



HISTORY

## The Ghosts of Gracie Mansion, Which Zohran Mamdani and Rama Duwaji Now Call Home

“The house has been home to some of the greatest mayors in our city’s history,” Eric Adams tells *Vanity Fair*, “and it truly radiates that energy—and not just because of the ghost that haunts the halls.”

BY ELISE TAYLOR

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Gracie Mansion, official Residence of New York City Mayor, illuminated at Dusk, Yorkville, New York City, New York, USA, September 1968. CIRCA IMAGES/GHI/UNIVERSAL HISTORY ARCHIVE/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP/GETTY IMAGES.

It’s official: **Zohran Mamdani** has a Manhattan zip code. On Monday, the New York City mayor held a press conference to announce that he and his wife, **Rama Duwaji**, moved into Gracie Mansion, the official residence of the New York City mayor. (And, pending a series of allergy shots for hizzoner, a cat will too.)

Mamdani spoke with reverence about the corn yellow house, which has stood on a riverfront plot in Yorkville since 1799. “This is a remarkable home with a remarkable history.... Rama and I intend to strive each day to be the best possible custodians of this beautiful home because we know that we are only its temporary occupants,” he said. After a few minutes, he asked the press if they had any questions. A reporter shouted to ask if he’d met Gracie Mansion’s ghost yet. “Why do people keep talking about the ghost?” He said, both amused and confused. “I haven’t yet met the ghost.”

Some context: When Mamdani confirmed he and Duwaji would move from their one-bedroom apartment in Astoria, Queens, into Gracie Mansion back in December, **Eric Adams**, its previous occupant, had some words of advice. “Beware of the ghost,” he told a **Fox Business** reporter. “It’s a friendly ghost, as long as you’re doing right by the city,” he said. “If you don’t become right by the city, he turns into a poltergeist.”

Technically, Adams should have said *she*. Rumor has it that the ghost has an identity: that of Elizabeth Wolcott.

Elizabeth was the young blue-blooded bride of William Gracie, the son of **Gracie Mansion**'s original owner and namesake, Archibald Gracie, a wealthy Scottish merchant. On July 2, 1813, William and Elizabeth held their wedding celebration on the grounds of the grand New York estate. Yet, according to urban legend, a great tragedy struck—Elizabeth died suddenly that very night. “The festivities were kept up until a late hour. The bride retired with her bridesmaids, and the happy husband was sent to see his young bride—die. She had ruptured a blood vessel. It was a melancholy affair,” author Walter Barrett dramatically wrote in *The Old Merchants of New York City*, a book published in 1863. Barrett was almost definitely sensationalizing—historical records say that Wolcott died in 1819 from apoplexy at the house. But the ghost is just one piece of lore from a 227-year-old house that has a bookshelf full of them.

A young man named Thomas J. Clooney lobbied the city to turn Gracie Mansion into a nightclub. “Nobody ever goes to see Gracie Mansion,” he wrote in a letter to the then-mayor. “My friends and I would like to start at once, with your approval.”

While modern day New Yorkers would consider Gracie Mansion to be located in Yorkville, when it was built in 1799, the neighborhood was called Horn's Hook. In the post-revolutionary era where transportation was limited, Horn's Hook was a country retreat for the burgeoning urban center's wealthiest residents, like an early Newport or Southampton. **John Jacob Astor** had a house there, as did prominent families like the Schermerhorns and the Rikers. With the help of his builder Ezra Weeks, Gracie erected a pale yellow Federal style country house overlooking the East River on 11 acres of land in Horn's Hook. The home quickly became the talk of the town, first for its beauty (it had a handsome Chinese Chippendale porch railing) and second for Weeks' association with a tragedy. That same year, Weeks's brother, Levi, tossed his girlfriend into a well. Weeks was a star witness in the trial, one of the first-ever transcribed in American history. His brother's lawyer? None other than Alexander Hamilton.



Bettmann/Getty Images.

The reception room of Archibald Gracie Mansion is redecorated in 1946 for the O'Dwyer family.



Bettmann/Getty Images.

Mayor Robert Wagner greets Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as he arrived late in the evening July 27 at Gracie Mansion to confer on the racial



Gene Koppock/NY Daily News Archive/Getty Images.

Mayor Ed Koch watching President Jimmy Carter on TV on the porch of Gracie Mansion

But back to the house! Archibald Gracie entertained constantly: Hamilton, General Lafayette, Hamilton, Washington Irving, and Thomas Moore were all guests at the mansion during his ownership. And yes, he threw an over-the-top wedding for his son and Elizabeth—the daughter of the Connecticut governor Oliver Wolcott, who was also the treasury secretary under George Washington. It was considered the social event of the season.

Yet fortunes rise and fall. In April 1823, Gracie put the house up for sale.

The city acquired **Gracie Mansion** in 1896 after its previous owner, Noah Wheaton, died and left the historic home riddled with back taxes. The house was incorporated into an ongoing public land development, Carl Schurz Park. Gracie Mansion became many things over the next 20 or so years: “It actually turned from this merchant class, high-end country home to a public restroom and an ice cream shop at one point, and a storage facility for parks equipment,” **Giulietta Fiore**, executive director of the Historic House Trust of New York City, says. “It was repurposed and utilized for what the city needed at the moment.”



Al Fenn/Getty Images.

A barbecue at Gracie Mansion, August 01, 1964



Jacob A. Riis/Museum of the City of New York/Getty Images.

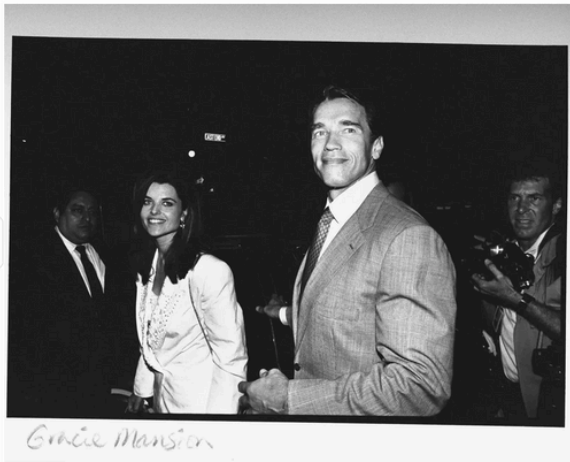
High-angle view of Gracie Mansion, circa 1895

During the Depression era, Gracie got a much-needed remodel thanks to Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration and New York’s ambitious parks commissioner, Robert Moses, decided to turn it into a historic house museum. But it never really gained any popularity due to its then still remote location. FDR Drive hadn’t been finished yet, so the only way to get close was via the mind-numbingly slow crosstown trolley.

That’s not to say that New Yorkers didn’t have ideas on what could be done with this newly renovated home. A young man named Thomas J. Clooney lobbied the city to turn it into a nightclub. “There is no place in Manhattan that offers *us* this entertainment. The movies are the inevitable answers to our dates. After the picture, a soda in an overcrowded ice cream parlor where corner-store roughnecks ruin any atmosphere of pleasantness,” he wrote in a letter to then mayor Fiorello La Guardia, republished in *Gracie Mansion: A Celebration of New York City’s Mayoral Residence*. “Nobody ever goes to see Gracie Mansion. My friends and I would like to start at once, with your approval.”

But Moses had a better idea. Since the 1660s, New York’s mayors had lived in their own homes. Moses, however, believed they should have a more dignified residence. He originally proposed the Charles M. Schwab House, a grand 75-room mansion on the Upper East Side. Perhaps wisely, La Guardia thought that might be a political death wish in those Great Depression days, when so many New Yorkers stood outside in soup lines. But would he consider the beautiful but long neglected landmark of Gracie Mansion?

“Robert Moses saw it and was like, ‘This is an amazing location. Let’s figure out how to create the mayoral residence out of this location, just like some of the other residences of leaders of cities and states in the United States and across the world,’” Fiore says. In 1942—and after another light refresh from the WPA—La Guardia and his family moved in.



Robin Platzer/Getty Images.

Arnold Schwarzenegger with Maria Shriver arriving at a party for Democrat supporters during the week of the Democratic National Convention in July 1992



Walter McBride/Corbis/Getty Images

Robert De Niro pictured at Gracie Mansion in New York City in 1988



Bettmann/Getty Images.

Senator John F. Kennedy sits with mayor Robert Wagner and New York governor Averell Harriman during a reception on the lawn of Gracie Mansion.

The parties (and scandals) really started after the war years with Mayor William “Bill” O’Dwyer. In 1949, New York’s tabloids had a field day when they found out 59-year-old O’Dwyer had been enjoying the company of a much younger lady friend in Gracie Mansion—a 33-year-old model named Sloan Simpson. “From all reports, the mayor and Sloan hit it off right away. The party was at The Palace, which was a trifle warm for all the commotion going on, and O’Dwyer kindly invited everybody up to his place. En route to Gracie Mansion, Sloan rode in his car,” read an October 1949 story in the *New York Daily News*. O’Dwyer and Simpson married a year later. Perhaps wisely considering the fate of William and Elizabeth, they wed in Florida. Although one mayor *did* decide to test the home’s marital luck: **Rudy Giuliani** wed **Judith Nathan** on the Gracie Mansion lawn in May 2003. Then mayor **Michael Bloomberg** officiated, and guests included **Donald Trump** and Henry Kissinger. It had only a slightly better ending than William and Elizabeth: Giuliani and Nathan settled their divorce in 2019.

When Bloomberg became mayor in 2002, he—like all the pre-La Guardia mayors before him—chose to live in his own home, a town house on the Upper East Side. But he *did* call up his longtime interior designer, **Jamie Drake**. Was he up for tackling a much-needed renovation of Gracie Mansion?

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“As is Mike’s way with everything, action started quite quickly,” Drake says, laughing, during a phone call with *Vanity Fair*. Two weeks after his inauguration, he had a meeting with Gracie Mansion Conservancy, the nonprofit in charge of preserving the landmark. “I had to get this done in eight months because the goal of Mike and his team was that we’d be completed on September 11, 2002—the first anniversary of the Trade Center tragedy—as another sign of New York’s resiliency.”

Most of it wasn’t pretty work—like when Drake and his team intended to turn off a plumbing valve for a bathroom that hadn’t been redone since the Lindsey era and somehow ended up turning off water for the whole house. They had to get special permission to shut the water for four hours down all of East End Avenue to fix the problem. There was also a rotting staircase that had become structurally unsound. They left the structure—“that’s important from a historic preservation point of view,” he says—but wove in steel to support it.

Still, there were moments for beauty. “I went about thinking what a grand but still country house this was—and how this was country house style,” he says. Drake went about focusing on styles, tastes, fabrics, and patterns of 1799 to 1810; a special point of pride was the restoration of the Yellow Parlor. He worked with Scalamandre to weave fabrics for the yellow parlor’s curtains and throw pillows. Then, he tracked down a specific shade of yellow called patent yellow.



James Keivom/NY Daily News/Getty Images.

Exterior photo of Gracie Mansion as seen in December 2013



Bettmann/Getty Images.

Seated on the steps of Gracie Mansion, Mayor Wagner chats with Robert Kennedy.

“It is a brilliant, bright, vibrant yellow that was very popular in the late 18th and early 19th century, such as [the one in] the octagon room at Monticello,” Drake explains.



Mayor **Bill de Blasio** and his family, including children **Chiara** and **Dante**, were the first to live in the house that Drake rebuilt. Although, with all due respect to Drake's work, his favorite part of Gracie Mansion was outside, not inside: "My favorite memory is of summer days playing one-on-one soccer with Dante on the huge lawn at Gracie Mansion. To the best of my knowledge, it's literally the last front lawn for any house in Manhattan," de Blasio tells *Vanity Fair*. "I remember chasing after the ball and experiencing rare moments of freedom and reckless abandon, a wonderful respite from the constant stresses of being mayor."

Does he have any advice for the new mayoral couple as they try to make the house their own? "It can feel antiseptic and museum-like, which can be alienating," he admits. "The antidote is to have friends and family over frequently, making full use of the lovely dining room and excellent kitchen staff. Kick back and relax on the beautiful porch in the warmer months, with a chilled bottle of wine."

And now that he's officially packed his bags, Adams also has something more to say about Gracie Mansion and that ghost. "The house has been home to some of the greatest mayors in our city's history," Adams says, "and it truly radiates that energy—and not just because of the ghost that haunts the halls."



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