

Little Old New Amsterdam

by SYDNEY MAYERS

ASTROLL along Park Avenue is especially impressive to visitors who may have seen it last a decade ago. But to appreciate fully the extent of the transformation that has occurred, we must wander back in time from New York to *Nieuw Amsterdam*.

Some 300 years ago, a gentleman on horseback rode into what were then the northernmost reaches of Holland's colony in the New World. His name was Isaack de Rasieres, he was the Secretary of the Dutch West India Company, and he was seeking attractive farmland for settlement. The area he cautiously explored is known nowadays as the "fashionable east side" of Manhattan. Meinheer de Rasieres thought so little of what is now midtown Park Avenue that he crossed it off his map; it was too hilly, too rocky and too heavily forested.

De Rasieres turned east, toward the river, and liked what he saw. There the land was high and flat, the soil was tillable, and it fronted on a fine waterway. He recommended the section, and years later, when the settlers came, his judgment proved to be sound. But no settlers came to Park Avenue, since all who inspected it agreed that its land would never have any value.

Park Avenue remained dormant for centuries. It did not even have a name until 1811, when it was dubbed The Fourth Avenue — no more than a line on a map. The City Fathers were delighted in 1831 to turn it over to railroad promoters as a right of way, confident the municipality was getting by far the better of the bargain. The railroad was built, and by 1870 Fifty-Fourth Street had been cut through. Yet the Avenue remained ugly and undeveloped for many years, occupied

only by squatters living in dingy and unhealthy hovels, blackened by the soot from coal-burning locomotives.

After long years of neglect, the area finally attracted a few industrial enterprises, such as a piano factory and a brewery, but it continued to be a civic eyesore. Only a miracle could change the sorry situation, and it took a catastrophe to bring this about. In 1902 a collision between two trains approaching Grand Central Station resulted in laws banning steam locomotives, compelling the railroad to go underground. By 1910 the last squatter had been evicted, and by 1935 (as if by magic) Park Avenue bloomed into a veritable Gold Coast of magnificent homes. The Ugly Duckling had been transformed into a Princess.

Park Avenue retained its splendid residential character until just after World War II, when another remarkable transition began. Stately mansions and luxurious apartment houses have swiftly made way for striking majestic office buildings, which are still being erected where rent-free squatting was once the normal way of life.

We can imagine the astonishment of the early settlers of the "fashionable east side" if they could see the dazzling architectural beauty of today's Park Avenue. But beyond imagination is how they would react to the current multimillion-dollar site values New York's population and productivity have given to the very acreage that in their day was not worth even the price of a few seeds.

This article is based on material prepared by the Irving Trust Company, whose 400 Park Avenue Branch is located on the site herein discussed.