

The New York Times
December 13, 1998

Goats' Town
By Clyde Haberman

Clyde Haberman writes the NYC column for The Times.

GOTHAM

A History of New York City to 1898.

By Edwin G. Burrows
and Mike Wallace.

Illustrated. 1,383 pp. New York:
Oxford University Press. \$49.95.

One of the first things you learn on picking up "Gotham" -- in itself no easy task, this super-thick book being heavy enough to cause back spasms -- is that Gotham is Anglo-Saxon for "Goats' Town." Who knew?

There actually is an English village called Gotham, not far from Sherwood Forest. Legend has it that old Gotham was filled with blockheads, like the farmer who rode to market on horseback carrying a bushel of wheat on his shoulders in order not to burden the poor animal. Washington Irving slapped the nickname on Manhattan in the early 19th century (and it may be the only Anglo-Saxonism not routinely heard today on the sidewalks of New York).

Why would New Yorkers have ever agreed to a moniker of such unfortunate origin? Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, history professors at the City University of New York, suggest it may be because legendary Gotham played the fool to mask real wisdom. Doltishness was a subterfuge to throw enemy outsiders off balance. In other words, if you accept this theory, Gothamites were con artists at heart. What better role models for a city that has rarely objected with vehemence to a little artful flimflam?

Burrows and Wallace should be congratulated for, among other things, exquisite timing. This year marks the 100th anniversary of New York's consolidation into a megacity of five boroughs, including formerly independent Brooklyn. There has been no shortage of retrospectives on the way things were over the last century. Here is a book to bring us up to speed on what took place in Manhattan before 1898, as far back as the ice age, when "packs of glaciers crept down from Labrador." That tidbit falls under the sly heading of "immigrant ice." In New York, everyone and everything come from somewhere else.

"Gotham" often has fun like that. But no book this encyclopedic can be expected to read like a romp. This is a serious reference work. So many facts are crammed into every square inch that trying to absorb them all will guarantee a headache bigger than the one the city already has over Yankee Stadium's future. Stray details are sure to stick, though,

not necessarily in any order of importance or chronology.

Did you know that New York's first hotel opened in 1794, called simply the City Hotel, on Broadway just north of Trinity Church? Or that the supposed \$24 purchase of Manhattan by Dutch traders was worth the equivalent of \$669.42 (and even at that bargain price, the Dutch may have been fleeced)? Or that the fabulously wealthy John Jacob Astor made part of his fortune smuggling opium as "America's first large-scale drug dealer"? Or that the brownstone for the rows of houses that give New York streets their distinctive look came from Paterson, N.J., and Portland, Conn.?

Oddments like those add spice to a book focused more on the powerful forces that shaped both city and country. After quickly dispensing with the ice age and the rest of prehistory, it marches relentlessly across the nearly three centuries from the Dutch landing to the emergence of the unified boroughs. The countless topics include, to list but a few, New York's wars with the Indians and its pro-Crown leanings, its financial support for the slave trade and its bloody draft riots during the Civil War, the commercial imperatives and the waves of immigration that constantly redefined it.

Periodically, the authors take a break from big-picture themes to provide insights into day-to-day life. They glide easily around town, peeking inside brothels for working men in Five Points, then pressing noses to the gilt-edged windows of the uptown rich. Even a self-impressed modern like Donald Trump might find it hard to top this for extravagance: "James Fenimore Cooper, writing to his wife in the winter of 1850, described a party where one woman wore 'a dress that cost, including jewels, \$30,000' -- a fantastic sum at a time when skilled mechanics and craftsmen took home between \$1.25 and \$2 a day in wages."

Blockbuster revelations of the you-read-it-here-first variety do not make themselves obvious in "Gotham." But important themes emerge, not the least of which is Manhattan's dominance as a mercantile center from the moment the Dutch plopped themselves down there in the early 1600's. Not much has changed on that score, or others. In so many ways, New York's evolution proves the ultimate wisdom of the great 20th-century philosopher Yogi Berra. Life in the big city is often *deja vu* all over again.

Think of some of today's major issues:

Vast gaps between rich and poor? At the start of George Washington's Presidency in 1789, the richest 20 percent of the city's population owned 75 percent of the wealth. The poorest 20 percent held a scant 7 percent.

Crime? "As early as 1749," the authors say, "one local paper reported that it had 'become dangerous for the good People of this City to be out late at Nights, without being sufficiently strong or well armed.' "

Tight housing? Around 1700, a harried colonial official complained that "houses are so scarce and dear, and lodgings worst in this place."

Cost of living? By 1720, "the diversity of imported goods in New York was matched by their costliness."

Municipal egoism? An 1837 guidebook mocked New Yorkers' tendency to see everything they did as the biggest and the best.

Relations with the rest of the country? " 'New York is notoriously the largest and least loved of any of our great cities,' wrote Harper's Monthly in 1856."

Even the quality-of-life campaign championed by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani echoes attempts by Peter Stuyvesant, New Amsterdam's Governor in the mid-17th century, to browbeat the citizenry into orderliness. Giuliani may wish to note what can happen to scolds if they are not careful: "The more Stuyvesant insisted on his authority, the more he was resented -- above all among the colony's burgeoning merchant elite."

Whether they are being ironic or sober, Burrows and Wallace offer a large-canvas portrait of a city they clearly love. One compelling reason seems to be New York's ability to recover from adversity. Its determination was powerfully shown when lower Manhattan was wiped out in December 1835 by a fire that raged for two weeks in subzero temperatures. While only two people died, 674 buildings were destroyed in a "13-acre ocean of burning waves." Yet within a year, 500 new buildings were constructed and the area was restored.

Then or now, you see, New York is the city that never weeps. It simply does not give up.

Copyright 1998 The New York Times Company