
Displaying Women

*Spectacles of Leisure
in Edith Wharton's New York*

Maureen E. Montgomery

Routledge New York London

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For Mary and Joseph Montgomery

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Acknowledgments

This study has its origins in a discussion with Carroll Smith-Rosenberg that took place during a miserable winter in Canterbury at a time when she was a visiting fellow in my department. After the publication of my doctoral dissertation, the question "What next?" loomed large. It seemed a demanding question then, all the more so because of my recent relocation to New Zealand and the geographical distance between my new home and the archives in the United States. I thank Carroll for giving me both the incentive and the encouragement to pursue my professional identity as an "Americanist."

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Introduction

At the turn of the century, "Saunterings," the weekly society column in *Town Topics*, a gossip society magazine, provided prolonged lamentations on the sins of New York's high society. Indeed, since the establishment of the magazine in 1885, the writer of the column, "The Saunterer," had set himself up as a censor of society. Through his network of informants, the Saunterer had "eyes" in different places—he was a panoptical figure surveying social life in the metropolis. He was also a merchant dealing in information, gossip, rumor, and innuendo, and in his hands the currency of gossip was transformed into profit and power. In his most pessimistic mood, he would describe New York society as a circus, a grotesque form of human life where "money-making and festal enjoyment" were the "prime motives of existence." For the Saunterer, the city was both repellent and bewitching: "a mass of fascinating evils that can ruin any weak nature." In 1890, for example, he complained that what he called "the woman habit" was a threat to the "lofty mental development and domestic grace in our young people," responsible, in fact, for "nine-tenths" of the misery and crime in the city.¹ Prostitutes were everywhere, he claimed, "feminine flesh" costing "from one cent to a hundred thousand dollars a pound." And if his readers doubted his word, they could go and see for themselves: "Start at Murray Hill and pass from there through upper Broadway and Sixth avenue to Water street, and at every turn stands the woman with the devilish eyes and mercenary soul."² Just over a year later, he again complained that vice was rampant in the metropolis, pointing his finger at those with great wealth and luxury who overindulged themselves in sensual gratification outside of marriage.³ His particular *bêtes noires* in this regard were adultery, alcoholism, prostitution, and homosexuality.⁴

The Saunterer read the street as a boulevard promenade; he was a man-about-town, frequenting clubs, restaurants, and theaters, taking in the sights and listening at keyholes. His eyes penetrated the shadowy corners in ballrooms, his ears listened for *faux pas* and indiscretions. He appraised public space and evaluated people's behavior and appearance both in terms of polite conventions and

with regard to the gender, class, racial, and ethnic boundaries of New York's high society. In his surveillance of public space he was a sexual voyeur, keen to pick up on society men's peccadilloes and ruthless in his condemnation of women's improprieties.

In April 1895 the Saunterer treated his readers, in four consecutive paragraphs, to a particularly florid rant on the public revelation of female flesh. The first two paragraphs began with an attack on the Reverend Charles Parkhurst, minister of a fashionable Fifth Avenue church, for instigating raids on the city's brothels, raids that had subsequently forced prostitutes out onto the streets. Preferring to keep "immoral conditions" "veiled," that is, in the relative privacy of brothels, the Saunterer deplored the creation of a public spectacle of "unescorted ladies with the boot heels that click and the skirts that climb . . . brought into the open street and illuminated by electricity."⁵ He then proceeded, in the third paragraph, to discuss the appearance on the Boulevard and Riverside Drive of genteel women on bicycles, wearing bloomers that showed their knees and revealed their curves. As if this were not startling enough, the bloomer costume, he predicted, would soon be replaced by small, elastic breeches. Worse still: "Women bicyclists will be wearing tights within a year." And why? Because "woman is in a progressive mood nowadays and will not remain content with half measures. . . . Youthful and beauteous womanhood is going to emancipate itself by means of the bicycle. It has charms to exhibit and is bound to exhibit them." But such a public exhibition of the female form would not, declared the Saunterer in his fourth paragraph, evoke much public outcry. And here was the rub: A liberal police force and a permissive public would hardly find such a "parade" shocking when they were so tolerant of female nudity on the stages of Bowery theaters in "living pictures":

At present the youth of New York may gaze each night in the year upon female nakedness presented in the most tempting and sensual shape that ingenious men can devise. Under the name of art the most amazing visions of living, breathing, palpitating nudity . . . is deliberately spread before innocent eyes, and the moral damage thereby is, I maintain, beyond computing.

Prostitution the Saunterer was prepared to condone, provided it was conducted discreetly, but he drew the line at female nudity on the stage, the latter being a blatant example of the commodification of female flesh. For him, the toleration of such commercial entertainment signified widespread degeneracy that would contaminate the respectable community. And, in a final flourish, he anticipated that, while the appearance of nude revuists on bicycles was unlikely, the highways would nevertheless soon see women cyclists in flesh-colored tights simulating nudity—in other words, "bicycle Godivas."

This censure of society women by the Saunterer stands out because of its moralistic tone, its use of sexual imagery, its treatment of sexual deviance, and the leap in logic in linking women cyclists to prostitutes and performers in salacious living pictures. It also raises a number of questions. Why, for example, in the view of the Saunterer, does the act of respectable women cycling signify the potential for moral degeneracy? Why does he infer a parallel between the behavior of prostitutes, women cyclists, and women in nude revues? Why does he superimpose onto women cyclists what he regards as most threatening in the metropolis, that is, naked women? His construction of sexual danger from the presence of prostitutes in the streets or the pornographic style of entertainments in the theaters is fairly predictable, but by framing his discussion of women cyclists with examples drawn from the world of commercialized sex, he draws this third group into the category of sexual deviance, confirming bourgeois men's suspicion that "beneath each woman's respectability lay a potential 'whore.'"⁶ If we go back to his opening paragraph, we can see that the Saunterer cannot abide streetwalkers, but he is prepared to concede that "leapfrog in private is not so generally demoralizing as soliciting in public."⁷ What has previously been hidden behind closed doors is now in public view and, what is worse, in "respectable places, such as restaurants and theatres." He reiterates his concern about the public display of the female form in his next paragraph, which focuses on women cyclists. By immediately going on to discuss women cyclists after commenting on streetwalkers, the Saunterer infers an analogy between prostitutes appearing on the streets and respectable women's appearance in a new and startling form as bicyclists, wending their way through city traffic with unprecedented independence and mobility. He makes his comparison between these two groups of women even more emphatic, however, by referring to the unveiling of their bodies:

The female limb is to gradually succeed in exhibiting itself abundantly in New York . . . [with] the swift disappearance of drapery and revelation of curves. . . . We are becoming very intimate with the sections of metropolitan beauty that have heretofore been secluded. That which was recently shy and shrinking is now bold and blooming. The sacred bulge is on view. The sculptured mystery is being brilliantly revealed.

The Saunterer's description of the display of "limbs," not to mention "the sacred bulge," and "curves," by "the gentle straddlers of wheels" is intended to equate to the "spectacular ankles" of prostitutes and their "skirts that climb." While the "bewildering exposure" was to be admired, he suggests, "we must dread what it is sure to lead to." And what it must lead to is made abundantly clear in his paragraph on living pictures, namely the shedding of long skirts and

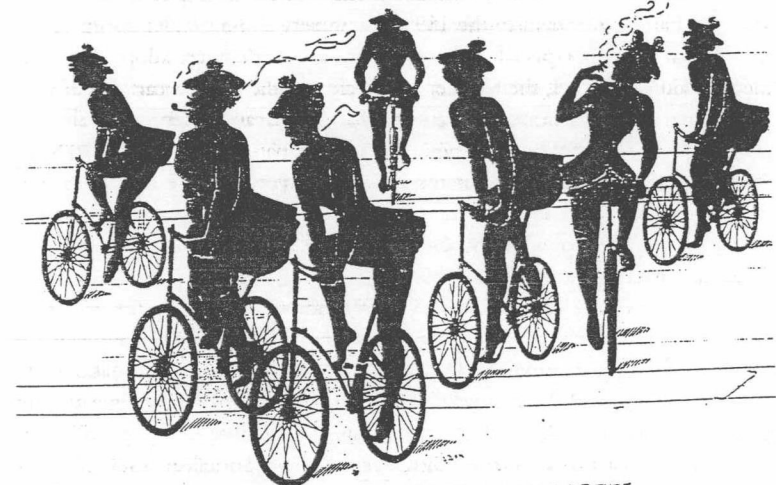
the donning of bloomers, which is tantamount to the total loss of all modesty. So total is this loss that, unlike the prostitutes, the women who performed in erotic living pictures are not even referred to as human. They are more repugnant than the "unescorted ladies" (his euphemism for prostitutes); the Saunterer deindividualizes them into the abstraction "female nakedness."

The sequencing of these paragraphs dealing with prostitutes, women bicyclists, and living pictures in a society magazine registers a profound unease with the presence of women in public space, one that is expressed in explicitly sexual terms and linked specifically to commodification. Boundaries have been transgressed. Neither fallen women nor respectable ones have kept to their allotted space, secluded from the street in private abodes. The worst is therefore to be feared. The moral damage to "innocent [male] eyes" from sexually dangerous women not only emanates from the theaters but is also present in the streets and now emanates from respectable women too. Women on bicycles, moving conspicuously in the streets, are, contrary to the codes of etiquette governing their behavior in public places, drawing attention to themselves. The leap in logic that the Saunterer consequently makes is that with respectable women now displaying their bodies, all women have become prostitutes.⁸

What appears to motivate the Saunterer as a society columnist is a perceived need—all the more urgent in an era of commercialized sex—to remind women from the respectable classes that the dividing line between them and those women who were denied respect was a very thin one indeed. He therefore took it upon himself to direct ridicule at society women on bicycles and sexualize their appearance in a bid to dissuade other women from following the fashion. In certain respects, this was not atypical of bourgeois white male culture in the United States at that time and its efforts to maintain the status quo in gender relations. During this same period similar epithets were flung at white women suffragists, who were also regarded as stepping outside their domestic role in seeking the vote.⁹ All in all, it seems that the 1890s were a troublesome time for men who were used to negotiating metropolitan space with confidence. Bourgeois women were testing the spatial boundaries of an urban topography that had been so conveniently arranged for men of the white Protestant establishment. As such, women riding bicycles on public thoroughfares were just one manifestation of the encroachment by women upon public space, claiming their share of the entertainment and self-gratification offered by the new palaces of amusement and new forms of recreation.

The Saunterer's concerns about increasingly ambiguous gender and sexual boundaries in New York City at the turn of the century illustrate many of the difficulties facing society women as they attempted to negotiate a world in which material possessions increasingly connoted social status. On the one hand, society women who "took up the wheel" signified, in fairly conventional terms, leisure (cycling as a form of recreation), wealth (before bicycles became

WHAT WE ARE COMING TO.



THE BICYCLE RACE OF UP-TO-DATE WOMEN IN THE NEAR FUTURE

widely available), and fashion (women's cycling as a novel activity).¹⁰ It was expected of them that they assert their class identity in these terms. On the other hand, the sight of women on bicycles suggested independence, mobility, and emancipation, which, taken together, threatened the traditional confinement of society women to domestic space and to those public places where social interaction was carefully regulated. It was one thing for society women to cycle within the confines of a private club or at the fashionable hour in Central Park, but to cycle down a popular thoroughfare in bloomers in 1895 was to contest the codes of etiquette governing women's behavior in public places. Throughout the nineteenth century, albeit implicitly, these codes had incessantly stressed the need to wear modest street dress and to move inconspicuously in order to avoid being misrecognized as a prostitute. In view of this, the full significance of the Saunterer's strategy becomes apparent: Society women riding bicycles in the street did not conform to the code of gentility. In fact, the Saunterer was acting as a censor of the behavior of those who set the fashion for the rest of society.

The Saunterer was not alone, however, in expressing alarm at the appearance of women cyclists in the mid-1890s. In January 1895, a cartoon caricaturing society women on bicycles appeared on the society page in the *New York World* alongside the column "The Week in Society," which featured a story about a fifteen-day women's bicycle race at the exclusive Michaux Club.¹¹ This cartoon was a transgressive image of women, a bizarre, carnivalesque depiction ridiculing society women in particular but, at the same time, betraying a deep

unease with the notion of independently mobile women in public. It reveals a widely felt anxiety evident in the 1890s: an anxiety about gender transgression, the fear that women, especially by riding bicycles astride, were adopting masculine behavior. Together, the Saunterer's article and the *World's* cartoon of society women cyclists connote difficulties that American society generally was having in coming to terms with the major transformation that the United States was undergoing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This process of modernization included changes in gender roles as well as changes in patterns of heterosocial relations. Other significant dimensions of this transformation involved commercialization, the development of consumer capitalism, the changing relationship between the public and private spheres, the growth of the print media, the decline of Victorian moral standards and formality, and the decline of gentility. At times, and certainly with respect to gender relations, the Saunterer represented those conservative forces that resisted modernization by trying to maintain the old ideals and traditions on which American gentility had been founded. At the same time, however, society journalism itself played a role in the process of modernization.

Leisure and the Leisure Class

The subject of this book is the public world of New York society women. It covers various aspects of women's lives at the turn of the century in terms of how they negotiated the larger transformation of American culture and society, as well as in terms of the intersection of class and gender interests. In particular, it explores how women's appearance and activities signified leisure with the express intention of laying claim to high social status, and how these women were, in turn, represented in the dominant discourses of journalism and etiquette. This study therefore seeks to make explicit the diverse meanings ascribed to New York society women's activities at the turn of the century in shaping and defining an upper-class identity. Leisure is the key to this upper-class identity precisely because it was an important marker of class. Moreover, the popular designation for the elite was "the leisure class."¹²

Authors of etiquette manuals looked upon leisure as something integral to the existence of society and essential to the United States's view of itself as a civilized nation, that is to say, a society led by a group of cultivated people who were knowledgeable about manners and the finer things in life. The very notion of leisure implied that certain people had time in which to pursue activities that conferred gentility. It also signified that such people did not have to engage in manual labor and that their time was not regulated by the demands of remunerative labor. This notion of leisure was, in fact, derived from the practices of the European aristocracy and was therefore firmly rooted in conceptions of class. Indeed, the American bourgeoisie had difficulties with the fact

that Europeans failed to take seriously its claims to having a leisure class and a society. As one turn-of-the-century etiquette manual typically noted:

An American traveller, when once rallied upon the fact that there was no aristocracy in his country, replied: "Pardon me, you forget our women!"

It was gallantly said, and characteristic of the chivalry that has always been so marked a trait of American manhood.

It is the stock reproach among Europeans towards us—this lack of aristocracy—which politely but thinly veils their conviction that we are a nation of rich and prosperous parvenus. . . . We believe the outward and visible signs of aristocracy are shown in perfect breeding, charm of manner, and unfailing courtesy, of which the inward grace is an instinctive refinement that is not merely a decorative attribute.¹³

Maud Cooke made even more explicit this notion that women in the United States represented the whole of the upper class when she asserted: "Women are our only leisure class." She firmly attributed refinement to women: "It is women who create society . . . and it is largely to women with their leisure, and their tact, that we must look to create and sustain the social fabric."¹⁴ This interpretation of American social affairs clearly heightened the value both of women's role in high society and of their active contribution to the advance or maintenance of their families' social status. Nevertheless, the female domination of society still meant that the American leisure class was vulnerable to criticism from those who saw European court society as representing the highest ideal.

Expatriate novelist Henry James was one of the major critics of social arrangements in U.S. high society. In James's view, the American upper class could never measure up to its European counterpart, and in both his fiction and nonfiction he refers to the conspicuous absence from high society of the male head of the household.¹⁵ In *The American Scene*, for example, he explores this state of affairs in some detail with reference to New York and Washington, D.C. He contrasts "the general European spectacle, the effect . . . of a large, consummate economy, traditionally practised . . . [and] arranged exactly to supply functions, forms, the whole element of custom and perpetuity, to any massiveness of private ease" to the "floundering" social organism of America's "vast commercial democracy," where only the women labor to find out "what civilization really is." The American businessman may, James contends, "never hope to be anything *but* a businessman" and thus is forced to abdicate "the boundless gaping void of 'society'" to women. In seizing upon this opportunity, women "represent the situation as perfectly normal," whereas for James it is entirely "unnatural."¹⁶ There is clearly a discrepancy, then, between the representation of society in American etiquette manuals, which promoted the role

of women in sustaining the "social fabric" and claimed that American society was capable of refinement and civilization, and James's insistence that the American social spectacle lacked men of leisure and history.

Mrs. Sherwood, a New York resident and noted authority on matters of etiquette, was mindful of European criticisms of U.S. society and especially those of Henry James when she drew her American readers' attention to "our bump-tiousness, our spredeagleism, and our too great familiarity and lack of dignity." She advised her readers to take on board some of these criticisms in the interest of self-improvement and to avoid being "held up as savages." But, at the same time, she exhorted Americans to decide for themselves on points of etiquette that would be in tune with America's distinctive political institutions and history, because "they are a part of our great nation, of our republican institutions, and of that continental hospitality which gives a home to the Russ, the German, the Frenchman, the Irishman, and the 'heathen Chineese.'"¹⁷ This quotation is representative of an ongoing concern about national identity that underscored the discourse of turn-of-the-century etiquette manuals. This formulation of national identity was, moreover, still rooted in an Anglo-American and racist construction of "civilization." At a time of intense concern about "racial 'fitness' and culture," the possibility of being equated with "savages" carried the damning implication in the mind of the white Anglo-Saxon bourgeoisie that the United States had not sufficiently "progressed along the path of civilization." Furthermore, because women were seen as carrying the burden of maintaining high society, the "American woman"—that is, the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant *haute bourgeoisie*—was also regarded as responsible for demonstrating America's "racial fitness."¹⁸

Etiquette discourse racialized "civilization," and this went hand in hand with the maintenance of a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant elite confronted with the growing ethnic diversification of America's population and the challenge of wealthy Jewish families to the de facto segregation practiced by high society. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, class and racial boundaries alike were policed. At the turn of the twentieth century, then, the identity of the American leisure class—that is, the ways in which the leisure class defined itself and presented itself to the world at large—was intricately connected to the issues of national identity, ethnicity, and gender relations. Indeed, identity was also shaped by the growing authority of scientific discourses on race and the hierarchy of races on a scale ranging from civilization to savagery.¹⁹

The notion of an American leisure class emerged in the late nineteenth century with the multiplication of vast fortunes gained from industrialization. As Richard Bushman has noted, the "self-appointed aristocrats of the post-Civil War era" with "their mansions, their airs, their pretensions were the natural outgrowth of the aristocratic genteel culture that the American middle class had appropriated from its former rulers."²⁰ The "leisure" of the "leisure class,"

then, constituted activities that were displayed to others or written about in newspapers, such as formal sociability, going to art galleries, the theater, and the opera, recreation and travel. The wealth of the leisure class was signified through such activities as well as through the conspicuous consumption of expensive material objects: houses, carriages, clothes, and so on. Such display "performed a hegemonic function," not unlike that of the World's Fairs at this time, in propagating "the ideas and values of the country's political, financial, corporate, and intellectual leaders."²¹ In turn-of-the-century New York, the nature of leisure as activity as well as the scale and practice of consumption changed significantly with increasing competition for elite status. This was the subject of Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), in which he argued that leisure was intentionally displayed to others because it connoted gentility, refinement, specialized knowledge, civilization, cultivation, wealth, and breeding. He also argued that it was by and large the responsibility of leisure-class women and their servants to convey these things to the public at large.

Many society women took up the challenge to become more public in the conspicuous display of wealth, thus making use of the wide range of resources available to them in the metropolis: fashionable ballrooms and restaurants, the services of press agents, and so on. Some of these women became celebrities, the minute details of their daily lives reported in the society columns of newspapers and in magazine articles. They were held up as leaders—leaders of society, of fashion, of taste, of gentility. On the other hand, if they were found wanting, censorship was swift. In fact, engaging in the public world led to all sorts of problems for society women. Traditional social conventions required women to behave and dress inconspicuously in public places, but the demands of high-society life required society women to seek notice and publicity. To cope with this contradiction, therefore, display and publicity had to be carefully managed.

A major concern in this study, then, is with how women in the New York social elite shaped a leisure-class identity for themselves and their families in the new age of the mass-circulation print media. From the 1880s on, the "mediatization" of high society had irrevocably altered the public/private boundaries between the private lives of the wealthy and the commercial world.²² High society found itself commodified into so many inches of news columns that helped to sell champagne and aids for indigestion, as well as to rent rooms in resort hotels. Its activities were frequently written about and photographed, with articles being mass-produced and circulated throughout the nation. The wealthy could well appreciate the enhancement of their claims to social leadership afforded by such publicity, but it was precisely this kind of publicity that was more difficult to control and that gave rise to new kinds of vulnerability.

Women Displaying Leisure

As has already been indicated, the notion of leisure connoted gentility, refinement, and respectability, so those who aspired to bourgeois social status had to put in evidence their command of leisure time. Because the male half of the American bourgeoisie was, by and large, a working bourgeoisie, it was therefore left to the women of the family to carry the marker of class by displaying leisure. In late-nineteenth-century New York this display of leisure moved to the public realm because of the intensification of social competition as wealthy newcomers were drawn to the metropolis, and this brought about a significant shift in the conceptualization of the woman of leisure for the bourgeoisie. Traditionally the bourgeois male had preferred to restrict women's access to the public realm; bourgeois status had been predicated upon the ability of the male to support his wife and family, thus relieving them of any necessity to engage in paid work. In the more segregated world of the bourgeoisie prior to 1870, it was the woman of leisure at home who had been regarded as an important symbol of class. But for the urban *haute bourgeoisie* in the late nineteenth century, the home was proving to be a somewhat inadequate arena for the display of wealth and leisure, and therefore public spaces were brought into service by way of supplementation.

The expansion of women's role in the public display of leisure had important ramifications for the construction of leisure-class femininity because women's display of leisure was no longer limited to putting on fine clothes and promenading on Fifth Avenue or in a carriage in Central Park at the fashionable hour. Instead, society women were on display in boxes at the opera or various shows at Madison Square Garden; they dined in fashionable restaurants; their portraits appeared in newspapers; and their social activities were recorded in detail. Large general entertainments well attended by the press ensured that women would be seen and that their names would appear in newspaper reports the following day, but the competition at large gatherings was intense and heightened the pressure on women to attract the right kind of publicity. By the 1880s much more was at stake, with growing competition for high social status and the emergence of society journalism. Displays of wealth became more blatant: Women donned "ropes of pearls" and wore the latest Parisian fashions. Fancy-dress balls and *tableaux vivants* were entertainments that permitted women wide scope for drawing attention to themselves, by dressing up as a well-known historical or mythological figure or as a figure in a painting. Putting on novel entertainments such as minstrel shows staged in private theaters or silver-service dinners for dogs guaranteed instant publicity, and possibly ridicule.²³

During the period in question, the whole nature of leisure changed for the urban *haute bourgeoisie* in New York. With specific regard to women, it came to

have less to do with "cultivated" pursuits in private settings, such as reading, singing, small-scale hospitality, and visiting artists' studios, or with traveling to see the sights of ancient European civilizations, but instead had more to do with public display and spectacle. In the eighteenth century the "ideal" woman of leisure engaged in activities that either "improved the mind," such as reading sermons, or enhanced the interior décor of the home, as, for example, by embroidering fire screens. Admonitory tales about either women with too much "free time" on their hands or others who participated in unproductive occupations such as gambling, reading romances, or gossiping painted an image diametrically opposed to that of the woman of virtue. Moreover, women who spent their time idly and self-indulgently were considered disorderly and even dangerous.²⁴ In the late nineteenth century, the leisure that women displayed was no longer restricted to the home and came to involve large outlays on leisure goods and services. The increasingly public nature of leisure enjoyed in heterosocial settings, such as restaurants, cabarets, or skating clubs, gave women greater access to public space, and this was combined with a greater mobility due to the availability of mechanized transport. Women had to work hard at displaying leisure and making sure that the display was noticed, particularly as newspaper scrutiny raised the ante. But while there was increasing surveillance of women at leisure and mounting pressure to make their leisure signify distinction, the other side to this was that women were able to have fun, indulge new desires, enjoy the attention and admiration that came from display, and have access to resources in order to put on an effective "show."

Women's participation in leisure activities can be seen, then, as being potentially emancipatory and, paradoxically, as providing further opportunities for domination and control. Clearly, it was acceptable for women to display their husband's wealth through legitimate forms of high-class entertainments, and innovations in leisure had to attain legitimacy on the grounds that they advanced class interests in order for women to partake in them. As such, the choices made by women as to which leisure activities they pursued were made within a context of gender inequalities.²⁵ Yet though leisure was an area of contestation between men and women, it may nevertheless be argued that New York society women were able to explore new ways of expressing their femininity through leisure. At the turn of the century, the increased emphasis on appearance opened up to women a whole realm of activities, specialized knowledge, and skills where choices could be made. As sociologist Dorothy Smith has argued with reference to current times, "The production of appearance calls for thought, planning, the exercise of judgement, work, the use of resources, skills. Behind appearance and its interpretation is secreted a subject who is fully an agent."²⁶ Society women in turn-of-the-century New York would have been brought up to know, or would have later learned, how to produce an effect concomitant with their definition as respectable, heterosex-

ual, leisure-class women. And, as Smith might well argue, they would have known how to put into practice the dominant discourses of femininity, would have known how to reproduce the "ideal"—or at least something evidently approaching it. If, as Smith says, women nowadays "work" at their appearance, then clearly it can be claimed that women in turn-of-the-century New York "worked" at signifying leisure. Although this work was itself not directly visible in form, it would have been "consciously planned" and would have taken a great deal of time. Moreover, it is in this backstage setting, behind the scenes, Smith argues, that women are "active and effective, making decisions, finding pleasure, having fun."²⁷

Society women were not, on the whole, reluctant participants in the changes affecting the nature and meaning of leisure and leisure-class lifestyle at the turn of the century. It appears, rather, that they welcomed opportunities to engage in the more heterosocial world of public places, while at the same time some venues of commercialized leisure encouraged women's participation because it lent respectability to their enterprises and increased the number of their wealthy patrons. Leisure activities enabled women of the *haute bourgeoisie* to gain access to the city, perhaps more significantly than did either voluntary or paid work. There can be no doubt, then, that leisure helped to legitimize women's presence in public space.

Leisure as Performance

The dramaturgical metaphor of "performance" has been widely deployed by historians of everyday life and material culture to elucidate the meanings of social interaction. In the work of Richard Bushman, Karen Halttunen, and John Kasson on American gentility, this notion of "performance" has been used to analyze the ways in which, in the past, people defined both themselves and their social relations. All three scholars have drawn attention to the exaggerated emphasis that was placed upon behavior, appearance, and possessions in societies that were undergoing rapid change. John Kasson and Karen Halttunen, for example, allude to a crisis in social identity in nineteenth-century urban America and to the turning of social aspirants en masse to etiquette manuals for advice on how to negotiate "the anonymous 'world of strangers'" and "to establish the legitimacy of their claims to genteel standing."²⁸ As Halttunen explains:

In what was believed to be a fluid social world where no one occupied a fixed social position, the question "Who am I?" loomed large; and in an urban social world where many of the people who met face-to-face each day were strangers, the question "Who are you really?" assumed even greater significance.²⁹

According to Halttunen, by the late nineteenth century the second of her typol-

logical questions "was less of a concern, for instead of posing a threat to the "social forms and rituals" of polite society, the confidence man had by then become a "kind of model for ambitious young Americans to emulate." In other words, in corporate America "the art of manipulating others to do what you want them to do . . . was far more valuable."³⁰

It is tempting to ask, therefore, whether there was a "growing theatricality of middle-class culture in the 1850s and 1860s," as Halttunen contends, or rather, whether a different *kind* of theatricality emerged as the techniques of theatricality themselves were transformed.³¹ Historians of the colonial and Victorian periods use the concept of theatricality. What is often not clear, however, is whether the construction of theatricality they use relates to the world of the theater relevant to the period they are studying or to that at the time of writing. After all, dramaturgical principles change over time, and our comprehension of illusions and their role in everyday life also changes. There is, nevertheless, something of a consensus among these historians, who have all drawn upon the work of sociologist Erving Goffman and his idea that gentility is a performance and that "houses, yards, carriages, costume, posture, manners were all part of the show."³² But as Goffman himself warned: "The claim that all the world's a stage is sufficiently commonplace for readers to be familiar with its limitations and tolerant of its presentation, knowing that at any time they will easily be able to demonstrate to themselves that it is not to be taken too seriously." However, the use of dramaturgical terms as metaphors for describing and interpreting social interaction always runs the risk of conflating the terms of theatrical illusion with real life; furthermore, the pervasiveness of such metaphors is so compelling that the differences can be overlooked. In addition, Goffman maintained that the dramaturgical perspective is only one of several that can be utilized.

According to Goffman's theory of the presentation of self in everyday life, the individual deploys techniques to "give off expressions," techniques that are "more theatrical and contextual, . . . non-verbal, [and] presumably unintentional," and these are used "on and off the stage." Like actors in the theater, individuals in "real life" want to convey a certain definition of themselves and their context. Within the realist/naturalist tradition at least, actors want the audience to believe that they are a particular character, and to be consistent with this projection they affect appropriate gestures and postures and wear appropriate costumes. There is a high degree of conscious intentionality in their performance, which is accepted as "real" by the audience as long as the illusion is sustained. In "real life," individuals may also intend that those whom they encounter accept that they have a particular kind of personality with specific social and cultural attributes. This may also involve a high degree of conscious intentionality. What is conveyed may, in fact, be either true or false, and Goffman's analysis is an attempt to understand how individuals, or groups of individuals, "define the situation" in everyday life.³³ This kind of analysis can

also be applied to the New York leisure class at the turn of the century and, in particular, to the ways in which social aspirants conveyed to each other and to society at large messages of self-definition. Rituals, social practices, and the use of material culture all conveyed expressions about forms of social identity that were class-, race-, and gender-specific. It is therefore possible to ascertain how these "messages" were received by the wider public through examining, *inter alia*, newspaper and magazine articles and other forms of social commentary.

Discourse and Counterdiscourse

In exploring the social experiences of women in New York society at the turn of the century, I have brought together different types of texts (or genres).³⁴ These texts, which range from newspapers to society magazines, from private correspondence to published memoirs, from contemporary novels to social commentary, all produce social meanings that have shaped my interpretation of social and, especially, gender relations in turn-of-the-century New York. Some texts bear directly on each other, while others are brought together for the first time in this study. What I have attempted to do in making connections between different types of texts is to draw attention to possible ways in which they deal with similar material, to suggest ways in which these texts reinforce or contest each other as well as ways in which they influence social practices. At the same time, social practices influence both the composition, or revision, of texts such as etiquette manuals, which were (and are) constantly updated and reissued, and the production of newspapers, which report, for example, on innovative social practices.

One particular framework I have used in making connections between texts is that of discourse and counterdiscourse.³⁵ It is, however, important to stress that particular types of texts need not fall neatly into either category—nor necessarily remain there. Not all newspapers, for example, reproduce dominant ideologies all of the time. Nevertheless, the oppositional concepts of discourse and counterdiscourse are useful for the purposes of this study because they can be employed to draw attention to the ways in which some texts take up and circulate dominant meanings about femininity, while others contest those meanings and produce alternatives. But these oppositional concepts are limited in taking account of texts such as newspapers or etiquette manuals, which can, at one time, represent dominant values in U.S. culture and, at another, support changes that have serious repercussions for dominant values. This, however, should come as no great surprise, because dominant values, or dominant discourses, are never homogeneous, let alone fixed, particularly during periods of major social, economic, and cultural transformation. So while etiquette discourse may on the whole have reinscribed traditional meanings of femininity, it also enabled women to negotiate social change and gain improvements in their

access to public space. Likewise, society columns usually reinforced the dominant construction of gender relations but also, through publicizing the activities of society women, could lead these same women to be more influential in their milieu and assist them in their efforts to maintain or lay claim to high social status.

And yet for each step forward there seems to have been a corresponding step backward. For example, etiquette manuals strongly encouraged self-surveillance through making readers believe that they were constantly under scrutiny by others. In effect, codes of etiquette placed powerful constraints on women's behavior in public, especially insofar as they reinscribed the dominant nineteenth-century categorization of women as either respectable or fallen. Nineteenth-century American etiquette was predicated upon the concept of respectability, and even though etiquette manuals advised women on how to safeguard their respectability, women still did not have absolute control over the way in which their behavior and appearance were interpreted by others. Indeed, the development of mass-circulation daily newspapers, and of society journalism in particular, extended the process of surveillance because of the capacity of the press to publicize infractions of codes of gentility, resulting in the kind of publicity that could have ramifications far greater than if the transgressor had just been seen by one or two individuals. While society journalism could greatly assist in the promotion of a society hostess's campaign for high status, therefore, it also provided the means for greater surveillance through the activities of reporters and the fact that payment might be made for information.

Women participated on both sides of the debate about femininity and what constituted acceptable genteel behavior. Their opinions were expressed in a variety of text types such as diaries, letters, memoirs, etiquette manuals, and fiction. Those women who were able to articulate their position in print were able to make significant interventions in the generation of meanings about women. Women were not merely "bearers of meaning"; they were also "makers of meaning."³⁶ One of the most significant interventions came from novelist Edith Wharton, herself a member of New York's social elite, who wrote about New York society at the turn of the century. Inevitably, her work represents certain interests, above all those of what Bourdieu would call the "dominated fraction" within New York society, that grouping that prided itself on its "cultural capital." At the same time, however, Wharton was critical of the society in which she grew up, and she used her skills as a writer of fiction to contest some of the past and contemporary social relations that kept women in a subordinate position. In some respects, therefore, her fiction constitutes a counterdiscourse that challenges the meanings given to femininity and gender relations by the news media and by consumer capitalism in general. And it is significant, moreover, that it was fiction that provided Wharton with the discursive space in which she could challenge dominant discourses. For although some of her

novels were best-sellers, which might suggest that she aimed at a popular market, she clearly aspired to being a serious writer and wanted to produce the kinds of novels that would stand for cultural values she held in high esteem. She was not about to participate in the mass culture of women's magazines, newspapers, or popular fiction. And indeed, there are ways in which her literary work provides important insights into the predicament of women in New York's high society.³⁷

Chapters 1 and 2 look at the "mechanics" of high society, the rituals involved in demarcating a social elite anxious to distinguish itself from the many hundreds of wealthy families converging on New York City after 1865. The emphasis in these early chapters is upon the period from 1870 to the late 1890s, when Mrs. Astor was an undisputed leader of New York society and social formality was at its peak. Chapter 3 considers the way in which the home was brought into service as a base for the increasingly publicized sociability of New York's leisure class. The remaining three chapters focus on society women and the public world of high society. Chapter 4 expands on issues raised at the beginning of this introduction with regard to the mobility and sexualization of women in public space. Chapter 5 further develops issues of the sexualization of women in the realm of commercialized entertainments. Chapter 6 examines the impact of newspaper publicity upon women leaders in society and considers how they adapted to publicity as a permanent feature of their lives.

The Social Calendar

Shortly before midnight on New Year's Eve 1904 the streets around Times Square and Forty-second Street were thronged with merrymakers and revelers. Pouring out of the restaurants and cafés along the Great White Way and emerging from the subway, the crowds converged on Times Square to see the fireworks display that heralded the dawning of the new year. The *New York Times* had recently acquired the land bounded by Broadway, Seventh Avenue, and Forty-second Street and had built a skyscraper to house its expanding operations. The newspaper claimed pioneering status for itself because of the subsequent northward move of commerce and entertainment and praised its owners' foresight in choosing what was to become a central Manhattan location amid theaters, hotels, restaurants, retail stores, and office buildings.¹ In 1907 Adolph Ochs, the publisher of the *New York Times*, set up a "time ball" that would descend down the outside of the Times Building on the stroke of midnight.² This new, gaudier commemoration of the new year, one befitting the electrical age, permanently took over from the old tradition of welcoming in the new year to the pealing of the bells at Trinity Church on lower Broadway, and of course the celebration of the new year at Times Square has now become an annual ritual relayed by television to millions of people across the United States.

This shared public celebration of New Year's Eve at Times Square began in the years just after the adoption of standardized time throughout the world. Indeed, this was a celebration of time itself, in Times Square, a location named after a mass-circulation daily newspaper that in its name declared its allegiance to public time. New Year's Eve was commemorated both by ritualistic celebration and by reports in the newspapers that were distributed only a few hours later—even before some of the revelers had crawled into bed. Moreover, because traditionally the passing of the old year was considered to be a time for

retrospection, a time for reviewing the year's events, newspapers and weeklies published special editions or sections that brought together accounts of events considered particularly significant.

While New Year's Eve brought New Yorkers from all walks of life together in public celebration, New Year's Day itself was celebrated privately. Up until the early 1880s in New York, the Dutch custom of men calling on women still prevailed. Men would dash around in sleighs all day until late in the evening distributing small gifts. In one Dutch-American household, each male caller was presented at the door with four *nieuwjahrskoeke* (New Year cakes) and, if he called during luncheon or dinner, he was expected to help himself to oyster stew, chicken croquettes, and salad. Each family had its own special recipes for sweets and cakes, but most popular of all with the men were the servings of punch and, for "appreciative older men," glasses of madeira. Some men made at least a hundred calls but "were always ready for another glass to keep out the cold and give strength for more."³ Keeping open house all day and supplying food and drink to male callers was exhausting for both the hostess and her household. In the 1890s New Year's Eve took precedence as the preferred time for commemoration of the new year, and hotels and restaurants provided venues for its celebration. One New York society columnist suggested that this new fad, which had become "a fixed feature of metropolitan life" by 1907, was perhaps a reaction to the "home celebration of Christmas." On the other hand, it might be "just a fancy to be bohemian, to forget all cares and responsibilities, and pass the most solemn hour of the year amid strangers or in strange surroundings."⁴ Whatever the motivation, the celebration of New Year's Eve illustrated an underlying trend in New York's high society to discard rigid gendered roles and private sociability and engage in heterosociability in commercial venues.⁵

This chapter provides a brief overview of the structure and function of New York's social life with regard to the various seasons and rituals that constituted the everyday routine of participants in high society. Particular consideration is given to the way in which social customs and codes of etiquette were invested with authority and the aura of tradition. Women of the *haute bourgeoisie* actively engaged in a busy social round of obligations and events in which they represented their husband's or father's interests. Examination of such activities offers glimpses into the kinds of social practices overlooked in most studies of the New York elite. Parlors, dining rooms, ballrooms, and the opera were social spaces in which gender and class relations were enacted and performed.

The Seasons

Every year on the fifteenth of October Fifth Avenue opened its shutters, unrolled its carpets and hung up its triple layer of window-curtains.

By the first of November this household ritual was over and society had begun to look about and take stock of itself. By the fifteenth the season was in full blast, Opera and theatres were putting forth their new attractions, dinner-engagements were accumulating, and dates for dances being fixed. And punctually at about this time Mrs. Archer always said that New York was very much changed.⁶

The annual New York social calendar developed over the years into a finely detailed schedule of events, of departures and arrivals worthy of a train timetable in the great age of railroads. Maintaining a fixed annual schedule, year in and year out, was a virtue in the eyes of a social leader such as Mrs. Astor. New Yorkers could set their clocks by her movements. Indeed, for most of the years during which Mrs. Astor held sway over the rapidly moving currents of New York society, her rigid adherence to routine provided it with a certain stability, if not predictability. Only the observation of mourning rituals was sufficient excuse for an alteration to Mrs. Astor's program. In 1905, when she was about to give what would be her last ball in her Fifth Avenue home, the *World* paid tribute to Mrs. Astor in a full-page item in its magazine section. In particular, it drew attention to her "amazing system":

From the day that she married until this Mrs. Astor has been a woman of amazing system. Her dances are always upon Mondays, her state dinners always upon Thursdays. She has had the same butler, Thomas Haig, since 1876. She sails for Europe on the first steamer after Ash Wednesday. She keeps the same apartment in Paris. She returns always in the same week in June. Her Newport villa, Beechwood, is always open on the same date. She comes to town in the same week in October. And so each year is rounded out.⁷

In fact, what Mrs. Astor did and when she did it became benchmarks for New York society.

The mobility afforded by steam travel enabled New Yorkers to spend a season in different parts of the country, if not the world. They moved like migratory birds, in flocks and at certain times of the year. Cold weather in February prompted early departures for points south, especially Florida. Unbearably hot weather in the summer drove businessmen out of the city to seaside resorts to join their families or friends already established there for the season. The advent of the automobile further increased the possibilities of travel, particularly opening up the environs of Manhattan and making popular the "suburban season" at places such as Tuxedo, New York, or Lakewood, New Jersey.

In the 1870s and 1880s the year was basically divided into two main seasons, winter and summer. The winter season was marked by the opening of the

opera season, initially at the Academy of Music and then, after 1883, at the Metropolitan Opera House. It was a period of formal entertainments, particularly coming-out receptions for débutante daughters in December and balls and dinners after Christmas. Those in society might remain in town until the summer months, when townhouses were closed and families moved to summer resorts. In the intervening period there was Lent, when entertainments were of a quieter nature and women gathered in each other's houses for sewing circles. After Easter there was a rush of weddings before society scattered to various summer retreats or abroad. By the 1900s and 1910s the New York winter season was foreshortened, with society dispersing early in January for warmer climes. Weddings, accordingly, were brought forward to accommodate the changing patterns of social migration.

Newport was the premier summer resort for much of the period in question. Here New Yorkers rented or owned "cottages" where they would spend two months or more. The scarcity of hotels in Newport afforded them the peace and quiet of a resort without the hustle and bustle of a seaside town readily accessible to a wide range of people—until, that is, the day of the excursionist dawned. According to some society columnists, by the turn of the century Newport's attractions began to pall and other resorts found favor with New York's elite, notably Southampton, Long Island. By the mid-1890s social life in Newport had become so formal that its original attractions as a watering place where one could relax and enjoy gentle recreation, had been marred, for some, by the expectations of society hostesses. One way of getting away from the demands of hostesses desperate for unattached men to make up the numbers in their cotillions was to escape to the Adirondack Mountains.

The establishment of a winter season in New York and a summer season in Newport was a part of the process of centralization and control. It grew out of the increasing concentration of wealthy families in New York after the Civil War, a development related to the rise of New York as the national center of banking and finance and as the headquarters of major business corporations. By establishing a regular program of social events, and thereby guaranteeing the presence of a sufficiently large proportion of the wealthy and well-connected families, social leaders could lay claim to the exercise of power and influence and enhance both their social and economic status. According to one eulogy on the death of Mrs. Astor in 1908 that appeared in a society magazine, her emergence as a social leader had helped to bring order to a "heterogeneous collection of people" and she had "controlled, in a way, the sentiment, beliefs and ideas on social life and customs of a certain number of families and individuals," people who came together frequently. The eulogy continued: "These people had common meeting places both in Winter and Summer; they saw each other frequently, their children grew up together, attended the same schools, and met each other at the same comparatively large balls of the Winter

season, such as the Patriarchs and Assemblies, and at smaller dances in half a dozen large private houses."⁸

In this process of defining the social season around the opera, the theater, and formal entertainments in private homes or rented public space, New York society was understood to be aping other metropolitan centers, notably those of western Europe. Society leaders were accused of acquiescing to the standards of effete aristocratic systems and going against the grain of democratic America. Undoubtedly there were strong European influences in the way that New Yorkers shaped and defined their social entertainments, partly because Parisian and London societies constituted models for elite formation and behavior, and partly because New York's elite was keen to establish parity with European metropolitan elites.

As previously noted, Mrs. Burton Kingsland asserted that it was "the stock reproach" of Europeans, in refusing to accredit American elites with equal status, to point to the absence of an aristocracy in the United States.⁹ From a traditional European perspective, leisured gentlemen were a prerequisite for the existence of an aristocracy, although by the late nineteenth century even this requirement was under revision in London and Paris. By comparison, men in New York's high society were, by and large, active businessmen and professionals. Yet it would appear from the scheduling of formal entertainments and the seasonal shifts that few concessions were made to the demands made by men's work. In fact, as one society columnist put it with reference to cotillions, the work schedules of men were distinctly incompatible with the social calendar:

The truth is that the men are beginning to find out that the pleasure of going to bed at four or five o'clock and getting up at 7:30 is very much overrated, and they wisely stay at home. A few foolish women, in order to be fashionable, began a couple of years ago, to arrive at 12 o'clock, and other equally foolish women took to copying them. . . . Nine men out of ten are in business or follow a profession, and must be at their offices about nine, or at latest, ten o'clock; yet the women expect them to dance until daybreak and to enjoy it.¹⁰

In the 1870s and 1880s New York society women persisted nevertheless in their adoption of polite European conventions in order to press home their social claims and to complement their husband's business interests, however awkwardly.¹¹ This meant, for example, that the optimum time for mixed sociability was after business hours, and, accordingly, dinners and dances became important ways of bringing people together to consolidate social and business ties. The conjunction of business interests with formal sociability in New York was not lost on those observing the metropolitan scene. As one columnist alleged, being a member of the exclusive committee that put on the annual Patriarchs series of subscription balls "entitles you to the privilege of inviting any business acquaint-

tances you may have from whom you think you can extract a few dollars in a purely 'business connection,' in return for the invitation."¹²

The incompatibility of high society with business hours was, essentially, a conflict between public and private time. Men's activities were governed by an encroaching sense of public time dictated by the workplace, whereas women's time continued to be governed by the reproductive life cycle and the traditional construction of women's lives as revolving around family concerns. Emile Durkheim's sociological distinction between "private time" and "time in general," that is, time that has a social origin as opposed to the individual experience of time, is instructive here. Durkheim argued that the division of time into days, weeks, months, and years corresponded to the periodic recurrence of rites, feasts, and public ceremonies, and that these established rhythms came to be uniformly imposed as a framework for all temporal activities. "A calendar," Durkheim claimed in 1912, "expresses the rhythm of the collective activities, while at the same time its function is to assure their regularity."¹³ It is clear, therefore, how broad acceptance of a social calendar enabled high society in New York and elsewhere to function successfully while, at the same time, claiming authority over certain activities and denying sanction to others.

With the passage of time, society gradually made more concessions to the demands of business while also laying claim to both public time and public space. The formality of high society in the era of Mrs. Astor and the Four Hundred did not sit well with the businessman, and complaints about the absence, or lack, of men at balls reached a peak by the mid-1890s. Subsequently, informal entertainments, such as country-house weekends, became popular both during the winter season and at other times of the year. Heterosociability in general was promoted by a more mobile society, with the advent of the automobile enabling men to motor out into the country for the weekend and giving women greater access to places of commercialized entertainment in the city. On the other hand, greater mobility also meant that high society became more decentralized, so the traditions and rituals that had once helped to give cohesion to a fast-expanding urban elite in the 1870s and 1880s were weakened.

The Winter Season

The development of a regular calendar of events, which those with social aspirations were expected to attend, was one way of establishing traditions at a time of social upheaval and unprecedented social mobility. The annual repetition of activities helped to assert both order and control at a time of flux. Attending the opera, for example, on opening night and thereafter on Friday nights for the rest of the season was a key social activity that helped to define those who were members of the inner circle. As a cultural activity implying that those involved had a knowledge of music and were well educated, the opera conveyed a con-

siderable range of cultural significance. Henry James captured the onerous burden placed upon the opera in New York:

The Opera . . . plays its part as the great vessel of social salvation, the comprehensive substitute for all other conceivable vessels; the *whole* social consciousness thus clambering into it, under stress, as the whole community crams into the other public receptacles, the desperate cars of the Subway or the vast elevators of the tall buildings. The Opera, indeed, as New York enjoys it, one promptly perceives, is worthy, musically and picturesquely, of its immense function; the effect of it is splendid, but one has none the less the oddest sense of hearing it, as an institution, groan and creak, positively almost split and crack, with the extra weight thrown upon it—the weight that in worlds otherwise arranged is artfully scattered, distributed over all the ground.¹⁴

The social importance of the opera was recognized by the old elite, who tried to restrict access to the boxes at the Academy of Music, New York's premier auditorium for opera during the 1870s. But the small and incommensurate Academy of Music, with its meager eighteen boxes and its stubborn patrons, was soon superseded. A powerful new elite group of corporate financiers and industrial entrepreneurs, including men such as J. P. Morgan, built a much larger opera house, the Metropolitan, with three tiers of thirty-six boxes each—more than enough to satisfy contemporary demand. The spaciousness of the new auditorium enabled the opera to maintain its centrality to the social life of New York throughout the period.

December became firmly established as the month for coming-out receptions for debutante daughters, while the winter season "proper," centered around large, formal entertainments, commenced after the new year. During this period, dinners and assemblies featured prominently as forums for introducing daughters into society. The Patriarchs' Balls, one of the best known series of subscription balls in the late nineteenth century, attracted mothers with daughters to bring out. The Junior Cotillions were also popular for debuts. Various subscription balls were organized as a series of two or three meetings, the first usually occurring in December and subsequent ones after New Year's. They provided a public forum for the introduction of daughters into society and were particularly welcomed by those of new wealth who preferred such public venues to optimize opportunities for making social contacts.

The annual ball held by Mrs. Astor was another attempt to establish a tradition and provide a focal point for society.¹⁵ It was regarded as marking the climax of the season and generally took place on either the first or second Monday in January. However, when Mrs. Astor moved her residence uptown to 842 Fifth Avenue from Fifth Avenue and Thirty-fourth Street to make way for the building of the original Waldorf-Astoria, she was able to increase the