



High Weirdness Indeed: The Empire State Building

"The reports themselves argue strongly against this. For the reports do not range over a broad spectrum. There are virtually no reports of unidentified sailing objects, or of UFOs with wings or wheels, and there are no reports of flying pink elephants (FPEs!) or of the Empire State Building being seen upside down in Pittsburgh."

-- J. Allen Hynek, "The UFO Mystery," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* (Feb. 1975)

But you know, if people did see a tower "upside down in air" (as T.S. Eliot would, and in fact did, put it), it would probably be the Empire State Building. Much as it galls my skyscraping Chicago soul to admit it, when it comes to capital-T The, capital-T Tower, there can be only one. And what a one it is -- possibly the last truly great building in America, built when Art Deco had aged to mellow perfection, but before the bitter Teutonic winds of the International Style could sweep all ornament and humanity away. Is it any wonder that the Reptoids and the Rosicrucians, Doc Savage and Felix the Cat, King Kong and the C.H.U.D.s, that everybody who isn't anybody fights their secret battles over it through time, space, and dimension? Well, it is a wonder -- and a story. 102 of them, in fact.

"A new and convenient house, barn, and several out-buildings, together with 20 acres of land, situated in the heart of New York Island, along the Middle Road, near the 3-mile stone, about 1/2 mile north from Chelsea Village. . . . It is confidently expected by those whose opinions are conceded to be found, that the rapid growth of the City and the villages of Greenwich and Chelsea will soon cause the value of the Aforesaid Land to be greatly enhanced."

-- notice for sale by "Jno. Thompson" of the future site of the Empire State Building (1825)

All 102 stories begin in the middle of Manhattan Island, on a swampy site known in colonial times as Sunfish Creek. The lot where Sunfish Creek and another, lesser, stream intersected, was common town property until 1799, when one John Thompson purchased it for \$2,400 and built a farmstead there. (The western slice of the future Empire State block had been granted in 1686 to a black man named Francisco Bastian, who sold out to a silversmith thirty years later.) In 1825, Thompson in turn sold the lot to a married couple, the Lawrences, who turned right around and sold it to a man named Charles Lawton for \$10,000. Lawton doubled his money in two years, selling the property to William Backhouse Astor for \$20,500. The Astor clan, headed by German fur-trader John Jacob Astor, was busily buying up all of New York City that was for sale. In 1849 a slum riot on Astor Place led the Astors north, to the old Thompson farm, where they built a sumptuous mansion at 350 Fifth Avenue. After feuding with his aunt Caroline Astor, William Waldorf Astor tore down his neighboring mansion and replaced it with a "common tavern," the Waldorf Hotel. John Jacob Astor IV responded by tearing down his mother's mansion and building an even grander hotel, the Astoria; cooler family heads prevailed, and the Waldorf-Astoria became a linked "twin" hotel and the center of New York's "tenderloin" district of Mauve Age decadence. Eventually, the Waldorf-Astoria became a victim of its address; midtown property was too valuable to waste on a mere hotel, Waldorf-Astoria or not. The Astors sold the hotel and two acres

of the lot to vice-president of General Motors John Jacob Raskob, the duPont brothers, and a pair of silent partners for \$16 million -- a tidy profit indeed. And there, Raskob and his architect William Lamb decided to build the world's tallest building.

"The directors of the Empire State, Inc., believe that in a comparatively short time the Zeppelin airships will establish trans-Atlantic, transcontinental and trans-Pacific lines, and possibly a route to South America from the port of New York. Building with an eye to the future, it has been determined to erect this tower to land people directly on Thirty-fourth Street and Fifth Avenue after their ocean trip, seven minutes after the airship connects with the mast."

-- Alfred E. Smith, press release (1929)

They were in competition with Walter Chrysler, who was equally determined that his Chrysler Building should be the world's tallest skyscraper. (The Crash of 1929 knocked a third competitor out of the race before he could break ground.) But, in the game of construction chicken, Chrysler finished first, allowing the Chrysler Building to claim the coveted slot for only a year. Raskob sealed its fate by planning the famed zeppelin mast for the Empire State, raising its height from 86 floors to 102, firmly trumping the Chrysler Building by 204 feet. Sadly, eventual experiments with the Navy airship *Columbia* proved that the powerful updrafts deflected by the building's walls made horizontal docking impossible.

In our world, that is. Surely somewhere or sometime Yankee ingenuity (or German discipline) keeps zeppelins on an even keel as they debark passengers into the "World's Highest Bar." Fritz Leiber, in "Catch That Zeppelin!" presented an Empire State Building where those worlds overlapped; the Gernsbackian future and the dire present. Norse tradition speaks of Yggdrasil, the tree at the center of the cosmos, the Axis Mundi around which all the worlds revolve; Siberian Tatar shamanism presents the "tree to heaven" as the axle of the world. Which may be why our demigod and protector, Doc Savage, dwelt on the 86th floor of that "gleaming spike of steel and brick" during his crime-fighting career. Perhaps, if one knows the right code to press, you can still emerge in Doc's eyrie. (An irresistible opening for a Cliffhanging Secret Urban [Fantastic](#) History game presents itself: the PCs discover Doc's dusty and sheet-covered eyrie for themselves when they accidentally activate the hidden relays, and must take up the Man of Bronze's mantle for the 21st century -- get Philip José Farmer's *Doc Savage: His Apocalyptic Life* and Lester Dent's novels, and get started.) There's more adventure in the building directory yet: does the Horatio Club rent out a suite on the 66th floor, or the Pyramid Warehousing Corporation on the 23rd? Why stop with Doc's world, or even our Gernsbackian zeppelin paradise: what if each of the 73 elevators of our Technopolitan Yggdrasil leads to another world, when its buttons depress in kabbalistic sequence?

"[T]he TV tower of the Empire State Building. And tell me to what empire this creation of American initiates refers if not the empire of Rudolf of Prague!"

-- Belbo, in *Foucault's Pendulum*, by Umberto Eco

Of course, if the doors lead to all worlds, some of them might not be pleasant at all. Yggdrasil, after all, had its roots in Hel; persistent urban legend describes secret sub-basements beneath the Empire State Building, headquartering Men In Black or hiding UFOs. (One particularly inventive sort argues that the "Manhattan Project" was so named because the real work, on Tesla-based [Philadelphia Experiment](#) technology, took place in the chambers beneath the ESB.) These chambers connect to the [secret world of underground](#) Manhattan (as seen in *Underworld*, for example) through "triangle-shaped tunnels" reminiscent of the trapezoidal halls [beneath Peru](#). Another rumor calls the chambers ritual magical spaces for Satanists preying on the homeless and "missing persons" -- the reliable David Icke not only identifies the Astors (who tunneled under the bog there for a century) as Reptoids, but derives their family name from the dark goddess Ashtoreth. Perhaps the Empire State's parallels should expand to include the voodoo "middle post" or poteau-mitan, the doorway for spirits to enter our world. The Empire State has more than its share of spectral tenants: the building killed 14 people during its construction, another 14 died when a B-25 bomber crashed into the 79th floor in 1945, and another 16 leaped from its observation deck in the first 16 years of the building's existence. Our skyscraper also scrapes the

bowels of the Pit: here dwell the Mole People, the Masonic Morlocks, the ghouls and the necromancers.

"The logic of the plan is very simple. A certain amount of space in the center, arranged as compactly as possible, contains the vertical circulation, toilets, shafts, and corridors. Surrounding this is a perimeter of office space 28 feet deep. The sizes of the floors diminish as the elevators decrease in number. In essence, there is a pyramid of non-rentable space surrounded by [a greater pyramid](#) of rentable space."

-- William Lamb, architect of the Empire State Building

Which makes the fact that the Empire State was dedicated on May 1, 1931, all the more disturbing; the Astors are apparently Illuminati, too. Saturn, killer of children, was in the American Eagle, Aquila, on the dedication day, for extra necromantic oomph. It took 410 days to construct; 410 being the kabbalistic value for "Kadosh," the vengeful Templar order of German Masonry. The Waldorf-Astoria was demolished on Black Tuesday, 1929, the destruction of the old financial order; excavation began on January 22, 1930, at the cusp between Capricorn and Aquarius; the building's final official height, with the TV tower, is 1,454 feet -- one less than 1455: "Adam Kadmon," the alchemical Perfect Man. Man, the measure of all things. The building is at Fifth ("gab", or "top"; the sphere of Mars) and Thirty-Fourth ("Babel," as in Tower of); 5x34 is 170, both "staff" and "cup," as well as "Kesilim," or Orion -- the Giant.

"On the lofty minarets of Manhattan there stands day and night an invisible muezzin who calls the faithful to the worship of Mammon and Speed. For our religion is practical pantheism, with energy as the Eternal Substance.

We are the super-city. We are the Nibelungen of the West. We possess the magic Rhine-gold, which is the Holy Grail of man's desire.

We are Gargantua and Siegfried. The old gods across the sea are graying. Already their Goetterdaemmerung has begun.

Come we, the newer Titans: and we are not yet pubescent."

-- Benjamin Casseres, "New York: Matter Triumphalis"

The Empire State, then, is a powerfully [bisociative](#) symbol: Tree of Worlds and the Technological Man, bringer of the new order and destroyer of the old (just as primitive King Kong falls from the Building's pinnacle, slain by technology and love joined). It is also, of course, the Tower, Struck By Lightning (on average, 23 times in any given storm). Not only is it on the street of Babel, but in Illuminati-designed meters it rises to 443: the number of "Bethel," the "House of God" -- the name of the Tower trump in some French Tarot decks. The Tower, of course, is the card of destruction and doom -- but also the kabbalistic path between Netzach and Hod, between the spheres of victory and splendor. Both cup and staff, perfect man and Satanic monster, the building rises at the axis of a symbolic Empire indeed. Perhaps its enigma only be truly captured in the blank smile of Felix the Cat -- the first image broadcast on NBC television, from the top of the Empire State Building, on Yule of 1931. Reach into his bag of tricks, why don't you? It's a magic bag, and it goes all the way down.

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