

Art Signs Challenge 'History'

By Melissa Tarkington
STAFF WRITER

At the corner of William and Fulton Streets next week, passersby will be greeted by a sign welcoming them to "Gotham City." Washington Irving, the sign reads, once gave New York City this nickname after an English village whose residents practiced tax evasion by running around acting demented.

Is this history?

You decide, say artists who designed this sign and 35 others denoting infamous or little-known facts about city history as part of the Lower Manhattan Sign Project, which will be officially opened in Battery Park tomorrow. The 18-by-24-inch metal signs are being placed on lamp-posts primarily in the financial district along South Street Seaport, the World Trade Center, Battery Park and near the Liberty Island ferry landing in lower Manhattan.

This collection of artwork, which offers an alternative, multi-ethnic view of history, is the result of three years of research, permit-gathering and historical verification by about 60 artists, performers, writers and teachers.

"We wanted to examine and question the way history was written in a public art project," said Lisa Maya Knauer, a participating artist. "We wanted to see what kind of relationship Lower Manhattan had with history — its ties to the past and then offer our findings in an objective, scientific way."

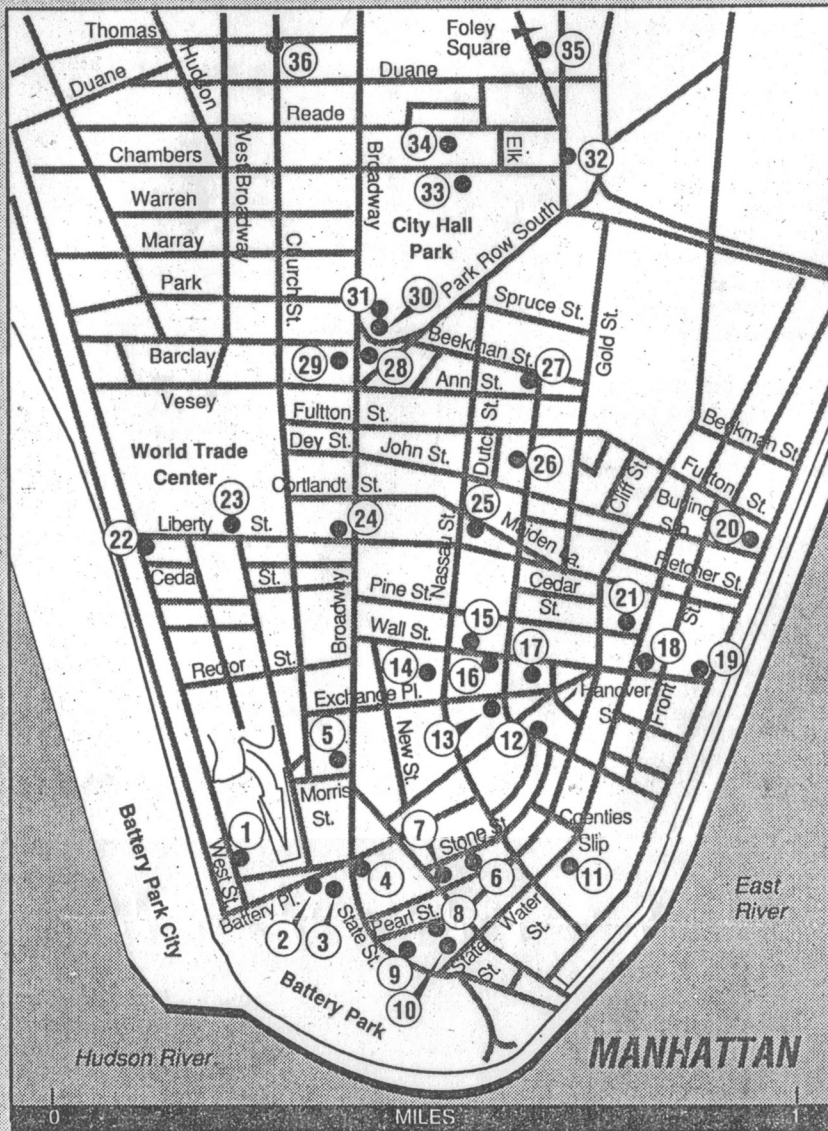
Through words and pictures, the signs will broach such subjects as epidemics, racial and sexual equality, the slave trade, subway fires, international health care, the "inequality of the U.S. Senate," New York's Chinese community and exploitation in boxing, among others.

"Each sign has a series of questions that addresses the viewer and directly engages that person," said Alan Michelson, who researched John Jacob Astor and fur trade. "We want people to think of the place they are in — we hope everyone is going to see a different thing."

The themes and locations of all the signs.

1. Potter's Field/Ellis Island
2. Indian Giver or When Will America Be Discovered?
3. Great Negro Plot of 1741
4. Leisler's Rebellion
5. Bullet made from Statue of King George
6. Homelessness: Forgotten Histories
7. Whitehall Street Induction Center
8. Origin of Pearl Street
9. Nelson Mandela's visit to NYC
10. Origin of the Word Indian
11. Indian Settlement Sites
12. India House
13. The Other J.P. Morgan
14. Stock Market Crash
15. False Democracy: Inequality of the U.S. Senate
16. Subway Fire
17. Insurance and National Health Care
18. Meal Market/Slave Trade
19. Rose Schneiderman: Union Activist
20. Chinese Community in NYC
21. Jacob Astor and Native Americans
22. The Story of the Waterfront
23. Madame Restell and Anthony Comstock
24. Office Workers Eat Their Lunch
25. What's in a Name?
26. Gotham City
27. Epidemics
28. Frances Wright: Facial and Sexual Equality
29. Vito Marcantonio: Radical Congressman
30. Civil Defense Drill Arrests 1950s
31. Boxing and Exploitation
32. Forlorn Hope/Debtor's Jail
33. The First Alms House
34. Negroes' Burial Ground/The City Limits
35. Smith Act Trials
36. United Tailoresses Society

The Lower Manhattan Sign Project



Newsday / Richard Cornett

Tom Klem, who designated homelessness as forgotten history on his sign, said he hopes the project prompts analytical thinking. "Perhaps someone will just read the questions, stop and think. Everyone could

see completely different things. We've given a lot of thought to how the public will interpret this project."

Greg Sholette, who created a sign titled "The Other J.P. Morgan," said they expected mixed reactions for challenging conventional "correct" history. "Any questioning of history is seen as threatening to so many people that we are expecting to get some backlash," he said, "and if this is seen as a liberal attack, it won't be effective at all."

Knauer said the project was initially planned as guerrilla art because they expected strong opposition and censorship.

"We thought we would be going out in the dead of night to do it," she said. "We thought we would be prevented from doing it directly."

The project, however, has received approval from The New York Historical Society and funding from the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council and the Andy Warhol Foundation, among others. None of the organizations attempted to censor their work, Knauer said. "We believe in a full range of voices being heard — so much about history has not been shared," said Erika Sanger, coordinator of pub-

lic programs at the New York Historical Society. However, Sanger said the historical society at first was skeptical about the project's authenticity.

"There were actually some historical questions," Sanger said. "I had my doubts, but I went through and researched questions with one of the artists and the artist proved me wrong."

The artists view themselves as creators of an original project.

"What makes our project different," Michelson said, "is that we have gone out and done a marker project and also that we are focusing on social history. There is almost nothing marking social history in this city."

The project is a combination walking tour and public art viewing and will run through December 27, 1992. The opening begins at 2 p.m. at Castle Clinton in Battery Park tomorrow. The artists are scheduled to lead the first walking tour from 3:30 p.m. until 5 p.m.

Maps of the walking tour are free and may be picked up at the visitors information booth at the World Trade Center.



Newsday / Jon Naso

Artists Lisa Maya Knauer, Todd Ayong, Alan Michelson and Tess Timoney with a sign by Michelson entitled "John Jacob Astor and Native Americans."