



# The Once and Future New York: Historic Preservation and the Modern City

*Randall Mason*

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In the popular imagination, the controversial 1963 demolition of Pennsylvania Station gave birth to New York City's historic preservation movement. As Randall Mason reveals, however, historic preservation has been a persistent force in the development of New York since the 1890s, when the city's leading politicians, planners, and architects first recognized the need to preserve the rapidly evolving city's past.

Rich with archival research, *The Once and Future New York* documents the emergence of historic preservation in New York at the turn of the twentieth century. Between 1890 and 1920, preservationists saved and restored buildings, parks, and monuments throughout the city's five boroughs that represented continuity with the past. Mason argues these efforts created a "memory infrastructure" that established a framework for New York's collective memory and fused celebrations of the city's past with optimism about its future.

Focusing on three major projects—the restoration of City Hall Park, the ultimately failed attempt to save historic St. John's Chapel, and the construction of the Bronx River Parkway—Mason challenges several myths about historic preservation. Against the charge that preservationists were antiquarians concerned only with architecturally significant buildings, Mason instead asserts that many were social reformers interested in recovering the city's collective history. Even more important, he demonstrates that historic preservation in this period, rather than being fundamentally opposed to growth, was integral to modern urban development.

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