New York 2011
QMUL Expedition Fund Report

Student: Jessica McDonald
Department: School of History

This report is in reference to my recent trip to America, part funded by the Ruth Owen travelling scholarship which I gratefully received from the Queen Mary, University of London Expeditions Fund. The aim of my trip was to carry out research for my dissertation, visiting my case study area of New York City. I also hoped to bring my recent studies of American history to life by experiencing the culture first hand.

After arriving at JFK International airport we made our way to the AirTrain, which provides a link between the airport and the city's subway system. We had tried to be as organized as possible and so already had print outs of the subway map and area around our hotel. We were staying at The New York Renaissance Guest House, which was conveniently only a few minutes walk from subway stop 137th St- City College. This stop was on the Seventh Ave line (1,2,3), which ran the length of the city, and so made getting around easy.

For our first evening we decided to go and walk around Times Square. It was just as we had imagined with yellow taxis lining the streets, tourists packed onto the sidewalks and huge billboards rising up the buildings, advertising everything from the latest TV series to cars and sports events. After we'd had our fill of the bright lights we wondered down one of the smaller side streets and found a diner where we enjoyed an American favourite, hamburger and French fries.

The next day we went to The Department of Records and Information Services at 31 Chambers St. Its collections were unified back in 1977, when for the first time in New York's history one department was established to take responsibility for the organization and retrieval of the massive documentation: records, reports and archival documents that had been produced by past and present governments. In 1980, the City Hall Library, Municipal Records Center and the departmental executive and administrative offices moved into their current home at Surrogates Court, Chambers St, a national historic landmark.

For the next few days I sifted through a vast array of photo collections and census records. The documents I discovered were fascinating and provided invaluable primary source material for my dissertation on New York City peddlers between 1880-1940. However, it was in fact the people who worked there who made the trip. Always more than willing to help and chat, their local knowledge of the city was immensely helpful and from our discussions I discovered Hester Street situated in the Lower East Side had been a popular spot for peddlers and that to this day an open air market still resides there. It was amazing to be able to view the photos of Hester Street from the 1930s and then
go to the place itself. Such an experience really brought to life my project and was one of my highlights of the whole trip.

After all the research was done we set about exploring the city once more. First stop was Central Park and like most things in New York, it was huge. Initially opened in 1857 and then expanded in 1873, the park represents the first landscaped public park in the whole of the United States and is an impressive 843 acres. It houses a Zoo, a reservoir, lakes, ponds and of course plenty of baseball fields. Walking around we quickly forgot that we were in the centre of a city with a bustling population of over 8.3 million. With the gorgeous lakes, wooded areas, open fields and the city sounds mostly blocked out it was easy to see why the park attracts over 35 million visitors annually.

After all the walking in the park we decided the following day to rest our legs and take a boat trip around the lower area of the city. We used the Circle-line sightseeing company based at 42nd Street and our guide was amazing. Highlights of the cruise included great views of the Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island, the United Nations, Brooklyn Bridge and the Empire State and Chrysler buildings. Seeing Ellis Island, which operated as an immigration-processing centre from 1892 to 1954 and through which over twelve million immigrants entered the United States, was fascinating. It really brought all the facts and figures, which I had been researching for my dissertation on immigrants and their connection to the occupation of peddling to life.

After viewing the Empire State building from a far we decided it was time to venture inside it. The building is a fabulous 102-storey art deco skyscraper which first opened in 1931. After an incredibly fast elevator ride to the top we stepped out to view New York from one of the cities best vantage points and we were not disappointed, the view was amazing. After taking rather a lot of photos we headed back down to street level and made our way up to the Natural History Museum, one of the largest in the world. It had on display an impressive collection of items ranging from a huge assortment of habitat dioramas, to a vast Blue whale model that hung from the ceiling in the Ocean Life room. However, for us our highlight was the Hayden Sphere Star Theater. After taking your seat inside a large dome you are delighted with a high-resolution video which surrounds you from all sides and takes you on a trip through space using scientific visualization of current astrophysical data, narrated, oddly, by Whoopi Goldberg. Even so the experience was awe inspiring, even if it did leave you feeling a little dizzy.

That said while all the tourist attractions were interesting, I feel we saw the real New York through just walking around the city, map in hand, just in case we got completely lost. There was nothing more exciting than discovering an interesting looking building, a small market or stumbling across a Jazz Band playing in the park. I would like to thank the Expeditions Fund again for supporting my trip and enabling me the chance to visit and study in a city as impressive as New York. The trip has really helped expand my knowledge and understanding of New York City and this, along with the primary source material I was able to access has been an invaluable resource to my project.