



When the Astors Owned New York: Blue Bloods and Grand Hotels in a Gilded Age

Justin Kaplan

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This newest book by Pulitzer Prize winner Justin Kaplan is a sparkling combination of biography, social history, architectural appreciation, and pure pleasure

Endowed with the largest private fortunes of their day, two heirs of arch-capitalist John Jacob Astor battled with each other for social primacy. William Waldorf Astor (born 1848) and his cousin John Jacob Astor IV (born 1864) led incomparably privileged lives in the blaze of public attention. Novelist, sportsman, and inventor, John Jacob went down with the *Titanic*, after turbulent marital adventures and service in the Spanish-American War. Collector of art, antiquities, and stately homes, William Waldorf became a British subject and acquired the title of Viscount Astor.

In New York during the 1890s and after, the two feuding Astors built monumental grand hotels, chief among them the original Waldorf-Astoria on lower Fifth Avenue. The Astor hotels transformed social behavior. Home of the chafing dish and the velvet rope, the Waldorf-Astoria drew the rich, famous, and fashionable. It was the setting for the most notorious society event of the era—a costume extravaganza put on by its hosts during a time of widespread need and unemployment. The celebrity-packed lobbies, public rooms, lavish suites, and exclusive restaurants of the grand hotels became distinctive theaters of modern life.

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