Old York

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

By DAVID W. DUNLAP

W th 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 mound, with walls of palimpsest on which the epochs of the present never entirely obscure the patterns beneath. Forever visible behind the newest layer, no matter how fast, are remains of the civic past. New York does not forget.

Paradoxically, such tantalizing glimpses are far more common when the city is most busyly rebuilding itself, as it has been in recent years, and construction and renovation crews seem to smear every other block. Each surge 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 illuminat e is removed from a patch of cityscape, history responds 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 building 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 news posts and thick brass handrails of the old Pennsylvania Station and unknowingly walk over its glass- black floors. A 24-foot-long exposure of the station's original granite wall emerged in 1988 from beneath a partition in a basement office suite not far from the waiting rooms.

New Yorkers who miss the Maritime Grill at the Manhattan Hotel on Herald Square, with its spectacularly vivid maritime tapestries by the artist Rudis Duss, can take the A Train. Six of Matisse's eight-foot-high terra-cotta lan- cements 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 pre-Century African Burial Ground? A grassy plot at Duane and Elk Streets, north of City Hall, marks the spot where 6,750 graves of black New Yorkers were unearthed in 1991 and to which they will be returned in 2002. The Ninth Avenue 67th Street buildings at 67th Street and 57th Street still bend to its curving course. Longhorns 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 — Bill- hard Parlor! Mustache Wax! Carriage Manu- factury! — echo the long-territories streets crisscrossing towering curtain walls of glass and steel. For Frank H. James, a Brooklyn photographer who lives with H.I.V., the signs are a personal metaphor for survival. "I like myself," he said, "many of those ads have long outlived their expected lives span.

This month, in Williamsburg, he is exhibi- ting 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 indelible, secrets remain and are occasionally divulged. An