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## **ARTICLE REPRINT**

**Learning on Foot:  
New York Walking Tours**  
**by Joyce Gold, History Tours of New York**

# Learning on Foot: New York Walking Tours

## by Joyce Gold, History Tours of New York

Up close and personal. That's the charm of walking tours. You're right there, you experience the neighborhood first-hand – but with new eyes.

How about taking your child on a family walking tour? It is a wonderful outdoor activity in which adults and children can participate in a discovery process together. The variety on a tour – buildings, vehicles, shops, street life, and stories about the past – gives multiple opportunities for the guide to relate the information to each individual in a meaningful way.

### Building on a Child's Own Experiences

New York City children know about the “pooper scooper” law for dogs but are amazed to hear about the tons of manure when horses were the engines of transportation. On today's streets children see garbage trucks. But 18th century garbage trucks were pigs and goats, wandering around in all kinds of neighborhoods eating up the scraps and garbage thrown on the ground.

On sidewalks where today's children see hotdogs and fruit for sale, children in earlier times would have heard street cries offering charcoal, milk, sand, matches, and scissors to grind:

Scissors to grind!  
Jingle, jingle goes the bell  
Any razors or scissors  
or penknives to grind!  
I'll engage that my work  
shall be done to your mind.

### Seeing Familiar Things in a Different Way

Everyone knows that St. Patrick's Cathedral is on Fifth Avenue. What they might not know is that in the mid-nineteenth century, most Catholic churches in Manhattan were built far east or far west, to be near the docks where impoverished Irish worked. In a time of great discrimination against them, the vision of the cathedral rising on Fifth Avenue conveyed the pride

of Irish Catholics, and their arrival as an influential constituency in New York.

Many youngsters are familiar with the Manhattan skyline, with high buildings mainly in Downtown and Midtown. What few may realize is that the placement of these tall buildings is also a reflection of the rock formation below ground. Bedrock comes nearer the surface in those two areas.

#### **Different Viewer, Different View**

On a tour, a child will learn that the same site might look different to different viewers. To some, a working class neighborhood is a thriving community of people who care and look out for one another. To others, it's a slum. For example, the West 60s was a Hispanic neighborhood, which some thought worked well. But in the 1950's Robert Moses, the Power Broker, saw it as wasted use of space and razed it to build Lincoln Center.

#### **Connecting Past and Present**

New York was 40 percent foreign-born in 1910. It is over 35 percent foreign-born today. While the ethnicity of the immigrants has changed,

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in many respects the reasons for immigration have not. In 1643 Manhattan residents spoke 18 languages; today residents in Queens County speak over 138 languages. A vehicle tour of Queens can show the great diversity of communities

today – from Greek Astoria, to Little India and Little Mexico in Jackson Heights, to Chinese and Korean Flushing, to Little Bangladesh in Long Island City. A Brooklyn tour can also show great diversity – from Little Pakistan in Midwood, to “Odessa by the Sea” in Brighton Beach. Williamsburg alone is home to three distinct ethnic groups: Poles, Puerto Ricans and Hasidim.

Children who visit Ellis Island walk the corridors through which over twelve million people from all over the world first set foot on American soil. Children sense the bravery of leaving home for a new land and a new life. They can better understand the Statue of Liberty, which greeted immigrants and welcomed them from countries in which they did not always feel welcome.

The connection between past and present is especially vivid at the intersection of Wall and Broad Streets, long a nexus of business and political importance. The wall to defend against a potential British invasion of the Dutch colony was here. When the British defeated the Dutch, the intersection became the site of the British City Hall. At the end of the American Revolution, that City Hall was converted into the first United States capital building and the site of George Washington's inauguration. Federal Hall National Memorial is on the site today, with its majestic steps and huge bronze statue of Washington taking the oath of office. Across the street is the cornerstone of capitalism, the New York Stock Exchange.

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#### **Understanding Time, Change and Sequence**

Time, change and sequence are important concepts that are challenging to convey. On the Lower East Side, one confused youngster asked, “Why did they build the Eldridge Street Synagogue in the middle of Chinatown?” He needed to know that when the synagogue was built, this was a Jewish neighborhood. Asians moved into it only in the last decades.

It is also helpful to point out that older neighborhoods look different from newer ones. One way of distinguishing the two is the pattern of their streets. Preserved in many of the older sections are short, quirky streets first laid down as Indian trails, cow paths, old streambeds and property lines long gone. In 1811, the city chose a design for future development – the now familiar grid plan of numbered streets and avenues.

The city helps protect the past by giving landmark status to neighborhoods with many irreplaceable structures that embody a particular aspect of city history. Today there are 86 such districts in the five boroughs, of which 53 are in Manhattan; 1,144 additional buildings throughout the city are individually designated.

### A Good Tour Engages Children

A good tour taps into the daily lives and thoughts of children. For example, to help a young child understand Grand Central Terminal, a guide might ask, “If you’re going to take a train ride, what might you want for the trip?” To help a child identify with a historical figure, like George Washington, the question might be, “We have just become an independent country, and you’re the first president of the United States. How would you feel? What would you do?”

Children have a unique point of view. They often want to understand how things work, asking such questions as how does the landfill stick to the land, what makes a building stand up, or how do the trains know where to go. For instance, I have noticed children often have a special affinity toward animals. Metropolitan Diary in *The New York Times* had the following example: After years of a father’s taking his son to see the equestrian statue of General

Sherman at the southeast entrance to Central Park, one day the boy asked, “Who’s the guy sitting on Sherman?”

### Choosing the Right Tour

A tour for children is most effective when it is fun and on the appropriate level, takes into consideration their needs and observations, and stimulates their curiosity about the world around them.

Parents might consider a neighborhood or a tour theme that ties into a school project or a particular interest that has captivated their child’s attention – ships, Indians, geography, the American Revolution. Or a child might be studying Colonial New York, the Ethnic City, Women’s History, Family Heritage, or Buildings and Architecture.

Some routes are appropriate for all ages. Dutch and British colonial New York focuses on Lower Manhattan, where the city began. Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty highlight the faith it took to leave the known for the unknown, and might help a child better understand his own family heritage. A Central Park tour includes the purpose of the park, how it came about, and controversies about its function. And all children can relate to the South Street Seaport and the Age of Sail.

Grade school students particularly enjoy exploring Grand Central Terminal. A great train station is a miniature city, and Grand Central has many delights and surprises, including a whispering arch. Young people in middle school and high school enjoy Chinatown, with its vivid colors, inexpensive emporiums, and food sometimes tempting, sometimes off-putting. They also like exploring the Lower East Side with its houses of worship, and perhaps a visit to the Tenement Museum.

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A guided tour in a vehicle is another great way to see the city. Such a tour might include a visit to a variety of Manhattan parks or Revolutionary War sites in both Brooklyn and Manhattan, or an overview of city neighborhoods to understand how each is distinct.

Some considerations that can be decided before the tour begins include whether tasting food might add to the activity, how long the tour should be, what amount of walking would work best, and what to do at the end of the tour – for example, visit a museum, have a picnic, or take a ferry ride.

Short or long, by foot or by vehicle, a guided tour is a great way to share and broaden a child’s experience of New York. It is even possible for a tour to get through to a cynical, world-weary fourth grader. After a tour of Greenwich Village, a young girl in a local independent school summed up her opinion: “It was much, much, much, much better than I thought it would be.”

*Joyce Gold offers group and private historic walking tours of New York City. Joyce Gold History Tours of New York, 212-242-5762, [www.nyctours.com](http://www.nyctours.com).*