

# THE GREATEST BACHELOR PARTY ON EARTH?

Police Raid of High Society Revelry Exemplifies Changes in Gilded Age Dining and Culture

Claire Stewart



Ashea Wabe, who performed under the name Little Egypt, in a photo by Benjamin Falk (*Wikimedia Commons*).

On December 19, 1896, Herbert Barnum Seeley hosted a raucous bachelor party for his brother Clinton; an affair that came to be known as “the awful Seeley dinner.” The ensuing scandal, set at Sherry’s, a fashionable Gilded Age restaurant, would make the brothers as famous as their grandfather, showman P.T. Barnum.

The players in the affair included a police captain dubbed “Whiskers” Chapman and a belly dancer called “Little Egypt,” who reportedly leapt naked out of a whipped cream pie and was known for performing in her “altogether.”

In 1896 New York City was in the grips of social reform, and it was not unusual for the police to be informed if an event suspected to fuel “immoral behavior” was in the works. Such a tip spurred the raid on Sherry’s, setting the controversy in motion.

Whiskers Chapman confused the door to the banquet room with that of a dressing room, and when his crew burst in on a fleet of dancers disrobing, mayhem

ensued. There was no sign of the legendary Little Egypt, no apparent evidence of licentious behavior, and the police soon left.

The Seeleys protested this invasion of a private function, and so began an enormous hullabaloo that embodied two popular opposing sentiments of the era: the high-mindedness of an administration built on the ideal of staunch morality at odds with public outcry for privacy and accusations of police and governmental hypocrisy.

Soon courtrooms overflowed with exotic dancers, restaurant staff, and dinner guests, all called to give testimony. The public delighted in the mingling of members of high and low society, seemingly aligned in their outrage over the intrusive tactics of the authorities. Never mind that Little Egypt had been stowed in a closet, and when the police left, she danced her signature “couche couchee” number on top of a table. The Seeleys, nonetheless, took the line that their honor had been wounded. Showgirls and waiters, called as witnesses, sat in a packed courtroom next to starchy society members. This “mixing” of classes was

a media spectacle, and mirrored the changing dining habits of an increasingly egalitarian Gilded Age New York.

## **Dining Out in Late Nineteenth-Century New York**

Sherry's was an expensive and exclusive catering venue, and was known for discretion at a time when the act of dining outside private homes was a relatively new practice. In the mid-1800s, the opulent mansions of New York's privileged teemed with debutante balls and society weddings, all catered by in-house chefs, often fresh from royal European estates. For the elite, who possessed vast drawing rooms and sumptuous ballrooms of their own, there was little allure in dining in public venues. Yet society by the end of the nineteenth century was in the midst of an enormous social and economic shift, and appearing in "public" was becoming increasingly normalized for the privileged class.



The dining room at Sherry's in 1898. (*Courtesy Hathi Trust*)

One new notable cultural development was that of women socializing outside the home, which corresponded with the rise of “commercialized” entertainment. The newly built Central Park, with its promenades and vistas, coupled with an expanding transit system, served to invite women into the street. Luxury hotels, too, entreated women to dine in their tearooms, adding yet another factor that pulled women out of their homes, something formerly not prudent for respectable females. As women pushed out into the public, men found refuge in their newly

formed male-only private clubs (Dunlop 169). These clubs, bastions of old money and educated privilege, would soon be at the center of debate.

Another seismic change in the United States, with especial effect on New York City, was the steady influx of immigrants. In 1865, 43 percent of New Yorkers were foreign-born, rising from an already high 36 percent in 1845 (Homburger 182). These immigrants quickly set about climbing the ladder of opportunity. In a new country, with no one to say otherwise, money, in place of “breeding,” was enough to allow entry into formerly restricted social domains. For the members of the old guard, intent on closing ranks and preserving their superiority, there was fear that these so-called undesirables would gain admittance to their alliance.

It was believed that young wealthy women in particular needed to be protected from fortune hunters, and unverified newcomers with no ties to established society were a threat to the social order. Previously, social habit kept diners at home, where there was little threat that a gullible heiress, for instance, could come in contact with an imposter or

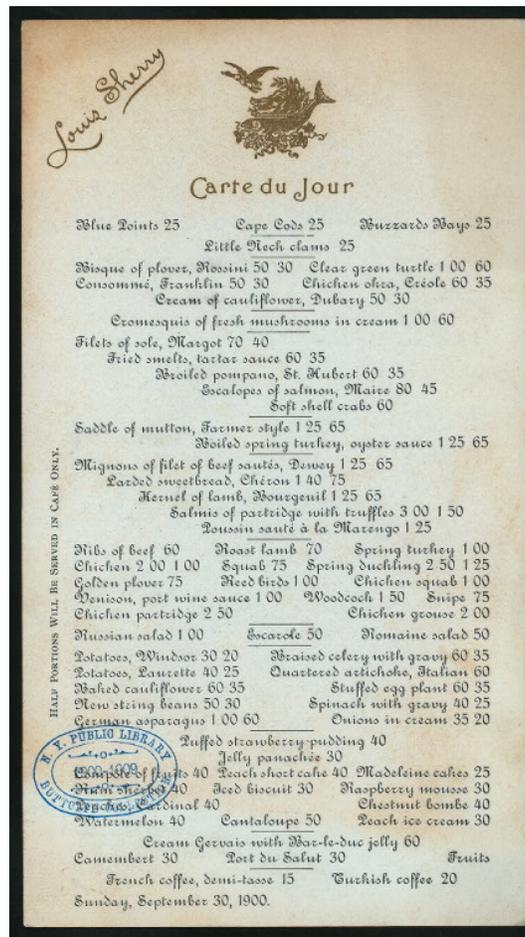
someone of lesser social rank. Dining quietly in private homes with a select and standardized roster of players was a far cry from cavorting in rented public ballrooms (Montgomery 2).

More and more mansions and luxury hotels were being put up as the number of freshly made millionaires swelled. This infusion of new wealth stemmed from railroads, mining, and construction, and New York City was a hub of commerce. There were fewer than twenty millionaires in the entire U.S. in 1840, yet over 4,000 millionaires by 1890 (Root 321). These scores of newly rich were eager to display their prosperity, and being seen at high-priced restaurants was one way to achieve social mobility. Yet, opulent dining and ballrooms had become central to the identity of the old rich, and their members were not keen on integration. There needed to be ways to “sort” the old money from the new, and food was a method through which to do that.

For one thing, gourmet menus could be difficult to navigate, and negotiating them could perhaps embarrass a person unsure of a menu’s wording,

pronunciations, or meanings. Menus written entirely in French especially served to make those outside the old social circles “uncomfortable” (Smith 238). So too did nonsensical names of dishes, named in ode to foreign locations or as tribute to opera singers or other cultural icons. Understanding what exactly was Sauce Veronique, Angels on Horseback, Oeufs Georgette, and Chartreuse was a challenge for the uninitiated.

In *Where and How to Dine in New York* (1903) the reader is reminded that Delmonico’s was “the home of politeness and reserve—a place where the initiated alone are at ease” (Lewis, Scribner 121). The same text notes that Sherry’s is “in reality a private club with membership limited by refinement and wealth” (Lewis, Scribner 126). The socially ambitious were intimidated by complicated menus and equally unsure of which fork to use. Yet they were also resolute, and ready to be educated. Enter a raft of instruction manuals, many bestsellers, which covered every aspect of dining and social interaction.



A daily menu from Sherry's, dated 1900. (*The Buttolph Collection of Menus, The New York Public Library Digital Collections* (<http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47db-54d1-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>).

These etiquette guides stressed the appearance of good breeding, and taught how dangerous it was to be considered “vulgar.” They also warned that table manners could reveal social rank. In 1866 etiquette

expert Arthur Martine wrote, “A man may pass muster by dressing well and may sustain himself tolerably in conversation” but “dinner will betray him” (Martine 67). In addition to incomprehensible menus, a dizzying array of silverware and complicated table settings could flummox all but the most schooled in haute cuisine and its corresponding etiquette. Etiquette guides took care to advise the ambitious of how they could break into a new social class, how to marry “up,” and most importantly, how to not betray one’s origins by behaving improperly at the dining table. Yet for figures like the Seeleys, secure in their social rank, moneyed, and unaffected by pesky reform measures, dining in New York’s posh restaurants was mundane.

Prior to the infamous Seeley dinner party, the luxurious Delmonico’s restaurant had long been hosting soirees for the affluent of New York. This trend was fueled in 1870, when Archibald Gracie King hosted his eldest daughter’s coming out ball at Delmonico’s. All 800 guests fit within its tony walls, a feat which would have strained even the largest of Fifth Avenue mansions. As William Grimes noted, Delmonico’s was a “social gatekeeper” for the “best” of

society (Grimes 102). Yet Louis Sherry, a young crafty restaurateur, knew there was plenty enough capital to go around, and he built Sherry's, a swanky new competitor to Delmonico's. It soon became the "it" place for the younger crowd in the late 1890s.

The staid Delmonico's held fast to the ways of an earlier, more stratified society. Even with doors wide open, married couples could not eat together in their private dining room without a chaperone. This "prudishness" allowed newer, more flexible restaurant managers to fill the void, and stag dinners for the elite were a profitable revenue stream. Delmonico's predictably refused to book the Seeley party. So the Seeleys went to Sherry's, which was already in vogue with the younger set (Root 340).

Meanwhile, lobster palaces had arrived; those boisterous, opulent dining halls that seemed to embrace everyone, even the elite intent on "slumming" for the night. Compared to the stolid society dining institutions, lobster palaces had an air of being relaxed and nonjudgmental. The gaudy new dining halls featured all manner of live entertainment and late-

night meals, with floor shows and plenty of spectacle (Smith 348). At Delmonico's, one "dined with heiresses." Lobster palaces, considered vulgar to the establishment, were a place where it was acceptable to "dine with chorus girls" (Root 340).

In the 1890s there was a growing sense that moral decay was settling on the city, a metropolis seething with immigrants and newly arrived rural transplants. Alcohol consumption obliged as an easy scapegoat, and gave reformers a tangible target on which to concentrate their efforts. Existing legislation from 1857 was revamped repeatedly, and by 1895 "Sober Sunday" laws were in effect. Hotels were still permitted to sell drinks to guests in their dining rooms, and private clubs were excluded. Thus, prosperous out-of-towners and club-going gentlemen could drink all they wanted on Sundays. For many New Yorkers, however, Sunday was their only day off work, and they were furious to be denied their due (Zacks 111).

And so, as ever, inventive entrepreneurs found loopholes. Saloons were swiftly converted to "hotels," as teeny makeshift bedrooms arose from the

backrooms of bars, and bartenders hastily threw tablecloths over pool tables to create “dining rooms” (Zacks 257). Now they could serve liquor on Sundays!

A fleet of newly rich social climbers clamored to be admitted into high society, and in turn were followed by those of lesser means who emulated them. This time of great new social mobility played out across the public dining rooms of the city, yet was complicated by an increasing fervor for social reform.

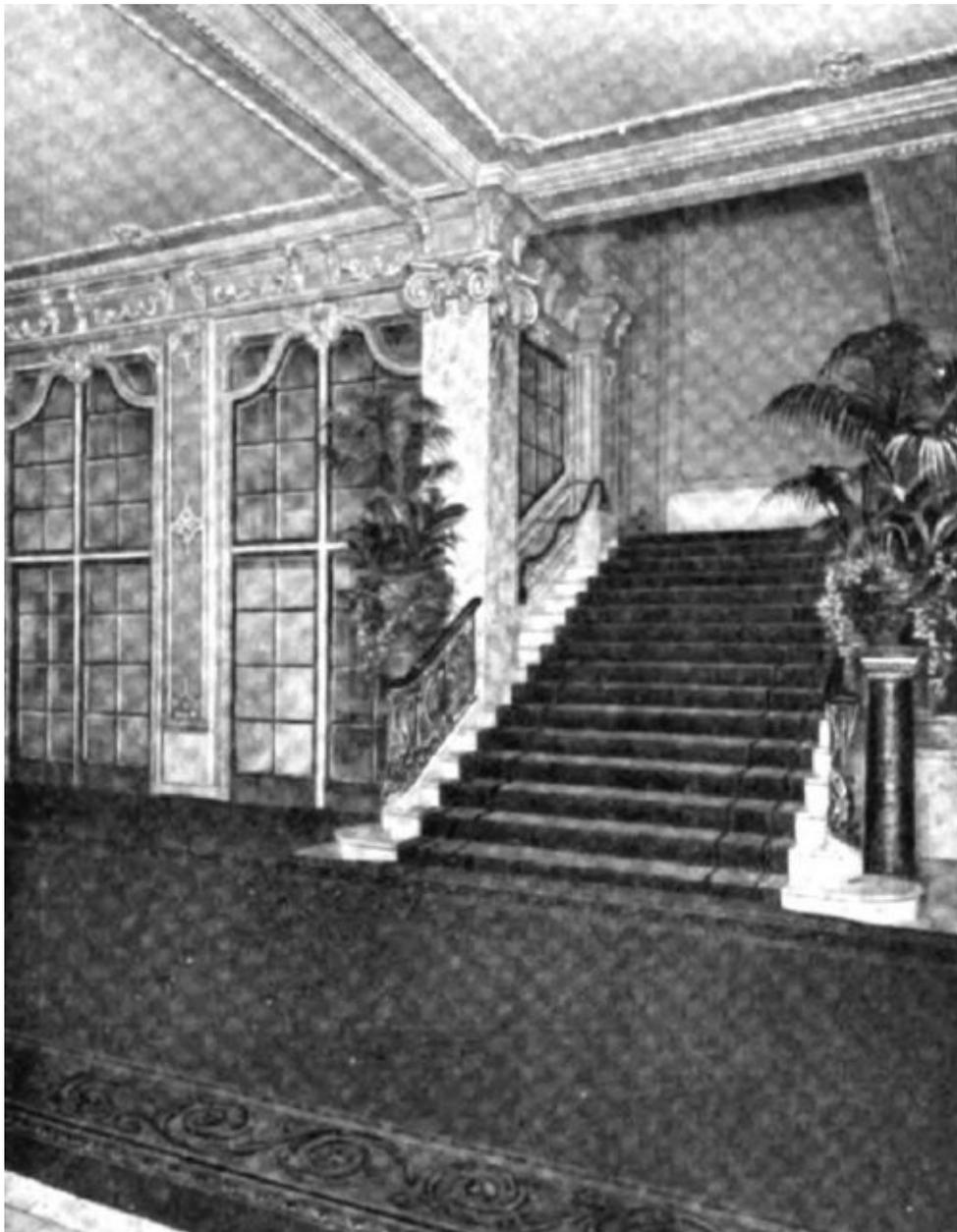
The spirit of reform served as a way to address the lingering unease of the establishment. This unease was fed by several factors, most especially the effect of massive immigration and the influx of “new” money. The arrival of women in the public sphere was monumental too. At the turn of the 20th century, it was the norm for luxury hotels to provide separate dining areas for men and women. Respectable women indeed now appeared in public fine dining rooms, but when and how they dined was regulated by social mores. And food, something related to the baser needs of humans, occupied a peculiar place in the psyche of Victorian Americans.

Vegetables, like meat, were regarded as particularly alarming, and needed to be manipulated in order to be insulated from their earthiness. 1876's *Practical Cooking and Dinner Giving* cookbook, for example, advised that carrots be cooked for an hour and a half. The same recipe recommended carrots be cut into the shape of a ball or a pear, and perhaps shaped into more elaborate designs with a tin cutter. Turnips, the guide tells us, were best cut into "parallelograms" (Henderson 197).

The new fashion for dining "à la Russe" (rather than à la Française) also lent itself to tender Victorian sensibilities. Rather than the previous method of placing all the courses on the table at once, now fussy individual courses emerged from the kitchen at intervals. Hence, no sensitive diner could be assaulted by the indignity of an ungainly platter or cut of meat. *As Modern Etiquette in Public and Private* (1887) stated, eyes were no longer "disgusted by the sight of large joints, the attention not distracted by the troubles of carving; all the disagreeable elements of a meal spirited away, and only the ethereal ones left" (Warne 25).

## The Awful Seeley Dinner

Dining venues of this era featured enormous floral arrangements, ornate themed rooms, mind-boggling decor, expensive party favors, and costumed waitstaff. Spectacle was everywhere, and if dispensed correctly, an indicator of status. Under these conditions, Herbert Seeley set about planning a memorable bachelor party for his brother Clinton.



The hall at Sherry's in 1904, in a photograph published in the *Architectural Record*. (Courtesy Hathi Trust)

Yet apparently, attention to décor was not all that was demanded at the dinner parties of some gentlemen of the Gilded Age. An oppressive and tightly controlled social code led to an inevitable desire to break loose,

and certain personalities of 1896 were up for any manner of illicit entertainment. For their private parties, brandy and cigars after dinner did not suffice. For these parties, ever-titillating professional performers were employed, hailing from legitimate theater companies, from vaudeville, and from the “nether world” (Dunlop 170). The cruder entertainments were outrageous, and included human sex shows, animals copulating, and staged fights between baited caged animals (Dunlop 171).

It was in this vein that Herbert Seeley set about procuring an eighteen-year-old dancer and “arranged it so her tights would fall off while dancing” (Dunlop 171). In testimony, Seeley would later state that he was indeed looking to book amusement, not going to “Sunday school.” And yes, he had wanted to book an act “with some ginger in it.” (Dunlop 179). This “ginger” would arrive in the form of multiple dancers, whose dress straps would be literally snipped off with scissors (presumably provided by the host) by the pawing party guests.

That a raid of Sherry's was called at all can be traced to the testimony of a theatrical agent representing a young dancer who had been interviewed in order to perform at the stag party. The agent, upon learning what exactly was being requested that night, was so scandalized that he went directly to police headquarters to lodge a complaint. And yet this agent was also the dancer's stepfather, and it would seem for \$10 more he would have not been at all scandalized.

In statements, the manager of Sherry's was "highly indignant" that his venerable workplace was under suspicion, and declared that there had never been a "breath of scandal" associated with the restaurant (*New York Times*, Dec 22, 1896). This was true, but seemingly not because Sherry's customers were of high morality, but because of the secrecy of this particular social sphere, as well as the discretion demanded of staff.

Following the raid, Herbert Barnum Seeley was summoned to police headquarters to give his account of the evening, and despite assuring the authorities that nothing untoward had occurred, proceeded to

reel off the names and addresses of his twenty prominent guests. Prior to this confession, police were unable to divine who exactly was at the affair and had not interviewed any attendees at all, only staff. It was here that Seeley violated the unwritten code of the era. As one researcher wrote, “bachelor life had but two rules; wear evening dress and keep mum.” Chatter of the Seeley dinner, splashed on the cover of newspapers for weeks, violated this code, and brought “the bachelor world of the late 1890s into public view for the very first time” (Dunlop 171). The act of making private life “public,” especially for the cossetted elite, signified a new assertiveness in the way the media portrayed the privileged. Public sentiment, initially sympathetic to the Seeleys’ violation of privacy, soon shifted to disapproval. Yet the public was also titillated by the tale, eager for details of exotic dancers and a ten-course meal served in a very expensive Fifth Avenue palace in which most readers could only dream of dining.

The trial was unique in that all levels of society mingled together at a time when the wealthy and the so-called lower classes were rarely attendant at the same

occasions. This standard was changing, however, and the Seeley trial presented a perfect storm of an era in flux. Court proceedings featured a “motley crowd” of onlookers. As the *New York Times* noted, they included the “fashionable man about town and the man who goes to court to keep warm” (January 8, 1897). One newspaper called the courthouse inhabitants “dandies, degenerates, and patrons of the ballet” (Dunlop 177).

Not one member of the Seeley dinner party ever spoke publically about what really happened at what was to become labeled the “Awful Seeley Dinner” (Dunlop 191). Herbert Seeley may have blabbed about who his guests were, but not a single one of those guests spoke publically about what transpired.

Little Egypt died of gas asphyxiation alone in her apartment in 1908, twelve years after the Seeley dinner. Little Egypt (called Asheia Wabe but born Catherine Devine) invested in real estate, owned a dance troupe, and was a shrewd businesswoman. She owned a “fine summer home” in Nova Scotia, numerous real estate holdings, and at her death had a

bank balance of \$30,000 (*New York Times* January 2, 1908). Her celebrity (and salary) skyrocketed after the dinner. She died a woman of means, yet one with a secret Yale-educated banker husband who never publically acknowledged their marriage (he did swoop in, however, when her estate was revealed). It is telling that the story of Little Egypt further serves as an example of the duality of the shifting class system at play at the turn of the century. Little Egypt was wealthy in her own right, but not considered marriage material for a cultured gentleman.

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Reporters told various conflicting versions of the dinner at Sherry's and their newspaper accounts offer a dizzying array of contradictions. Researcher M.H. Dunlop notes that this disparity has to do with a cultural inability to use specific language that could have accurately described the dinner. Language in

1896 was meant to be delicate, and it was a special challenge for writers to recount graphic court testimony. Euphemisms, such as “in the altogether” would have to do. Women were ultimately banned from the courtroom, but nonetheless, a lack of “publically usable language” strained the imaginations of witnesses who were “unable to even name body parts” when asked to describe the movement of the dancers accused of obscenity (Dunlop 178).

Further confusion lies with the lineage of the Seeley brothers. Some newspaper accounts claimed the men were nephews, not grandsons, of the circus man P.T. Barnum. Their mother, Pauline, was in fact P.T. Barnum’s daughter. P.T. had four daughters, and frustrated with the lack of a male heir, left an extra enticement in his will should Clinton forever use the Barnum name (Herbert had long been recognized as a goodtime guy not to be trusted with a fortune).

Another cause of confusion was that there were several dancers who used the moniker Little Egypt, and it became a sort of shorthand for “exotic dancer” in this era. According to newspaper accounts and a later

obituary, it seems Ashea Wabe was indeed the Little Egypt of Seeley fame. But other personalities, too, would claim the distinction, muddying the details.

Clinton Barnum Seeley, guest of honor at his stag party, married Florence Tuttle just a week later and lived a long life as a respectable Connecticut banker and “city benefactor.” The couple were married for sixty-one years until Florence’s death a year before Clinton’s.

Herbert Seeley had a less industrious life and spent years trying to get out from under a trust established in order to protect the fortune left him by his grandfather. He had a fondness for gambling, and when he died at forty-three, his obituary stated he had an “alert mind and lack of self-control” ([barnum.org/nti04117.htm](http://barnum.org/nti04117.htm)).

Sherry’s would serve as a go-to for New York’s affluent until the threat of Prohibition, along with changing fashion, caused the doors to close in 1919. Just prior to Prohibition taking effect, Louis Sherry’s \$250,000 stockpile of vintage wines was transferred to the vaults of the Waldorf Astoria. Sherry showed his

appreciation to select loyal customers by providing them with private keys to the wine vault. Sherry would go on to run a high-end chocolate shop, cater in conjunction with the Waldorf Astoria, and negotiate a corporate merger that would eventually see that his name was included in the designation of the opulent Sherry-Netherland Hotel. Louis Sherry died in 1926.

The controversy over the Seeley bachelor dinner party was rooted in the fact that New York culture was undergoing tremendous change. Unspoken tensions concerning a great wave of immigration, an influx of wealth, and new patterns of living and dining all lay beneath the exaggerated response to a party that got out of hand. The dinner party at Sherry's, and its repercussions, can serve as a mirror for what was occurring in greater society in 1896.

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