

The New York Times

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, please [click here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytimes.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#) »

May 22, 1994

Streetscapes/The Rockefeller City House; Pied-a-Terre Off Fifth for a Parsimonious Billionaire

By CHRISTOPHER GRAY

THIS month has seen a great hubbub about Kykuit, the Rockefeller estate at Pocantico Hills that opened to the public on May 4. Tour tickets are sold out for the year except for ferry package tours.

John D. Rockefeller also had a city house, unmentioned in the celebrations of Kykuit because it was demolished more than 50 years ago. But the unusual complex of house, stable and garden at 4 West 54th Street still presents an interesting lesson in rich men's dwellings. And it turns out that bits and pieces of the building still exist, but not on the original site.

John D. Rockefeller entered the oil business in 1863 and by 1880 his Standard Oil Company controlled more than 90 percent of American oil production. Mr. Rockefeller lived in Cleveland but visited New York more and more frequently on business.

In the 1870's he took suites at two Fifth Avenue hotels, first the Windsor, between 46th and 47th Streets, and then the Buckingham, between 49th and 50th Streets.

Around 1880 he bought the northeast corner of 72d Street and Fifth Avenue, apparently intending to put up a mansion. But in 1884 Mr. Rockefeller, a devout Baptist with a reputation for sober parsimony, decided to buy, not build, and took title to an existing house at 4 West 54th Street.

The four-story brownstone, two-story carriage house and central garden had been built in 1865 by William P. Williams, a West Street merchant, when most of the area was open land. In 1881, a later owner redecorated and extended the house to the side, but by 1884 it was still an anachronism, especially for someone as rich as Rockefeller.

Yet he and his wife, Laura, made no major changes to the house, keeping the Eastlake, Moorish and other highly decorated rooms. Rockefeller retired in the 1890's but his holdings in Standard Oil kept earning money. By 1916 he was a billionaire, apparently the world's first.

The 1900 census-taker found Rockefeller in occupancy with his family and 10 servants. Most of these were Irish-born women, and the turnover between each census of 1890, 1900, 1905, and 1910 was almost complete: only Sarah Scott, the housekeeper, remained a constant. Even the Rockefellers, evidently, had trouble keeping help.

In the 1880's it was generally assumed that Fifth Avenue in the 50's would remain safe from commercial intrusions for several generations, but around the turn of the century Rockefeller began buying adjacent

properties on 53d, 54th and 55th Streets and on Fifth Avenue to protect his holdings from commercial encroachments.

One of these was the town house at 13 West 54th Street, to which the 31-year-old John D. Rockefeller Jr. moved when he left his father's house in 1905. Then, in 1913, he moved into a new 10-story private house at 10 West 54th Street, at 102 feet high the tallest ever built in New York, forming an ungainly pair with his father's ancient dwelling.

It was about this time that the son retired to join his father in a huge charitable campaign, designed in part to repair the reputation of the Rockefeller interests as rapacious capitalists.

It appears that the father and son came to prefer their Pocantico estate to their city houses, but they still wrought profound changes on their neighborhood. In 1929 John D. Rockefeller Sr. bought the land that he later developed as Rockefeller Center -- one early plan even had Rockefeller Plaza extended north to 53d Street.

In 1932 the Museum of Modern Art, co-founded in 1929 by Abby (Mrs. John D. Jr.) Rockefeller, moved to a Rockefeller-owned town house at 9 West 53d Street. The museum's present building went up on the site in 1939, heavily supported by the family, and Nelson A. Rockefeller became its president. In 1936 Nelson Rockefeller oversaw the construction of the modernistic Rockefeller apartments, at 17 West 54th Street.

John D. Rockefeller Jr. moved out to 740 Park Avenue in 1936, and his father died the next year. In 1938 the houses were demolished to make way for the Sculpture Garden of the Museum of Modern Art. At the time of demolition three of the Victorian-style rooms that John D. Rockefeller Sr. had so thriftily reused (and never remodeled) were taken apart and donated, the bedroom and the dressing room to the Museum of the City of New York, and a Moorish room to the Brooklyn Museum.

According to a report in The New York Times of 1938 the bricks from the sidewalls of the 4 West 54th Street house were salvaged for the interior walls of a new house built at the Pocantico estate for Abby Milton, daughter of John D. Jr., and her husband, David. But the Miltons' daughter, Abby O'Neill, says that her parents' architect, Mott Schmidt, actually placed them on the exterior. "It's the most beautiful soft color," she says.

Photos: 4 West 54th Street with stable circa 1860. (Rockefeller Center Archives); John D. Rockefeller, Sr. and Jr. (Rockefeller Archive Center, 1930's)