

A Brief History Of The White Horse Tavern, NYC's Legendary Literary Watering Hole

by [Paula Mejía](#) in [Food](#) on [Mar 12, 2019, 2:22 pm](#)



The White Horse Tavern, 1961. ([Library of Congress](#)).

The building housing the White Horse Tavern, a historic, no-fuss dive located at 567 Hudson Street in Greenwich Village, has been sold to the notorious landlord Steve Croman, it was reported last week, worrying longtime patrons, locals, and even tourists. Opened in 1880, the bar touts itself as the second-oldest continuously run tavern in New York City, and has the stories to match.

In the mid-20th century, literary luminaries including James Baldwin and Anaïs Nin frequented the watering hole, and Jack Kerouac was a particularly unruly patron. [The Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation](#) notes that Kerouac was ejected from the bar so many times that someone took it upon themselves to carve “JACK GO HOME!” on a bathroom stall. Legend has it that the idea for the Village Voice (RIP) was born over drinks at the bar, known colloquially as “The Horse.” And most famously, the White Horse is where Welsh poet Dylan Thomas swilled his final drinks before his death; his portrait still hangs by his usual seat.

In the 1930s and 1940s, the White Horse garnered a reputation for being a haven for left-leaning denizens, communists, and union organizers, such as the National Maritime Union. The bar cemented its reputation as a bohemian hangout by the fifties, though, when literary figures were known to drink and revel there. Authors including William Styron and Norman Mailer frequented the bar, often holding Sunday afternoon hangouts, partially due to the fact that New Directions publisher James Laughlin had a place nearby, and authors would often stay there when they were in town, as [Bill Morgan notes in his book](#). Musicians also rubbed elbows at the bar, including folk legends Bob Dylan and Mary Travers.

The urban planning activist Jane Jacobs [lived on the same block](#) as the White Horse Tavern, at 555 Hudson Street, between Perry and West 11th Streets (it's since been named Jane Jacobs Way). A regular at the bar, Jacobs immortalized that very strip of the Greenwich Village in her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, describing the unconscious routines and rituals that comprised life there as the "sidewalk ballet."

Jacobs featured the White Horse in her book, too, describing the seamless shift from longshoreman locals drinking there during the day and the literary set commingling in the evening, all the while "a solid wave of conversation and animation surges out and hits you; very warming." The same year that Jacobs published her landmark tome, that block [was in danger of being destroyed](#) —as Berman notes, the contentious city planner Robert Moses and then-Mayor Robert Wagner [wanted to tear down](#) 14 blocks in that area in the name of "[slum clearance](#)."



The block where White Horse currently stands, pictured in a 1940s tax photo. (Courtesy the Municipal Archives)



White Horse Tavern, 567 Hudson Street, 1975. (Photo by Edmund Vincent Gillon, courtesy of [the Museum of the City of New York](#); 2013.3.1.613)

"What's amazing is that the bar is largely physically unchanged from its 20th century heyday, and it continues to be a mecca for visitors from around the world who are interested in its incredible literary history, while at the same time continuing to serve as kind of a neighborhood watering hole in the Village," Berman says.

The bar received a historic landmark designation in 1969, which has helped keep it somewhat intact. On Monday, The Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation [submitted a request](#) to the City's Landmarks Preservation Commission, arguing that the bar's interior should be a landmark as well. But even if that happens, it still won't protect it from becoming an upscale, completely new version of the White Horse we know.

In his letter to the Landmarks Commission, [Berman writes that](#) the bar has functioned as a contemporary salon, where "artists, writers, and intellectuals gathered to talk, argue, pontificate, and share and cross-pollinate ideas."

It's unclear what the new ownership will mean for this bar, though the fact that it's located in the Greenwich Village Historic District means it won't be torn down. "It's very hard to mandate that the character of a business remain the same," Berman says. "There's nothing legally preventing anyone from actually turning it into something that's not even a bar or a tavern at all, although that doesn't sound like it's their intention."

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 **Eric M. H.**  Guest • 3 days ago
I'm surprised there are less than 15 backlinks to other articles.
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 **Lei-Zee**  Guest • 3 days ago
What's the virtue signaling exactly? It is a relatively famous place with an NYC artist history, that is kind of right up Gothamist's alley.
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Lei-Zee → Guest • 3 days ago

All the coverage is overkill, but it isn't virtue signaling. Covering the sale and/or demise of old NYC bars and restaurants isn't anything new for them either.

I guess your issue is with them taking a position on cultural preservation over development? I don't know if I'd call it "virtue signaling" as much as it is just a fairly consistent editorial stance here.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



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Lei-Zee → Guest • 3 days ago

My argument is that not only are you using that term wrong, but that there is nothing unreasonable about being annoyed when someone like Steve Croman takes over something of historical or cultural significance in this city.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



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Lei-Zee → Guest • 3 days ago

When did I say anything about the right opinion? All I said is being unhappy about it isn't unreasonable or phony.

You're right that is is common, sadly common, which is basically the whole premise of the blog that first broke this news:

<http://vanishingnewyork.blo...>

But you're wrong that no one cares about keeping places like this around, it is just usually impractical or impossible to do so.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



American Dreamer Redux → GiuseppeGiorgio • 6 hours ago

What made the White Horse Tavern a magical place decades ago were the literary types and other persons that frequented it. Those people are long gone as Greenwich Village is no longer a Bohemian mecca for intellectuals that it once was as we all know.

Therefore saving this bar and its interior doesn't seem that important to me without the people that frequented it.

Maybe they can set up dummies of famous poets and writers at the bar and sitting at tables!!!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



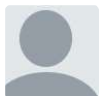
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plinf → Guest • 3 days ago

Ah, imagine to happen upon cynicism in the comment section. There were plenty of people equally upset about CBGBs (as someone who actually went there in the 80s to 16+ shows on Sundays, I can both understand why and be equally flummoxed, as it really was disgusting) and Mars (this, too, was rather unpleasant), but the history, the sheer length of operation, and its strange ability to survive and encourage the mixing of various sets is what makes this place a little more special. It's like Marie's Crisis and Julius', they have survived and are institutions of a kind, and we should respect this. True, New York is not a static city, but we should allow for some nostalgia for a time when artists of all types could actually live and work in a city where now only the truly wealthy can achieve some semblance of comfort.

3 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



getoffmylawn • 3 days ago

How is Croman even allowed to still be in the real estate business with his convictions for ruthless tactics and scammy deals? Much less having the balls to buy such a high profile property. Oh wait...NYC real estate....no real repercussions for abhorrent