



CARDOZO

Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law

LARC @ Cardozo Law

---

Library Staff Online Publications

Cardozo Law Library

---

8-31-2021

## Researching the History of 55 Fifth Avenue

Ingrid Mattson

*Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://larc.cardozo.yu.edu/staff-online-pubs>



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Mattson, Ingrid, "Researching the History of 55 Fifth Avenue" (2021). *Library Staff Online Publications*. 18. <https://larc.cardozo.yu.edu/staff-online-pubs/18>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Cardozo Law Library at LARC @ Cardozo Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in Library Staff Online Publications by an authorized administrator of LARC @ Cardozo Law. For more information, please contact [larc@yu.edu](mailto:larc@yu.edu).

## Law Lines

The newsletter of the Law Library Association of Greater New York

---

# Researching the History of 55 Fifth Avenue

Posted on [August 31, 2021](#) by [LawLines](#) | [1 Comment](#)

*By, Ingrid Mattson, Associate Dean for Library Services, Professor of Legal Research, and Director of the Law Library, Cardozo School of Law*

55 Fifth Avenue (home to Cardozo School of Law) is the birthplace of a number of truly remarkable cultural institutions in New York City. As part of a conference highlighting Billy Holiday's impact on music, issues of race in the United States, and Cardozo, I researched the history of the law school's building, where Billie Holiday first recorded professionally in 1933 with Columbia Records with the producer John Hammond. Here is some of that history and the research strategies I employed to uncover it.

Often as librarians, we know what we are looking for. Our skills are called upon to help someone find where some item is located, but it isn't often I find time to do deeper research into the 'what.' I wasn't even sure what there was to find in terms of the history of our building. I'd like to say I started with an organized plan, but instead I began with two things: Google and the New York Public Library's online historical newspaper collections. If you're a New York City resident, getting an NYPL library card gives you access to a number of databases from the comfort of your office, which proved invaluable while libraries' physical spaces were closed this past year. Many of the collections typically available only onsite have remote access for a while longer. My goal was just to try some random searches to get feedback and generate working knowledge of the kinds of things I might expect or try in my hunt.



[55 Fifth Avenue](#)

Like many librarians, I love indexes, subject headings, and organization. Unfortunately this research project didn't really give me good opportunities to use those tools. I was left with lots of keyword searches in a variety of combinations to piece together the history. It was a bit more like one of those impossible puzzles than it was a nice, 1,000 piece puzzle with discrete, simple parts. Here are some of the lessons I learned or re-learned during my research.

Timing matters when you're researching history. Billie Holiday was not famous when she made her first professional recordings, so searching for her in the online *New York Times* archives during the era that interested me was fruitless. Of course the *New York Times* wasn't writing about her in the 1930s—she was about as famous in the early 1930s as I am today. Which explains why searching anywhere for “Billy Holiday” and Cardozo was about the worst

search I did. All I turned up was contemporary articles mentioning the connection in passing. Am I ashamed to admit I tried such a ludicrous search? No. I've learned through the years every search helps as it gives you feedback on what not to look for and makes you wonder (and then correct) what you've done poorly in those preliminary searches. There's something to learn even from mistakes or missteps.



[Billie Holiday c. 1943](#)

Keyword searches may be limiting, but they may be all you have. Most of my research was conducted with bits and pieces I found scattered across a strange collection of blog posts, websites, and licensed databases from the New York Public Library. Keyword searches were the primary way I was able to track stuff down, but depending on the functionality of the algorithm powering the database, I needed to run scores of searches to capture the variability in terms used in the search results. Sorting between 55 fifth avenue and 55 5<sup>th</sup> avenue (using numbers or spelling things out), or describing the location as the northeast corner of 5<sup>th</sup> avenue

and 12<sup>th</sup> street, all mattered and produced different results. Advanced search fields, which are designed (I think?) for more sophisticated researchers, proved poorly equipped to actually give me the range of results I expected if I use an OR operator or tried other variations. All of this process also gave me more ways to help law students learn to keyword search better, rather than dismissing it as a less useful search strategy.

You have to be creative. At one point I thought I'd exhausted my research, but by chance I noticed sometimes people spelled Billie Holiday with an ie (Billie) versus a y (Billy). And in other instances I noticed Columbia referred to a Columbia Records or Columbia Phonograph or Col. Phonograph Co. More than a thesaurus function, spelling and abbreviation variation really mattered. It took multiple searches in multiple places, plus spotting the variations, before I realized I'd need to be a lot more creative to spot every little scrap of information.

You have to be patient and thorough. Research is an iterative process. Each time I noticed some new version of how a person, company, location, or other relevant resource was spelled or phrased, I went back to databases and ran my searches again with the different combinations, trying variations to try to get at every little bit of news that I may have missed. Every time I had one more piece of the puzzle (like the words Lenox or Maynicke), I added those into my searches, re-ran searches, and revisited databases I'd scoured previously. The more specific a word I could tie to previous, more generic searches, the better.

Finally, I turned to tried and true librarian resources—people. I spoke with an A/V specialist, researchers at the New York Public Library, Sony's archivist, and a person who worked at the NYC Municipal Archives. Sometimes consulting with others and picking up the phone are the quickest ways to find what you need. A finding tool might be online, but forging connections with people can sometimes get you more information.

Here's a brief overview what I learned from all of those lessons.

The present-day 55 Fifth Avenue was constructed on the site of the old Lenox mansion, which was home to James Lenox, a wealthy bachelor philanthropist who passed away in 1880. On his death, Mr. Lenox's extraordinary book collection included the first Gutenberg Bible in existence in the United States and formed the nucleus of the New York Public Library holdings, while his mansion passed through several owners between 1880 and 1911. As another piece of music history, the mansion was the first site of the Institute of Musical Art from 1905–1910. The school move uptown after leaving the mansion and is now known as the Juilliard School.

A July 2, 1911, New York Times article heralds what is now known as 55 Fifth Avenue as the bellwether sounding doom for lower Fifth Avenue homes. (Lower Fifth Avenue was described as Washington Square to Fourteenth Street.) The construction of the commercial building that now houses the law school, designed by the architectural partners Maynicke & Franke represented “the dreaded invasion of business” planted in the midst of a “district of old-fashioned homes...of such a select type as not to mar the atmosphere of quiet refinement characteristic of earlier days.”

Advertisements in 1922 in the New York Herald and the New York Tribune show a listing to lease four floors in the building, each at approximately 18,000 square feet. According to a 1931 article from the New York Times, Columbia Phonograph Company leased two floors for \$450,000 for 16 years: the tenth and eleventh. At present, the tenth floor is home to the Dean's Suite, faculty offices, and several administrative offices, while the eleventh floor is occupied by our Office of Career Services and our clinic suite. Columbia's time at 55 Fifth was very short-lived. By July 31, 1934, Variety was reporting that Columbia Phonograph Co., Inc., was acquired by Brunswick, and “as a first step in its Col acquisition,” Brunswick “endeavor[ed] to rid Col of its present lease at 55 Fifth avenue.”

Among the list of those who recorded at 55 Fifth Avenue are Gene Autry and Jimmy Long in October 1931 (on Perfect Records), Fletcher Henderson and his band in December 1932, Duke Ellington and his Orchestra in February 1933, and Benny Goodman and his Orchestra with Billie Holiday in November and December 1933. Billie Holiday recorded two songs with Benny Goodman and his Orchestra in our law school: *Your Mother's Son-In-Law* and *Riffin' the Scotch*, and The New York Age reported in its Talk of the Town section September 29, 1934, this brief note: “Billie Holiday is making records for Columbia.” The New York Age, founded in 1887, was the most prominent Black newspapers of its time.

A story John Hammond has told in a number of places goes like this:

“The recording industry was absolutely broke in the early 1930s. Columbia was in bankruptcy; it was owned by a company called Grigsby-Grunow . . . so poor old Columbia and Okeh were a bankrupt part of a bankrupt company, so there was no money for jazz at all. . . . I persuaded [Columbia] that they had to record Fletcher Henderson. . . . So at ten o'clock in the morning there were three people in the studio and by 12.35 John Kirby dragged his bass in and we had exactly 50 minutes to cut four sides and balance the band. This was the days of big waxes, so there was no way of editing it. 'New King Porter Stomp' was just a run-through; there was no time to do a take. The band is very loose, and the whole thing was recorded on one microphone at a lousy studio at 55 Fifth Avenue.” This quote is drawn from *The Song of the Hawk: The Life and Recordings of Coleman Hawkins*. Mr. Hammond tells a similar story in *The Producer: John Hammond and the Soul of American Music*.

By all accounts, this session, which John Hammond identifies as his first producing endeavor, “gives an impressive sound picture of the Henderson band at its relaxed best.” Even with a “lousy studio” exceptional talent and skill shine.

I find I often emphasize my library's services and staff in an effort to promote that our library is more than a study space. But I have realized that the space where history is made, where people are and have significant experiences,

can matter just as much to the story.

- See also, [Cardozo Honors the Legacy of Billie Holiday](#), YU News (March 11, 2021).
- Professor Mattson also gave a talk on this research and her experience in an exclusive LLAGNY ZOOM event on August 24, 2021 titled, [Billie Holiday's Legacy Walks the Halls of 55 Fifth](#).
- She also received a 2021 [AALL Call for Papers, Short Form Division Award](#) for her article, "Billie Holiday's Legacy Walks the Halls of 55 Fifth Avenue".



This entry was posted in [2021](#) and tagged [55 Fifth Avenue](#), [Archival Research](#), [Billie Holiday](#), [Cardozo Law School](#), [Ingrid Mattson](#), [New York](#), [New York City](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).

---

#### ONE RESPONSE TO “RESEARCHING THE HISTORY OF 55 FIFTH AVENUE”

---

Pingback: [Year in Review – Top Blog Posts from 2021 | Law Lines](#)

---