

Moving Day: A Forgotten Tradition

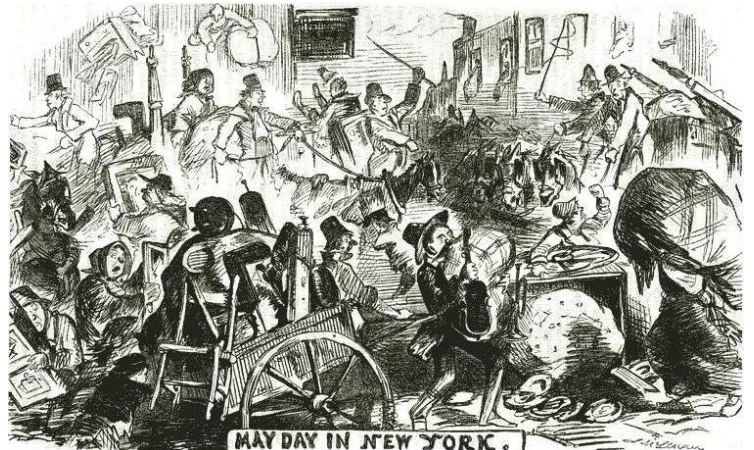
By Jean Luddy

“Moving Day”, the custom of finding a new place to live each year around the first of May, dates back to the colonial era. Primarily a tradition in New York City, Moving Day affected New Yorkers who leased their residences. Each year on February 1st, sometimes referred to as “Rent Day”, landlords notified tenants about the upcoming rent increase which would take effect at the end of the next quarter year. Those choosing not to renew their leases would spend the next few months looking for places that were more affordable or better located. With most of the leases expiring at the same time, the streets of the city on May 1st became filled with people moving their possessions from their old apartment to a different one.

The origins of Moving Day reach back into the earliest of years of the settlement of New York City. Legend has it that May 1st was the day that the settlers from Holland set sail for the New World. Even after the English took control of the city from the Dutch in 1674, years before the American Revolution, adherence to the custom continued.

Before the 19th century when New York was closer to its size during the colonial era, the custom of mass moving on the same day had a moderate impact on street traffic. However, due to industrialization and immigration, the city’s population rose dramatically in the 19th century with the result that Moving Day caused a major disruption throughout the city.

“The streets became clogged with a throng of people trying to get their possessions into their new residences. When the dust of the resulting confusion cleared, New York appeared as if an earthquake just hit: broken dishes, shattered furniture and destroyed houses (old homes were pulled down to make way for the new) were everywhere.”



The custom of a spring moving day was not confined to New York City alone. Articles from the Hartford Courant make reference to the tradition, except in Connecticut, Moving Day was April 1st.

During the school year of 1877-1878, a group of students from Rockville High School published a series of school magazines. These magazines were printed several times during the school year. Written by the students, each issue contained stories, essays, poetry, and articles on local and school news. Area businesses purchased advertisements to fund each magazine. The set of magazines for that year was titled *The R.H.S.*

The following essay, “The First of April”, was written by Leila Loomis Bill, class of 1879. She described Rockville’s version of Moving Day.

“About these days,” as the Almanacs have it, it may not be amiss to note down some of the associations connected with the First of April. We think of it as a day of general migration, in other words a “moving day.” With some this is a day thus annually observed. “Fixed to naught but love of change, “no matter they pitch their tent, the First

of April always finds them ready for a move. This includes only a small class, for people generally look forward to the confusion and uproar of moving with any but joyful anticipation. Many will remain in uncomfortable quarters, and suffer great inconveniences, rather than go through this “sea of trouble.” The day has its comical as well as disagreeable aspects. Houses are turned upside-down and inside-out. Men, women, and children are in great commotion, all bustling about busy as bees, the children in high glee, only wishing the First of April came every year. In and out they go, carrying articles of furniture, till finally, the house being stripped entirely, tables, beds, earthen-



ware and tin-ware all piled pell-mell on the wagon, they are ready for the “grand moving” as it was called in olden times. The mother, with arms full of baby, plants herself on the top of the household goods, while the father and children trudge along on foot. They finally reach their destination, set their effects in order, remain perhaps six months or a year, when they are ready to repeat their experience. Moving has its benefits as well as evils, and first there is the certain knowledge one gains of the amount of old, worthless trumpery there is on hand. As a chair or table loses a leg it carried to the attic, with the idea that “some day it may be of some use to somebody”, but unfortunately that somebody never gets the benefit of it, and article after article

accumulates until moving time comes around. Then there seems to be no end of the trash the attic, cellar and closet contain, and all wonder where it ever came from. Another advantage in moving is the forming of new associations. If one’s surrounding are undesirable, if he is in an unpleasant or unhealthy location, if his neighbors have not been congenial, it is certainly among the greatest of luxuries to be able to make a change.”

Moving Day in New York City lasted into the early 20th century. As time went on, people began to hire professional movers instead of doing everything themselves. Even so, the moving companies were hard pressed to handle the high demand for their services during the time around May 1st. The custom lost momentum when the demands for able bodied men during World War II reduced the labor pool. In addition, the advent of rent control limited the amount that rents could be raised each year which encouraged more people to stay in their apartments. In July 1945, a headline in the New York Times announced “Housing Shortage Erases Moving Day.”

Sources for this article: Information about Moving Day in New York City was found in an online exhibit prepared for the Newman Library at the City University of New York

http://newman.baruch.cuny.edu/digital/2007/moving_day/index.html

The images came from Britannica ImageQuest. Several bound copies of *The R.H.S* are available in the local history collection of the Rockville Public Library. Leila Loomis Bill was born in Rockville in 1861. Her father, Judge Benezet Bill, had his home and office in the building on Park Street that was next to the Rockville Hotel. Leila Bill married lawyer Charles Phelps in 1880. She died at the age of 27 in 1888 and is buried at Grove Hill Cemetery in Rockville. Her father’s home was later moved to Ellington Center when the Sykes Manual Training and High School was built.