

Republic of Greenwich Village Walking Tour: A Seasonal Gem of NYC History

BY KAJU ROBERTO

It was a beautiful unseasonably warm late September day when we all met under the Washington Square Arch for the Republic of Greenwich Village Walking Tour, hosted by NYC tour guide Mark Kehoe. This walking tour was part of the Village Trip, and it has been a strong staple of this one-week long late summer NYC festival celebrating Greenwich Village for many years.

This fascinating two-hour tour centered on the history of NYC particularly from the southern tip of Manhattan to where the north Greenwich Village ends.

Mark is a walking encyclopedia of historical knowledge about New York City.

From 17th Century New Amsterdam to The Village Today

From how the Dutch first arrived in 1624 and named this land New Amsterdam, to how the Lenape traded goods, to the yellow fever epidemics that in the 19th century caused the land where Washington Square Park is today to be a grave site, to how Millionaire's Row began, and how Canal Street was once an actual canal, Mark did not miss a single beat. For example, on Center Street where housing court is today, there was once a big fresh water pond that became so polluted it had to be drained into the canal now known as "Canal Street."

Another intriguing fact Mark mentioned is that people would come to the west side in the early 1800s (where Hudson River Park is now located), and rent small cottages to escape the "bad air of yellow fever" of the central city. Supposedly, this early strain of yellow fever was so strong, you could be fine in the morning and dead by the afternoon. This was a time before sanitation existed, where pigs roamed the city streets and people threw their garbage out of their windows.

Under Dutch rule, there were slaves in Greenwich Village brought to the city by Sephardic Jewish traders and others. Eventually some slaves were allowed to buy their freedom by working. Some were even given fertile land on Thompson Street, which was known as "Little Africa" well into the 19th century.



TOUR GUIDE MARK KEHOE is an expert on historical NYC sites in Greenwich Village. It was all part of the Republic of Greenwich Village Walking Tour as part of the Village Trip festival on September 20th. Photo by Kaju Roberto.

In 1811, the grid pattern of the city streets we know today began with city legislation named "The Commissioner's Plan." There was no altruistic motive for this; it was purely devised to sell housing lots. Avenues running uptown and downtown and numbered streets starting from Houston Street began here. Until 1830 the north end of Washington Square Park was the northern edge of the city. Writers and artists were opposed to this plan, since the city at that time was filled with beautiful rolling hills, small lakes, and waterfalls.

Charles Street Prison and the Birth of Fifth Avenue

In the early 19th century, there was a prison on Charles Street. From there some inmates were sent up the Hudson River to Sing Sing, hence the origins of the saying "being sent up the river." Work on Fifth Avenue started in 1830, but only reached as north as 23rd Street by the early 1840s. This is about the time the super-rich started moving to the lower completed part of Fifth Avenue.

The First Artists Settle in Greenwich Village

By the beginning of the 20th century, artists and poets began moving into the Village as rent was cheap. As early as the 1890s, there was an Arts Student League and the National Academy on 57th Street.

Around this time, a group of artist pals from Philadelphia (which included John Sloan and Everett Shinn and led by Robert Henri) settled in Greenwich Village. They were later dubbed "The Ash Can School" painters since Henri encouraged them to paint what they would see, rather than the romantic depictions of nature scenes. This was a novel art concept at the time.

The Republic of Greenwich Village

We finally worked our way toward Sixth Avenue and turned east on 8th Street. Here Mark showed us a brick building with small windows where the Dadaist artist Man Ray lived in 1915. He was romantically involved with the American photographer Lee Miller. By accident, they discovered the surrealist

photographic technique called "solarisation," although Ray would take full credit for it. This caused their inevitable breakup.

We next moved on to MacDougal Alley where Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney purchased her art studio, which later became the first Whitney Museum.

Moving further along Fifth Avenue, we had come full circle back to the park. In 1889, the first Washington Square Arch was erected near its current location. This wooden structure was so beloved by the Greenwich Village community, that in 1893 it was rebuilt larger in its current location. Many years later would become the beacon for one of the most important Greenwich Village events.

January 23, 1917 witnessed the creation of the Republic of Greenwich Village. The French conceptual artist Marcel Duchamp had moved to NYC from France in 1915 to avoid conscription following his highly successful NYC Armory Show in 1913 - the first art show to expose European artists to American audiences. His showing of his radical painting *Nude Descending the Staircase* made Duchamp an international sensation.

The artist perpetrators led by Duchamp broke into the side door of the Washington Square Arch and climbed to the top. They partied there for 24 hours, bringing sandwiches, balloons, Japanese lanterns, and wine where the group declared Greenwich Village to be the Republic of Greenwich Village. It was a place of radical thinking, a place to be free and to create.

The Republic of Greenwich Village Walking Tour was the perfect way to learn so much about the history of the New York City and Greenwich Village. Definitely look up Mark Kehoe and take one of his walking tours.

For more information: thevillagetrup.com

Kaju Roberto is an accomplished musician, singer/ songwriter, journalist, and an award-winning producer. He is the artist Rad Jet on Spotify

Alternative Coffee House for Emerging Singer-Songwriters

BY KAJU ROBERTO

On September 6, I had the pleasure to cover two very talented Latino singer-songwriters at the People's Voice Cafe on 239 Thompson Street. This alternative coffeehouse offers quality entertainment and a place for emerging singer-songwriters to perform and show their wares. It has also been a space for artistic expression and a wide variety of humanitarian issues and concerns since 1979.

The cafe is run as a non-profit collective without any political affiliation. The People's

Choice Cafe is an alcohol-free space supported in part by the generosity of the Folk Music Society of New York and the Judson Memorial Church.

Introducing Two Wonderful Singer-Songwriters

The performance room had the feel of a large classroom with a makeshift stage. There were about 20 people in attendance, many of whom were songwriters, musicians, and

filmmakers. Outside in the corridor, the staff was selling coffee and chocolate chip cookies. The event's host Judy Gorman, a singer-songwriter guitarist who has been hailed by Pete Seeger, kept us entertained with humor in between the performances.

This main performances highlighted two very awesome New York City-based Latino singer-songwriters. They both performed in English and Spanish.

Mario Cancel-Bigay: The Humorous Poet and Professor

Mario Cancel-Bigay (pronounced Big Eye) is a Puerto Rican singer-songwriter, poet, translator, and ethnomusicologist who happens to be a virtuoso on the Puerto Rican 10-string cuatro, the island's national guitar. Mario is also a professor at New York University where he teaches courses on Latin American cultures and global works.

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