



Unexpected Riches in Two Lower Manhattan Museums

By [FRANCIS MORRONE](#) | September 4, 2008

The Financial District has in recent years become home to a number of specialty museums. In 1994, the George Gustav Heye Center of the National Museum of the American Indian opened in the former [United States](#) Custom House at Bowling Green. The Skyscraper Museum, founded in 1997, had rather a nomadic existence until 2004, when it settled down into the mixed-use building that contains the [Ritz-Carlton Hotel](#) at the southern end of Battery Park City.

I'll write about those outstanding museums in a future column. This week I'd like to focus on two others.

The Museum of American Financial History was founded in 1988. In January of this year the museum moved from its longtime home at 26 Broadway, in the former Standard Oil Building, to 48 Wall St., the former Bank of New York Building, at the northeast corner of William Street.

The 32-story building rose in 1927-29. Benjamin Wistar Morris designed it as the headquarters of New York's oldest bank, founded in 1784. The best thing about the building has always been its outstanding double-height second-story banking room. One ascends via a gracefully curved "flying" double stair to the Georgian Revival room with its Adamesque ceiling reliefs and moldings, and arcade piers articulated by marble Ionic pilasters.

Best of all are the eight arched murals on the history of the commercial and industrial development of [New York City](#). From 1928, these were painted by J. Monroe Hewlett, an architect and muralist who made the cartoons for the Sky Ceiling of Grand Central Terminal, designed the exquisitely ornamented Masonic Temple in Fort Greene, [Brooklyn](#), and was the father-in-law of Buckminster Fuller. The museum does an excellent job of highlighting and explaining these murals, which became a de facto part of the collection when the museum took a 20-year lease in this building.

And the collection is wonderful. The history of banking and finance is visually very rich in ways you may not at first imagine. But immediately up the stairs my eye alighted on a beautiful Brunsviga-Midget "System Trinks" calculator that was used by Isidor Sacks, the comptroller of Lehman Brothers between 1928 and 1959. No date is given for the calculator, but my guess is it's from the 1920s. Brunsviga was Europe's leading manufacturer of calculating machines in the era when office equipment was beautiful.

There are also improbably gorgeous cast-metal cash registers. A nickel-plated NCR model is dated circa 1908-20 and was used in candy stores, restaurants, and dry-goods stores. A heftier and more elaborate brass NCR machine, circa 1908-16, was made specifically for department stores. Again, one is reminded and stunned by how beautiful these things once were.

The other especially visually pleasing things a financial museum has to offer are stock and bond certificates. I especially like the railroad bond certificates imprinted with detailed pictures of trains.

The museum has a Bloomberg Terminal, a 1920 Smith-Corona typewriter, a marvelous circa-1930 Teletype "Black Box" stock ticker that one can just see Eugene Pallette bending over in a 1930s screwball comedy, Fortune magazine covers, and all manner of exhibit cases explaining various financial operations.

The museum also displays what it says is the earliest photograph of [Wall Street](#). It looks west toward Trinity Church from, it is said, a ship's deck. I'd like to see some documentation. The picture is undated, but the tower of Trinity Church is the present one, so at the earliest it would be 1845, and I wonder that someone did not photograph Wall Street before that. Still, it's a wonderful picture, with the omnibuses plying the disheveled roadbed.

The New York City Police Museum opened in 2000 at 26 Broadway. In 2002, the museum relocated to 100 Old Slip, the former 1st Precinct police station, between Front and South streets.

Like cash registers, police stations used to be beautiful. The Renaissance palazzo-style building with rusticated limestone walls dates from 1909-11 and was designed by Hunt & Hunt. Its interiors, alas, are rather plain, except as enlivened by the museum's collections.

Three floors relate the history and present operations of the police force that was founded in 1845. On the third floor you'll learn all about present policing, and you'll leave with no doubt about the differences among Operation Impact, Operation Atlas, and Operation Nexus. There are also many mementoes of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. One example that I

found deeply moving is the charred belt, holster, and handcuffs of Officer Moira Smith, who died on that day.

For visual interest, there are vintage uniforms (the 1940 "Choaker" is quite stylish), telegraph equipment, teletype machines, saddles, motorcycles, bicycles, and a 1972 Plymouth Fury radio patrol car, remarkably handsome in green and black.

There's a hazmat suit as well as a bomb squad robot, and there are photographs of every police commissioner since 1901 (Michael Murphy), when the present administrative system went into effect. The only photo to appear twice is [Ray Kelly's](#).

Don't miss the mug shots, and especially don't miss the guns and handcuffs. A circa-1850 flintlock pistol seems straight out of "Gangs of New York," while a 1910 pair of handcuffs has a distinctly Art Nouveau design.

My sole complaint about the two museums is the overreliance on audio and video. These certainly have their place, but it's gotten to the point where every specialty museum has an omnipresent nerve-rattling cacophony.

But these museums prove that visual riches may be found in unexpected places.

<http://www.nysun.com/arts/unexpected-riches-in-two-lower-manhattan-museums/85127/>