

INTRODUCTION

“Broadway may only be a street to some people, but to some of the rest of us it’s a religion.” So claimed Eddie Foy, Sr. onstage at the Palace Theater, and thousands of people have proved his statement true.

Broadway is the only spot where the hundreds of different worlds that constitute New York City meet face-to-face. The result has been funny, dramatic, and sometimes deadly. Broadway mixes hookers, Broadway stars, gangsters, newspapermen, schnorrers, and bon vivants, rubberneckers, and passersby. These worlds all coexist in 10 blocks of Broadway.

Surprisingly, there has been no comprehensive history of the Times Square area. There have been short books with chatty rundowns on the nightclubs and theaters, but they have tended to be very vague and broad in scope. Few facts enter into the pages of those books. This book is meant to be an informal guidebook to the mercurial history of Broadway. Partly scholarly and partly anecdotal, the book, like Broadway itself, can be used by those who have an exact destination in mind or those who wish to wander aimlessly, browsing up and down the boulevard.

For those hardy souls who are purposeful in their quest, major entries are arranged alphabetically. Subjects not covered in their own separate entries are listed in the index. My hope is that the referrals in the index will lead the interested reader to a somewhat complete idea of a person’s career or a place’s importance in Times Square history.

Those who would rather take a more lighthearted browse through the history can pick an entry at random and follow the cross-references to additional entries. This method might eventually take one through the entire book.

Since Broadway and Times Square have been the center of the American entertainment industry, many entries are devoted to performers, writers, and theaters. But the electric atmosphere of the area also attracted many ancillary industries and individuals from other walks of life. I have tried to balance the entries accordingly.

Setting the criteria for which entries to include and which to exclude was difficult. I could have made the book more complete with shorter entries, but I felt this would result in a dry book with little room for anecdote. And it is often the stories about the individuals and locations that give Times Square its unique flavor. Also, I decided to include those individuals and institutions that might stand as symbols of their type and that are important in their own right as well. For example, Rector’s is the only “lobster palace” included in this book. However, it didn’t differ that much in ambiance from Shanley’s or the dozens of other haute cuisine restaurants that dotted Broadway in the early years of the century.

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Neil Simon, Joseph Fields, Arthur Miller, Eugene O'Neill, and Tennessee Williams are the only playwrights accorded their own entries. However, briefer discussion of many more authors can be discovered through use of the index.

Far more composers and lyricists are represented than are playwrights. This is because I feel that they had greater impact on American theatrical history than their legitimate-theater brethren. After all, the musical theater is Broadway's lifeblood. Its popular songs are known throughout the world, and amateur productions have influenced many Americans beyond the boundaries of Broadway. Because the book was limited in size, not every theater or playwright or restaurant could be covered.

I also tried to focus on those individuals who have had a lasting influence on the area and the art of Broadway beyond their own times. For example, John Golden was a well-known producer, director, playwright, and sometime songwriter, but today his name is practically unknown. This does not mean he didn't make real contributions to Broadway, but he didn't merit an individual entry. Instead, a good description of his professional life can be found through index references. On the other hand, many figures who never received much fame are included simply because they seemed to illustrate a certain ambiance in Times Square at a particular time.

Biographical entries cover actors, gangsters, critics, entrepreneurs, and many incidental but colorful characters. The biographies cover their subjects' lives and careers as they related to Broadway and Times Square.

Entries on Broadway theaters contain the opening dates of the houses, architects, and opening attractions. Additional details are provided by tracing the histories of major productions and their stars.

I have tried to keep my own judgments apart from the factual entries, but Times Square is as much a subjective feeling as an actual location, and the choices of who and what were included obviously reflect my personal consideration of their importance.

The history of Times Square goes back to before the founding of the United States. In 1776 the English general William Howe attacked Manhattan from the East River, near what is today 37th Street. This later became the subject of Robert E. Sherwood's play *Small War on Murray Hill* and the Rodgers and Hart musical *Dearest Enemy*. When news of Howe's landing reached General George Washington, he immediately brought his troops down from Harlem, where they were headquartered. From downtown came the American general Israel Putnam (who later had a Times Square building named after him). Putnam's guide was Aaron Burr.

Washington and Putnam occupied sites on what are now Bryant Park, behind the New York Public Library on 42nd Street between 5th and 6th Avenues, and the area near the present-day Broadway between 43rd and 44th Streets. Years later, Washington would enjoy taking his wife, Martha, on a carriage ride through the area.

During the 1800s this area was the home of squatters who settled along the creek known as Great Kill. The stream was later filled in and became 42nd Street. The area was known for its goat farms and as the site of manure dumping, a big business given the importance of the horse in the 18th century. Dutch farmers began settling the area and developing farms.

John Jacob Astor and William Cutting purchased a 70-acre plot of land between Broadway and the Hudson River, bounded by 42nd Street to the south and 46th Street to the north, for \$25,000 and established Medref Eden farm. Astor had arrived in the country in 1784 from Waldorf, Germany. He began a fur trade called the American Fur Company (the Astor Place subway station features a beaver in its tile decoration as a tribute to Astor). Astor built a series of forts in Oregon to protect his fur business and began trading with China from the Pacific Coast. He also dealt in English pianofortes.

John J. Norton owned a large farm on the west side of 42nd Street. On September 28, 1825, he ceded a part of his farm, the Hermitage, to the city so that it could construct 42nd Street. The city paid Norton \$10 for the rights of passage.

In 1829 a local paper carried an advertisement that read in part: “To let—large and commodious house and garden spot situated on Forty-second and Forty-third Streets, and 100 feet from Eighth Avenue. Well calculated for boarding school, summer retreat or private family—being pleasantly situated on high ground with view of North River. House has 25 rooms, good well and pump in cellar. Garden is laid out and at present planted for spring vegetables.”

The streetcar line finally reached the summer homes around East 42nd Street in 1839. The 42nd Street thoroughfare was used to drive cattle from the docks to slaughter houses on the East Side. The cattle arrived at 42nd Street on the Weehawken ferry from New Jersey. Horsecar lines from the ferry also took passengers downtown.

Houses, stores, schools, and churches were built in the area. Bloomingdale’s Baptist Church (1841), the 42nd Street Presbyterian Church (1868), and the Methodist-Episcopal Asylum for the Aged and Infirm (c. 1855) all opened on 42nd Street. The Bloomingdale’s Baptist Church became the Central Baptist Church in 1868, the 42nd Street Presbyterian Church became St. Luke’s Evangelical Lutheran Church in 1875, and the asylum closed its doors in 1883 and was converted into the Clinton Apartment House. In 1878 St. Louis College, “for Catholic boys of refined families,” occupied 224 West 58th Street. The Church of St. Mary the Virgin at 228 West 45th Street was an Episcopal church with 600 members. In 1866 the Sisterhood of St. John the Baptist opened the Midnight Mission “For the reclamation of fallen women, who are here given homes, and, if found worthy, aided in obtaining permanent homes or employment.” The mission was at 208 West 46th Street. The George Bruce Memorial Circulating Library was situated at 226 West 42nd Street beginning in 1883.

The area, named after London’s Long Acre, became the center of the carriage industry. Where the Winter Garden Theatre now stands was Tattersall’s American Horse Exchange. Harness shops and stables made up the majority of the businesses on Longacre Square. As the theater industry moved into the area the carriage shops moved northward along Broadway and were transformed into garages and automobile showrooms when the horse became passé.

Slowly but surely, the New York theater industry came uptown from the City Hall area to 14th Street and Union Square, to 23rd Street and Madison Square, to 34th Street and Herald Square. The theaters followed the diagonal swath that Broadway cut through the city.

Little by little new theaters began nearing Longacre Square. Among the first theaters in the Longacre Square area was the Metropolitan Concert Hall at 41st and Broadway. Built in May 1880, the concert hall was never a success. It became the Metropolitan Casino, Alcazar, Cosmopolitan Theatre, a roller-skating rink, and an exhibition hall. It was demolished in 1887 to make way for the Broadway Theatre, a very successful venture.

T. Henry French and two partners built the Broadway, which opened on March 3, 1888, with a production of *La Tosca* starring Fanny Davenport. French was the son of Samuel French, whose name graces the still popular play-publishing business he founded. The new Romanesque building seated 1,776 patrons and had a 75-foot-wide stage. Like many theaters of the time, the Broadway was the home to acting companies, in this case led by De Wolf Hopper and Francis Wilson. Both companies specialized in comic operas. The Broadway Theatre left the legitimate field in 1908 when vaudeville and movies took over its stage. The theater was torn down in 1929 and replaced with a garment center building.

The Casino Theatre, built in 1882 at the corner of 39th Street and Broadway, was a favorite of audiences and performers. In 1900, the same year that Macy’s moved from the “Ladies’ Mile” on 6th Avenue in the 20s to Herald Square, the Casino had a roof garden built over its auditorium, the first of a popular breed of theaters around the turn of the century.

One year after the construction of the Casino, the Metropolitan Opera House opened on Broadway between 39th and 40th Streets. The arrival of the distinguished opera

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company gave the area a new cachet, and soon society began to look at the West Side as an attractive area. The opera house suffered a major fire in 1892 but was rebuilt and lasted until 1966, when a new (and inferior) Metropolitan Opera House was constructed in Lincoln Center.

By 1893 New Yorkers were spending \$6 million a year on entertainment. That same year (the year of the World's Columbian Exposition and Grover Cleveland's inauguration as President) landowner Robert Goelet built a theater on his plot of land on 38th Street and Broadway and called it Abbey's Theatre after producer Henry Abbey. *King's Handbook of New York* (1893) predicted that Abbey would occupy "a prominent and worthy place among the most notable theatres of the New York and the world." But this was not to be. Abbey left the theater in 1896, and the name was changed to the Knickerbocker Theatre under the auspices of Al Hayman. The Knickerbocker was torn down in 1930.

The first theater on 42nd Street was the AMERICAN THEATRE, built in 1893, the year of a great stock market panic. After a successful opening with *The Prodigal Daughter*, the theatre's fortunes quickly fell. It became a vaudeville house, a motion picture house, and finally a burlesque theater. It was demolished in 1932.

In 1895, in the area known as "Thieves' Lair" by locals, OSCAR HAMMERSTEIN I built his OLYMPIA theater complex. Electric lights had just been installed in the Long-acre area. The theaters that made up the Olympia complex on Broadway between 44th and 45th Streets were not a success, although they managed to draw attention to the square as an entertainment center.



Site of the Time's Tower, 1898.

The area along Broadway from 37th Street to 42nd Street was dubbed “the Rialto.” Soon the Longacre theater district would also be called “the Rialto.” In the 1950s and 1960s Sam Zolotow wrote a popular theater column in the *New York Times* called “News of the Rialto.”

Almost 80 theaters were constructed in the Times Square area. Many were built by producers and actor-managers who headed their own stock companies. They leased the land from the original owners, who were intelligent enough not to let go of their land holdings. More and more producers such as DAVID BELASCO and Daniel Frohman had their own houses built. Later, just before and during the 1920s, impresarios such as FLORENZ ZIEGFELD and EARL CARROLL would build theaters to house their productions.

Most of the successful theaters in the area were owned by the 6 members of the Theatrical Syndicate, a trust that was happy to force out its competition. The syndicate was put out of business in 1916 and replaced by another equally powerful group, the SHUBERT BROTHERS. The Shuberts’ power cannot be overestimated. During the Depression, when breadlines snaked around Duffy Square at Broadway and 47th Street, it was the Shuberts who kept American theater alive. The Shuberts were forced to break up their near monopoly in the 1950s.

The square’s preeminence was solidified in 1904 when the *New York Times* (founded in 1851) tore down the Pabst Hotel and built its new headquarters, the TIMES TOWER. It is telling that the entrance of the Pabst Hotel faced downtown, while that of the new Times Tower faced uptown.

The move by the *New York Times* to the square led to the City Council’s voting to rename Longacre Square, Times Square. In April 1904 the mayor signed the designation.

The Times Tower gained prominence in the square when the MOTOGRAM electric zipper sign was wrapped around the building. The Motogram gave the latest news, and thousands of New Yorkers, in the years before the widespread use of radio, would gather in the square to see the latest reports on modern technology. Even during radio’s and, later, television’s prominence in timely news reporting, the Times Tower remained a focal point. New Yorkers gathered to see election results, news of the Japanese surrender in World War II (and the resultant V-J day celebration), and sports finals.

The square was also used for mass rallies to sell war bonds, for publicity stunts (see STUNTS), for political demonstrations, and for the annual New Year’s Eve celebration. Parades, including Macy’s annual Thanksgiving Day parade, marched down Broadway through the square.

On October 27, 1904, the West Side Subway was opened from 4th Avenue to 42nd Street on the East Side, then across the thoroughfare to Broadway and up to 125th Street. Within one year the Times Square subway stop had been used by over 5 million people. The laying of the new subway lines through the city, the consolidation of many train lines into Grand Central Terminal at 42nd Street and Vanderbilt Avenue in 1878, and the completion of the 3rd and 6th Avenue elevated trains also in that year helped the burgeoning area of Times Square.

In 1905 gasoline-driven buses replaced the horse-drawn streetcars. The city saw its first metered taxicabs in 1907. Unfortunately, many of the theaters were not built to screen the increased noise from the traffic. Patrons sitting in the last rows of the orchestra at the REPUBLIC THEATRE could not hear Mrs. Patrick Campbell in *Magda*. Press agent A. Toxen Worm had a brainstorm when George Tyler facetiously suggested that the problem could be solved if 42nd Street were covered in tanbark. Worm thought the idea was the ideal publicity stunt and ordered the street so covered.

John C. Van Dyke described Times Square in his book *The New New York*. He wrote: “At eight in the evening there is the incessant come and go of trolleys, the rattle of cabs, the shuffle and push of many feet along the street, the insistent voice of ticket speculators, and the unintelligible shout of men and boys hawking night editions of newspapers.”

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The construction of Madison Square Garden at 50th Street between 8th and 9th Avenues brought many sports enthusiasts to the area. The money to be made in area nightclubs and later speakeasies, not to mention the money being laundered through Broadway investments, led to an influx of gangsters (see *GANGSTERS*).

The opening of such hotels as the *ASTOR*, the *Metropole* at 41st Street between Broadway and 7th Avenue (the home of *GEORGE M. COHAN* and *Enrico Caruso*), the *Vendome* at Broadway and 41st Street, the *Claridge*, and the *KNICKERBOCKER* brought tourists and travelers to the area. The docks, only four avenues away, hosted the arrivals and departures of the giant luxury liners making port in New York. The Times Square hotels were the nearest deluxe accommodations for these travelers and were halfway between the ports and the rail lines. Fancy restaurants such as *RECTOR'S*, *Shanley's*, *MURRAY'S ROMAN GARDENS*, and *Churchill's* served such upper-class patrons as *ANNA HELD* and *DIAMOND JIM BRADY*. The years following World War I were boom years for Times Square. Money was plentiful and New York was the richest American city. This wealth led to changes along the Great White Way. The theatrical unions, such as *ACTORS' EQUITY*, gained power and demanded increases in pay. Inflation, spurred by the success of the stock market, raised production costs, and ticket prices reflected the increased costs and increased taxes needed to support the growing metropolis.

The boom era culminated both financially and artistically with the theatrical season of 1927–28, when 257 plays opened in the 71 theaters around Times Square. Shortly after this, however, the industry suffered three major blows, one financial and two artistic. The first was the stock market crash of 1929, which forced many producers and their backers into receivership. Even the powerful Shuberts lost many theaters. The second was the acceptance of sound pictures by the public. Great movie palaces were built along Broadway in the late 1920s. The construction of these massive halls culminated with the greatest of all, the *ROXY THEATER*, under the auspices of *S. L. ("ROXY") ROTHAFEL*, the man most responsible for the development of the movie palace. The third big effect on the industry was the emergence of radio as a mass entertainment force.

During the 1930s many theaters were darkened by the sudden drop-off of theatrical ventures. Many of the houses were converted to radio (and later television) studios or burlesque houses. Still more were demolished or left empty. The *FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT* managed to keep some of the theaters lit. The burlesque houses slowly led to the eventual decline of the 42nd Street area. When Mayor LaGuardia outlawed burlesque, the theatres became grind movie houses and attracted an even lower class of clientele. Soon low entertainments such as *Ripley's Odditorium* and *Hubert's Museum* and *Flea Circus* attracted a decidedly less ritzy crowd to the Great White Way.

World War II brought a new prosperity to the area, but it was a middle-class and lower-class area. Still, the theater remained the center of the nation's entertainment industry. Due to its vigor and unique signage, especially that of *DOUGLAS LEIGH* and the *ARTKRAFT STRAUSS Sign Company*, Times Square itself became a great attraction.

The 1960s and 1970s saw a worsening of the area and a drop in the number of legitimate shows produced on Broadway. Many of the 42nd Street theaters fell into further disrepair and showed kung fu or porno films round the clock. The opening of the Port Authority Bus Terminal brought runaways and vagrants into the area, and 8th Avenue became known as one of New York's most undesirable locations. Hustlers of three-card monte and other scams mixed with pickpockets. Peddlers selling fake Gucci bags and \$10 imitation Rolex watches crowded the sidewalks. As drugs and prostitution flourished around 42nd Street and Eighth Avenue, numerous plans, all discarded, promised to clean up the area.

Many New York landmarks, including *LINDY'S* restaurant, the *Astor Hotel*, the *PARAMOUNT THEATER*, and the *Roxy Theater*, were demolished to make way for high-rise office buildings, which increased land values and destroyed the low-rise ambience



44th Street at Night in 1955.

of the area. Many of the great spectacular signs were taken down and replaced by simple illuminated billboards.

During the 1980s there was a resurgence of activity around the area. Zoning changes made it more profitable to build in the area, and more and more skyscrapers were built, pushing out still more of the ancillary businesses that served the theater industry. Preservationists waged an unsuccessful battle to save the HELEN HAYES and MOROSCO theaters. This led to an increased determination to save the remaining theaters, and by late 1987 most of the remaining theaters enjoyed landmark status (over the objections of their owners). A major redevelopment of 42nd Street was announced by Mayor Edward Koch's administration, but condemnation of buildings in the area and new construction were stalled by a series of lawsuits. A stock market crash in October 1987 made new construction less attractive. Many of the individuals involved in the redevelopment plan were indicted, and the entire plan came under increased criticism. The Koch administration, astoundingly in favor of redevelopment over preservation, insisted in pursuing the plan even after it seemed unwise and unfair to do so.

The Walt Disney Corporation's refurbishment of the NEW AMSTERDAM THEATRE proved to be the most important catalyst in the renovation of 42nd Street. Together with the renovation of the VICTORY THEATER and a flourishing economy under a Democratic president, 42nd Street was finally on its way toward cleanup. The results were impressive even as die-hard New Yorkers mourned the loss of historic theaters and the introduction of generic national chains. The new Times Square was largely an economic success, if not a cultural one. Sidewalks were incredibly crowded with moviegoers, theater patrons, and tourists.

When Edward Arlington Robinson, on his way to a Broadway show, wrote "The White Lights, Broadway 1906," he could not have realized just how prophetic his poem would be:

Here, where the white lights have begun
 To seethe the way for something fair,
 No prophet knew, from what was done,
 That there was triumph in the air.