

One if by Land, Two if by Sea

A Brief History of the Carriage House at 17 Barrow Street

The carriage house with accompanying barn, now known as One if by Land, Two if by Sea, has had a long and complex history tied to one of the most controversial figures in early American history.

When Aaron Burr was Attorney General of the State of New York during the 1790’s he housed his coach and horses in the carriage house at 17 Barrow Street. Burr went on to become a powerful member of local and federal government making many enemies along the way – particularly Alexander Hamilton. Their disputes eventually made it into print when some comments made by Hamilton were published in an Albany newspaper, which quoted Hamilton as saying that Burr was “a dangerous man . . . who ought not to be trusted with the reins of government.” Aaron Burr was infuriated when he read Hamilton’s published comments, which came to his attention shortly after he lost the election for governor of New York. He believed that Hamilton’s unrelenting insults to his character had cost him the governorship, effectively ending his political career. On July 11, 1804 Burr met Hamilton in a duel on a grassy field in Weehawken, New Jersey. There were serious consequences to this history-making duel. Not only did the event end in the death of General Alexander Hamilton, a Revolutionary War hero and the first American Secretary of the Treasury, but led to the downfall of the politically powerful Aaron Burr, then Vice President of the United States. He also lost most of his New York property, including the carriage house 17 Barrow Street.

There is a lingering mystery about this building involving a tunnel cut in a straight line from Hudson Street, formerly the shore of the river. It is barrel-vaulted and has the look of similar passageways of 18th century military construction. It is entirely stone-lined, brick-roofed and appears to be of the very same brick and stone as the carriage house and barn. Was the tunnel built to smuggle contraband from the shore? Was the tunnel used during the Revolutionary War? The tunnel was almost certainly used later by the “underground railway” for fugitive slaves to get to the carriage house as one stop on the road to Canada and freedom. But who built them?

Barrow Street remained a mews, with carriage houses on both sides of the street, vegetable carts and stalls between the carriage house doors, and hogs freely patrolling the garbage. A Fire House was eventually built next door and the carriage house had a new life as a stable and engine house. The rooms above now housed firemen, not liveried servants. At this time vegetable carts were banned from the street by city ordinance, so as not to block the fire engines. The hogs were banned shortly after that for health reasons during the cholera pandemics.

In the late 1890’s the city authorities sold the carriage house at 17 Barrow Street. The new owner very quietly turned it into a house of ill-repute, somewhat out-of-the-way and more discreet than those in the “Tenderloin District” above Madison Square. Later, about 1910, the property became a silent movie house. As the twentieth century progressed, 17 Barrow Street became a bar, a restaurant, a bar again, and then another restaurant.

In 1970 it was purchased by its current owners. They spent the next several years restoring the carriage house finding numerous bits and pieces of earlier life in New York including old coins, hand-made horseshoes and antique bottles dating to the early 1800’s. An original hitching post was uncovered, which is still visible in the present bar area.

Finally, with the restoration complete, the building was transformed into its present life as One if by Land, Two if by Sea. The carriage house now exhibits its rich history and the charming architecture of a refined age.