



A Toast to Gotham, Topped-Up

By Edward Kosner
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SAVE PRINT TEXT

It would take a diligent reader about a hundred hours to cover the new "Encyclopedia of New York City," from the photographer Berenice Abbott to Louis Zukofsky, a forgotten poet who took 50 years to complete an 800-page epic.

Of course, you'd likely get sidetracked in the list of the 205 ticker-tape parades up Broadway that the city has staged since 1896. Or in the entry about immigrants to New York from Slovenia that cheerfully reports that in the 1920s they specialized in making straw hats. Who knew?

This updated edition of the "Encyclopedia," first published 15 years ago, is more than simply a 1,561-page crib book for trivia addicts. It's a heroic compendium of the achievements and follies of the millions of strivers who've toiled in New York since Peter Minuit (page 843) bought the island that the Indians called *manahactanienk*—meaning, appropriately enough, "place of inebriation"—in 1626.



Auld Lang Signs New Year's Eve in Times Square on Dec. 31, 2008. EPA/CORBIS

The project's impresario is Kenneth T. Jackson, a history professor at Columbia University who assembled hundreds of contributors, mostly academics and librarians. No one would confuse their earnest, uninflected prose with Voltaire's, but they are careful, fair-minded to a fault, and their accumulated information is, well, encyclopedic.

The 5,000-plus entries are a blend of relatively short items and pages-long takes on individual boroughs, religious denominations, the arts, the economy of the city, firefighting, crime, politics, housing, the sewer system and beyond. There are extraordinary lists: every newspaper ever published in the city; songs about New York; every English governor starting with Richard Nicolls in 1664; every U.S. congressman ever elected; container ship tonnage; leading causes of death. If data about the city can be ranked, ranked it is here.

For all the rewards of the long entries, the Encyclopedia's real pleasures lurk in the shorter items, some of them barely a paragraph long.

An intrepid reader will learn that Hellmann's mayonnaise ("The whole egg, the whole egg, the whole egg goes into Hellmann's real mayonnaise") was hatched in a German immigrant's delicatessen at 490 Columbus Ave. in 1905. And that Dr. Brown's celery tonic became a staple at Jewish delis because Coke was not deemed kosher until the 1930s. Nordic name or not, Häagen-Dazs ice cream was first churned by a man from the Bronx. And Barbicide, the blue disinfectant that they clean combs with in barber shops, was invented in Brooklyn in 1947.

THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF NEW YORK CITY

Edited by Kenneth T. Jackson
Yale University Press, 1,561 pages, \$65

There's plenty of literary lore, too. O. Henry wrote "The Gift of the Magi" in Pete's Tavern on Irving Place, the oldest continually operating drinking establishment in the city, opened in 1864. William F. Buckley got 341,226 votes running for mayor in 1965 on the Conservative ticket, but Norman Mailer got only 41,288 in his quixotic Democratic primary race for mayor four years later. In 1882, Herman Melville turned down an invitation to join the Century club because he felt he was too much of a loner.

"The Encyclopedia of New York City" is particularly conscientious about the real-estate imperative location, location, location. On page 748, the book reports that Abraham Lincoln registered at the Astor House hotel on lower Broadway when he came to New York in 1859 for what became his celebrated speech at the newly opened Cooper Union. Barry Obama, as he was then called, lived at 339 East 94th St. during his senior year at Columbia. Alexander Kerensky, the Russian leader ousted by Lenin, ended his days on Riverside Drive. Henry Kissinger lived with his parents on Fort Washington Avenue in Washington Heights while attending George Washington High School.

Anyone who thinks Craigslist invented demimonde classifieds can sample the 19th-century ads for prostitutes on page 1,044, including "Mrs. Everett's" establishment, where she "accommodates a few charming and beautiful lady boarders who are from the sunny South and equal to any of [their] class in the city."

There are no entries for baby alligators or crocodiles in toilets or other urban legends, but the "Encyclopedia" does do justice to Judge (Joseph Force) Crater, still missing after 80 years; to the reclusive Collyer brothers, who were found dead in their junk-choked brownstone in 1947; and to the perennial favorite of the trivia-haunted, Maj. William F. Deegan, who turns out to have been a renowned architect as well as the namesake for the expressway running past Yankee Stadium.

Thousands of entries in the new edition have been freshened, and there are fully 800 new entries, including CompStat, the New York police department's pioneering analytic system for crime statistics. Bernie Madoff slipped in under the deadline—there is a 22-line recitation of his epic Ponzi scheme. Curiously, the World Trade Center had no entry in the first edition, so the most poignant listings in the new book are for the lost Twin Towers and for the day they fell, Sept. 11, 2001.

Inevitably, the tome has its flaws. Pale Male, the red-tailed hawk that roosts on a Fifth Avenue cornice, has his own entry, but not John Cheever, who wrote marvelous stories of the city, or the artist Saul Steinberg, whose Manhattan-centric panorama of America for the cover of the New Yorker is an icon. William H. Roman, an all-but-forgotten bureaucrat, somehow rates a full-column entry, as does the mouthy Rev. Al Sharpton. But Daniel Patrick Moynihan, scholar, ambassador and three-term U.S. senator, a genuinely distinguished son of Hell's Kitchen, is kissed off in half the space. The author of David Halberstam's paragraph seems to think that his big journalistic works were novels.

But these quibbles are gnats on the hide of an elephant. "The Encyclopedia of New York City" is an engrossing book of marvels, as monumental in its way as its wondrous subject.

—Mr. Kosner, born and bred in Manhattan, has been the editor of Newsweek, New York magazine, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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