

The Old Brewery was the heart of the Five Points, and was the most celebrated tenement building in the history of the city. It was called Coulter's brewery when it was erected in 1792 on the banks of the old Collect, and the beer brewed there was famous throughout the eastern states. It became known simply as the Old Brewery after it had been transformed into a dwelling in 1837, having become so dilapidated that it could no longer be used for its original purpose. It was five stories in height, and had once been painted yellow, but time and weather soon peeled off much of the paint and ripped away many of the clapboards, so that it came to resemble nothing so much as a giant toad, with dirty, leprous warts, squatting happily in the filth and squalor of the Points. Around the building extended an alley, around three feet wide on the southern side, but on the north of irregular width, gradually tapering to a point. The northern part led into a great room called the Den of Thieves, in which more than seventy-five men, women and children, black and white, made their homes, without furniture or conveniences. Many of the women were prostitutes and entertained their visitors in the Den. On the opposite side the passageway was known as Murderers' Alley. [...]

The cellars of the Old Brewery were divided into some twenty rooms, which had previously been used for the machinery of the brewing plant, and there were about seventy-five other chambers above-ground, arranged in double rows along Murderers' Alley and the passage leading to the Den of Thieves. During the period of its greatest renown the building housed more than 1,000 men, women and children, almost equally divided between Irish and Negroes. Most of the cellar compartments were occupied by children who lived into their teens without seeing the sun or breathing fresh air, for it was dangerous for a resident of the Old brewery to leave his niche as it was for an outsider to enter the building. In one basement room about fifteen feet square, not ten years before the Civil War, twenty-six people lived in the most frightful misery and squalor. Once when a murder was committed in this chamber (a little girl was stabbed to death after she had been so foolish as to show a penny she had begged) the body lay in a corner for five days before it was finally buried in a shallow grave dug in the floor by the child's mother. In 1850 an investigation found that no person of the twenty-six had been outside of the room for more than a week, except to lie in wait in the doorway for a more fortunate denizen to pass along with food. When such a person appeared he was promptly knocked on the head and his provisions stolen.

Throughout the building the most frightful living conditions prevailed. Miscegenation was an accepted fact, incest was not uncommon, and there was much sexual promiscuity; the house swarmed with thieves, murderers, pickpockets, beggars, harlots, and degenerates of every type. Fights were of almost constant occurrence, and there was scarcely an hour of the day or night when drunken orgies were not in progress; through the flimsy, clapboarded walls could be heard the crashing thud of brickbat or iron bar, the shrieks of the unhappy victims, the wailing of starving children, and the frenzied cries of men and women, and sometimes boys and girls, writhing in the anguish of delirium tremens. Murders were frequent; it has been estimated that for almost fifteen years the Old brewery averaged a murder a night, and the Cow Bay tenement almost as many. Few of the killers were ever punished, for unless the police came in great force they could not hope to leave the Old Brewery alive, and the inhabitants were very close-mouthed. Even if the police learned the identity of a murderer he could seldom be found, for he dived into the burrows of the Points and fled through the underground passages. Many of the inhabitants of the Old Brewery and of the Cow Bay dens had once been men and women of some consequence, but after a few years in the dives they sank to the level of the original inhabitants.

New York, 1870s

ELE 24

The Beauforts' house was one of the few in New York that possessed a ball-room (it antedated even Mrs. Manson Mingott's and the Heady Chiverses); and at a time when it was beginning to be thought 'provincial' to put a 'crash' over the drawing-room floor and move the furniture upstairs, the possession of a ball-room that was used for no other purpose, and left for three-hundred-and-sixty-four days of the year to shuttered darkness, with its gilt chairs stacked in a corner and its chandelier in a bag – this undoubted superiority was felt to compensate for whatever was regrettable in the Beaufort past. [...]

But folly is as often justified of her children as wisdom, and two years after Mrs. Beaufort's marriage it was admitted that she had the most distinguished house in New York. No one knew exactly how the miracle was accomplished. She was indolent, passive, the caustic even called her dull, but dressed like an idol, hung with pearls, growing younger and blonder and more beautiful each year, she throned in Mr. Beaufort's heavy brown-stone palace, and drew all the world there without lifting her jewelled little finger. The knowing people said it was Beaufort himself who trained the servants, taught the *chef* new dishes, told the gardeners what hothouse flowers to grow for the dinner-table and the drawing-rooms, selected the guests, brewed the after-dinner punch and dictated little notes his wife wrote to her friends. If he did, these domestic activities were privately performed, and he presented to the world the appearance of a careless and hospitable millionaire strolling into his own drawing-room with the detachment of an invited guest, and saying: "My wife's gloxinias are a marvel, aren't they? I believe she gets them out from Kew." [...]

The Beaufort house was one that New Yorkers were proud to show to foreigners, especially on the night of the annual ball. The Beauforts had been among the first people in New York to own their own red velvet carpet and have it rolled down the steps by their own footmen under their own awning, instead of hiring it with the supper and ball-room chairs. They had also inaugurated the custom of letting the ladies take their cloaks off in the hall, instead of shuffling up to the hostess's bedroom and recurling their hair with the aid of a gas burner; Beaufort was understood to have said that he supposed all his wife's friends had maids who saw to it that they were properly *coiffées* when they left home.

The house had been boldly planned with a ball-room, so that, instead of squeezing through a narrow passage to get to it (as at the Chiverses') one marched solemnly down a vista of enfiladed drawing-rooms (the sea-green, the crimson, the *bouton d'or*), seeing from afar the many-candled lustres reflected in the polished parquet, and beyond that the depths of a conservatory where camellias and tree-ferns arched their costly foliage over seats of black and gold bamboo.

Newland Archer, as became a young man of his position, strolled in somewhat late. He had left his overcoat with the silk-stockinged footmen (the stockings were one of Beaufort's few fatuities), had dawdled a while in the library hung with Spanish leather and furnished with Buhl and malachite, where a few men were chatting and putting on their dancing-gloves, and had finally joined the line of guests whom Mrs. Beaufort was receiving on the threshold of the crimson drawing-room.

Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 1920, Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994, Pp 12-14



Anonyme / Dejeuner sur un gratte-ciel / Lunchtime atop a skyscraper, New York, 1932 / Mittagessen auf einem Wolkenkratzer © NOUVELLESIMAGES S.A. et UP/Bettmann 1997 / www.nouvellesimages.com / offset printed in France / Pl. 035

Charles C. Ebbets, *Lunchtime Atop a Skyscraper*, New York, 1932