



Gracie Mansion

A Student Guide to the People's House

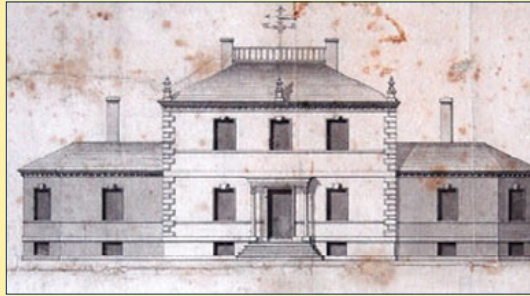


Mayor Bill de Blasio

Before Gracie Mansion

The land on which Gracie Mansion stands was originally the site of Belview, the Manhattan home of British Loyalist Jacob Walton. Belview was built in 1770, five years before the American Revolution began, when New York was still a British colony. Today, the land is part of New York City, but in Walton's time it was five miles away from the city, surrounded by farmland, trees, and water. Cars and trains had not yet been invented, so the only way to reach Belview was by boat!

At the start of the American Revolution, American rebels seized Walton's house. Walton and his family escaped to Queens by boat, and George Washington's troops turned the property into a colonial fortification. The Walton home was destroyed by the British during the war.



Detail from a drawing of the Walton house, dated 1774.

Why did the American rebels want to seize the Walton house at the beginning of the American Revolution? (HINT: Please see the map on the next to last page.)



This British cannonball, excavated from the land surrounding Gracie Mansion, dates from the time of the American Revolution.

Imagine a battle scene from the American Revolution

Cannonballs like this one bombarded the Walton house in September of 1776 and destroyed it. This cannonball is made of iron, and although not much larger than a baseball, weighs more than 12 pounds! It was found while archaeologists were excavating the grounds of Gracie Mansion in the 1980s.

What do archaeologists do? How does their work help us to understand the past?

Mr. Gracie builds his house

After the American Revolution, the Walton family sold the property where Belview once stood to Archibald Gracie, a successful Scottish-born shipping merchant. The Gracie family lived in New York City, but also wanted a country home. In 1799, Gracie built a wood-frame house on the land. His new home, Gracie Mansion, was part of a group of similar



Collection of the New-York Historical Society (584.33).

Above, Mrs. Archibald Gracie (Esther Rogers), illustration from 1925 based on an earlier miniature.

Above right, Archibald Gracie, miniature by an unidentified artist, circa 1795-1800.



Collection of the New-York Historical Society (19258.35).

country homes along the shoreline of the East River.

There were still no cars or trains, and no roads connected Gracie Mansion's country location with the city. By boat, the Gracies' trip from their city home downtown to their country home could take hours!



The country home of Archibald Gracie by an unidentified artist, circa 1810.

Gracie lived and worked in New York City. Why would he want to build a country home five miles away?

The Gracie house grows

Mr. and Mrs. Gracie had eight children and needed to expand their home. The Foyer (front hall) was constructed in 1810 and at the same time a large parlor was added to the house. The enlarged home provided more room for the family to entertain important friends like Alexander Hamilton, the first Secretary of the Treasury, and Washington Irving, author of *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*.

Special artists have painted a large compass rose in the center of the Foyer floor representing Gracie's success as a shipping merchant. The wooden floor is painted to look like marble using a technique known as trompe l'oeil, French for "trick the eye."



The Foyer of Gracie Mansion.

Why would a compass be used to symbolize shipping?

What are some other examples of trompe l'oeil painting at Gracie Mansion? Why would you want to paint something to look like something else?



Detail of the compass rose painted on the Foyer floor.

Lights glitter at Gracie Mansion

Notice the sparkling crystals on the chandeliers in almost all of the rooms at Gracie Mansion. Glass was very costly and indicated a family's wealth during Gracie's time, and it also served a very useful purpose. People liked their homes to have brightly colored, light-filled rooms, but there was no electric light at the time.

They therefore needed to find other ways to bring light into their homes. The glass of the chandeliers picks up bright colors and bounces light into a



The chandelier in Gracie Mansion's Ballroom being cleaned.

room from all angles. Today, specialists clean these chandeliers by hand, making sure that each prism on every chandelier maintains the brilliance it would have had when the Gracies lived in the house.



Chandelier in Gracie Mansion's Patent-Yellow Parlor.

Throughout Gracie Mansion chandeliers are hung in front of mirrors and near fireplaces. Why have they been placed this way? (HINT: People liked their homes to be as bright as possible.)

Mirror, mirror on the wall

Convex mirrors seem to pop out of their frames. When you look into one, your face appears distorted. You probably wouldn't use a convex mirror to see how you looked before going out! This type of mirror was popular in Gracie's time because it is perfect for picking up light from the parts of the room not directly in front of it. The mirror then reflects the hundreds of sparkles of light it captures back into the room.



Convex mirror in Gracie Mansion's Ballroom.

The eagle is shown removing a ball and chain. What could this symbolize?

The American eagle at the top of the mirror is an emblem of the United States.

Hear the chimes

Located in the Foyer of Gracie Mansion, this tall case clock, also known as a grandfather clock, was built by a New York

Why is the location of a grandfather clock in a house so important?

clockmaker around 1800, long before wristwatches were invented. Unlike most clocks today, it chimes on the hour and needs to be wound with a special key once each week.

Tall case clock in Gracie Mansion's Foyer.



Make yourself comfortable

In the early nineteenth century, a fireplace provided warmth and enough light to read or sew. Did you notice that there is a fireplace in every room of Gracie Mansion? Around each fireplace is a mantel, decorated with trim and molding. Details often used on mantels included urns and oval sunbursts, as well as wheat, garlands, and pineapples – symbols of abundance, wealth, and hospitality.



The fireplace in Gracie Mansion's Ballroom.

The early nineteenth century was known as the Federal Period.



A small statue of George Washington on the mantel shelf in Gracie Mansion's Library.

The architecture and home furnishings of that time had symmetry with balanced proportions. At Gracie Mansion, all mantels display objects arranged with perfect balance.



The painting above the mantel in Gracie Mansion's Library is *Summer's Day* by Maurice Brazil Prendergast, 1916-18, in the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art (77.1.43).

Find as many examples of symmetry and balance as you can. What might this symmetrical style tell us about how the new United States of America wished to be seen?

The French connection

Have you ever used stamp printing to make a picture? The wallpaper in Gracie Mansion's Dining Room was made in France in the 1830s using carved wood blocks that were coated with paint and stamped onto the paper; it looks like a continuous painting of a garden without a frame.

Archibald Gracie, like many successful shipping merchants of his time, traveled to France for business and pleasure. The Dining Room wallpaper is a fitting decoration for Gracie Mansion because of Gracie's travels and also because France was an important ally of the Americans during the Revolution.



Gracie Mansion's historic Dining Room.

William Waldron

Have financial problems like Gracie's occurred during other times in American history?

The Gracies move

Archibald Gracie's shipping business made him one of the richest men in New York. However, the politics of the time caused his business to fail, and in 1823 he was forced to sell Gracie Mansion to pay his debts.



Cork Pilot by an unidentified artist, circa 1830.

From family home to museum

Two other nineteenth-century families made Gracie Mansion their home, but in 1896 New York City became the owner of the house. It is hard to imagine that

In what ways does the Foyer look different in this picture from the way the room looked during your tour?

Gracie Mansion was used for storage for the neighboring park, and even as an ice cream stand! In 1923, Gracie Mansion became the first home of the Museum of the City of New York. After the museum moved to its current location on Fifth Avenue, Gracie Mansion was renovated and prepared for a well-known New Yorker to move in.



The Foyer of Gracie Mansion in the 1920s, when it was the first home of the Museum of the City of New York.

A mayor comes to Gracie Mansion



A portrait of Mayor La Guardia at his desk at City Hall by Samuel J. Woolf, circa 1945.

In 1942, Gracie Mansion became the official residence of the Mayor of the City of New York. Mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia moved into the house with his family and was the first mayor to live at Gracie Mansion. New York City became the very first city in the United States that had a special home for its mayor.

What might you learn about Mayor La Guardia from this portrait? Can you think of any landmarks in New York City named for Mayor La Guardia?

Gracie Mansion: the People's House

In 2002, Gracie Mansion was restored to its original beauty under the guidance of the Gracie Mansion Conservancy. It is important that Gracie Mansion's doors are open to the public, so New Yorkers and visitors from around the world can enjoy all that the house has to offer.



Mayor de Blasio welcoming visitors to Gracie Mansion.



A magnolia tree in bloom on the lawn of Gracie Mansion with the Hell Gate and Robert F. Kennedy bridges in view.

You have seen that a tour of this eighteenth-century home teaches visitors so much about the history of New York City from its earliest days to present times. Today Gracie Mansion is truly the People's House.

What are three words you would use to describe Gracie Mansion? How did you feel as you walked through Gracie Mansion? What types of activities take place at Gracie Mansion today?

We want to hear from you!



Please email us at GracieTours@cityhall.nyc.gov and let us know:

- What is the one thing you will tell your friends about your tour of Gracie Mansion?
- What object seen during the Gracie Mansion tour was the most interesting to you?
- Was there a question you did not have time to ask during your tour?

Ask us now!

Map detail adapted from a 1930s document showing the location of Gracie Mansion.



Special thanks to the Heckscher Foundation for Children and to the New York Community Trust in partnership with the Historic House Trust of New York City for their generous support of this publication.
 For more information about Gracie Mansion and its tour program, please call 311 or visit www.nyc.gov/gracie.

Gracie Mansion, East End Avenue at 88th Street, New York, New York 10128