



**Audio essayist: David Freeland**

**Title: Echoes of Tenderloin past**

**Duration: 6 minutes, 50 seconds**

### **Introduction**

Faded advertisements on tall buildings and ceiling art in souvenir shops: These hint at a popular urban culture that lived for its moment and then was gone.

In this episode of Bookpod, David Freeland talks about *Automats, Taxi Dances, and Vaudeville: Excavating Manhattan's Lost Places of Leisure*, the book he wrote to document the buildings that drew earlier generations of New Yorkers in search of a day or night's entertainment.

### **Presentation**

In the book, I really seek out little known buildings or remnants of buildings throughout Manhattan and I explore them, get to know them and I use those really as starting



points into larger social histories associated with these places.

Most of these places, well, all of the places are related to popular culture and entertainment. But most of the buildings have been forgotten by a lot of New Yorkers. A lot of them are places that you might not necessarily notice, really, if you were passing by.

It's very easy to just sort of take change for granted, as a given of life here in the metropolis. But the reality is that often what stays and what goes, you know, architecturally, is related to a larger force. Often it's economics.

I think the best example that I can give of that is with the Tenderloin. I actually devote an entire section of the book to the Tenderloin because of the prominence the Tenderloin once held within the city landscape really.

The Tenderloin was an area of town west of Fifth Avenue, between about 23<sup>rd</sup> Street and like 34<sup>th</sup> Street. And it was really not only the best known vice district, the main vice district in New York from about 1870s to around the turn of



the century or just after, but it was one of the most famous vice districts in the country.

And it was actually so famous that San Francisco's Tenderloin took its name from New York's, uh, supposedly. But it's been completely erased from history. Some of the buildings are still there, a few, not many. Every year more and more seem to go.

And the drive to clean up vice in the Tenderloin, and by vice I'm referring to gambling, prostitution, a host of smaller offenses, but those are really the two big ones, the drive was initially spurred by private citizens, particularly a group known as The Committee of Fifteen.

The Committee of Fifteen was a group set up about 1900 to combat vice throughout the city. To really do the things that they felt the police were not doing because many of the gambling houses and brothels and dance halls and saloons in the Tenderloin operated, well, *all* of them operated with police protection.



So it was an intricate system that had been worked out over the years that benefitted pretty much everybody.

It's really the closest, you know, that we've come to having like a Red Light District, officially sanctioned like a Storyville in New Orleans. It was in its own place geographically and it operated with the help of the police. And for a long time I think much of New York was able to sort of look the other way.

But as real estate, that land was very valuable. And one of the things that astonished me as I was researching the book was when I realized that the chairperson of The Committee of Fifteen was William Baldwin, who was also, as it happened, president of the Long Island Railroad.

And William Baldwin was the very first person to announce in the New York papers the coming of the new Pennsylvania Station, which was right at the same time he was working with The Committee of Fifteen, although it took about ten years to build.

So what happened was that the parent company of the Long Island Railroad, the Pennsylvania Railroad, began buying up



Tenderloin property – much more than it ever needed to build the station. Really the idea was to buy up as much property as it could because the land was going to be tremendously valuable once the station was built.

So it's all about real estate.

So you really have to look at what was behind these crusading motives to clean up vice. And I'm not trying to say that The Committee of Fifteen was not interested in cleaning up vice. They were because, you know, many of these establishments in the Tenderloin were just really located very closely to their own homes, you know to neighboring Fifth Avenue, to churches and elegant mansions on Fifth Avenue.

But the point I do want to make is that the people who were most fervent about cleaning up vice in the Tenderloin were some of the same people who stood to gain the most economically from its redevelopment.



And we see that today. Flash forward one hundred years, the narrative behind the cleanup of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and Times Square bears a striking similarity to that of the Tenderloin.

It would be too easy to isolate these New York stories into the past and to just look at them as interesting stories, and that would be fine. But I think as historians, even as citizens, I think, of this city, we have a larger obligation. When we're investigating our past, we really owe it to ourselves to look at those connections and to see how these patterns are still influencing our own lives.

### **Valedictory**

For more information about David Freeland, visit his blog at [www.gothamlostandfound.com](http://www.gothamlostandfound.com).

And to see his short film about the original Swing Street in Harlem, visit [www.thirteen.org/thecityconcealed](http://www.thirteen.org/thecityconcealed).

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