterate a mural when you can paint over? Why dismantle a sign when you can just turn off its light?

Landmarks that were famously swept aside endure in surprising ways. Travelers still grasp the globe-topped newel posts and thick brass handrails of the old Pennsylvania Station and unknowingly walk over its glass-block floors. A 20-foot-long expanse of the station's original granite wall emerged in 1998 from behind a partition in a basement office suite not far from the waiting room.

New Yorkers who miss the Marine Grill at the McAlpin Hotel on Herald Square, with its spectacularly vivid maritime tableaux by the artist Fred Dana Marsh, can take the A train. Six of Marsh's eight-foot-high terra-cotta lunettes turned up eight months ago at the Broadway-Nassau station in Lower Manhattan, thanks to the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's Arts for Transit program.

The 18th-century African Burial Ground? A grassy plot at Duane and Elk Streets, north of City Hall, marks the spot where 427 graves of black New Yorkers were unearthed in 1991 and to which they will be returned in 2002. The Ninth Avenue el? Apartment buildings at 67-71 West 109th Street still bend to its curving course. Longchamps restaurants? A streamlined Art Deco sign still points the way to the long-vanished branch at 423 Madison Avenue, near 49th Street.

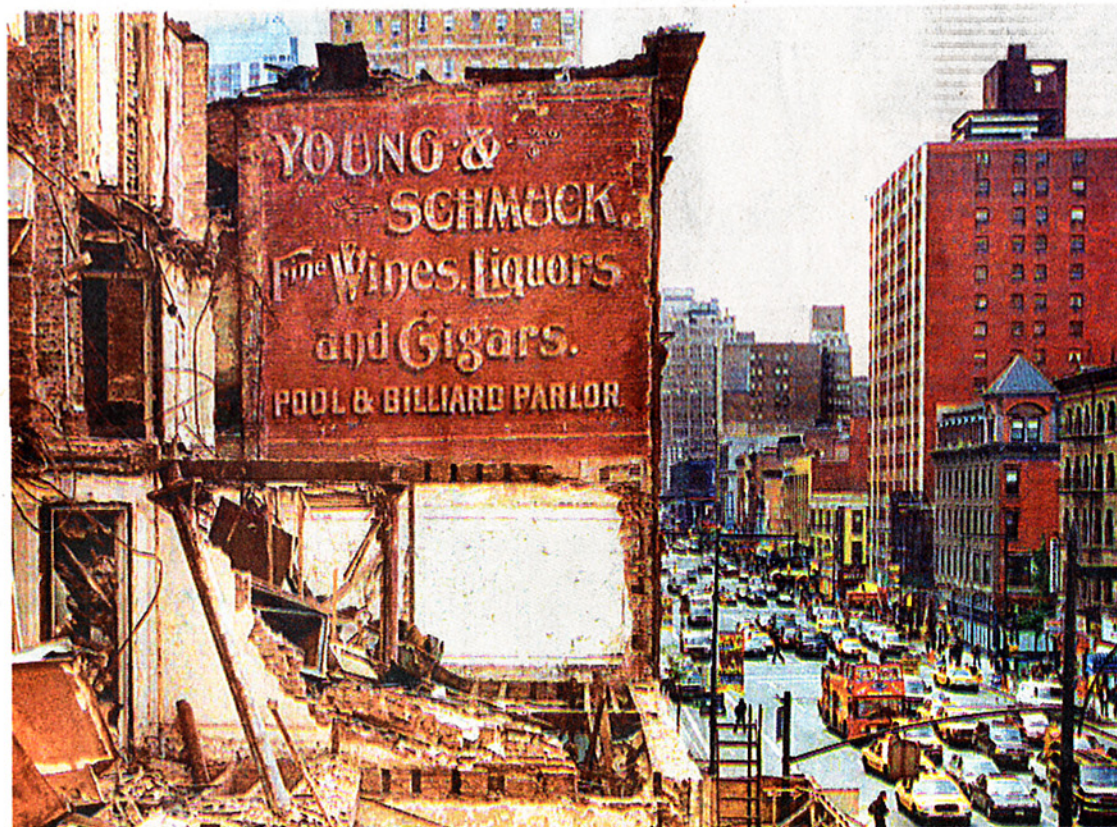
Messages from handpainted murals — Billiard Parlor! Mustache Wax! Carriage Manufactory! — echo like long-forgotten street cries among towering curtain walls of glass and steel. For Frank H. Jump, a Brooklyn photographer who lives with H.I.V., the signs are a personal metaphor for survival. "Like myself," he said, "many of these ads have long outlived their expected life span."

This month, in Williamsburg, he is exhibiting photographs of vintage Brooklyn signs. "You'd be surprised how many people hunger for something that anchors them to the past in New York," Mr. Jump said.

Where Rockefellers Roamed

Even in Midtown, where the past seems most ruthlessly to have been erased, secrets remain and are occasionally divulged. An

Continued on Page 17



Above, Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times; top, Frank H. Jump; top right, Naum Kazhdan/The New York Times

FROM THE SHADOWS A long-observed image of a mustachioed man's face, top, stares out from a lower Broadway wall; above, an Eighth Avenue sign that came to light in summer; top right, a doorknob from a Rockefeller home.