

86 Bedford St.

by Rachel B. Doyle for *The New York Resident*

The home of the legendary speakeasy Chumley's—86 Bedford St.—is up for sale again. The 175-year-old building changed hands in 2005 as part of a \$6.9 million dollar deal which also included 29 residential units.

Despite damage to the facade, a collapsed chimney, and unclear plans about fixing both—the current asking price of this historic building is a quasi-reasonable \$3.75 million. "We asked around a six percent return. I think it will certainly help the sale process. Obviously the market has increased in the last year or so," said James Nelson, a managing partner at Massey Knackal, the realty firm handling the deal.

Building sales in the Greenwich Village continue to be hot, according to Andrew Berman, executive director of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation. The area, he said, "has a charm and authenticity that really cannot be replicated anywhere else. If it weren't for certain restrictions in place, a lot of those buildings would be torn down already."

"The Village always has a lack of product – whether for sale or lease – because there is a limited stock. You don't see a ton of new development because of the historic aspects," added Nelson. And with such a famous establishment right below, this new open listing is guaranteed to garner substantial interest.

Despite the building going on the block, Chumley's isn't going anywhere since its lease isn't up until 2085. Touted as "the oldest speakeasy in the country to retain its original ambiance," Chumley's has been around since 1926 —when it was purchased by Leland Stanford Chumley, who remodeled the front of the former blacksmith's shop with innocuous garage-like doors.

Behind this obscure facade, lay the favorite illicit watering hole of literary luminaries such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, Jack Kerouac, Norman Mailer, Anais Nin, Simone de Beauvoir and J.D. Salinger (before he became a recluse). The original incarnation contained kitchen entrances disguised as bookshelves, two trapdoors to conceal spirits, and a trick staircase designed to foil the police.

"It's supposed to give the illusion that we're in a basement, when in reality we're on street level. It allowed the bartenders some time to clear away alcohol during Prohibition," said John Lefebvre, a waiter at Chumley's.

The entrance remains the same as it was in the '20s: unmarked and only accessible by a clandestine rear passageway leading from Barrow Street. And Chumley's will likely never have a sign, as landmark designation restricts anything having to do with physical changes.

A little known fact about 86 Bedford St. is that its seditious reputation actually precedes Prohibition. According to legend, the building was also a refuge for runaway slaves – due in part to its proximity to Gay Street, which had a large pre-Civil War era free black community.

"In the floor of the bar there is a trapdoor that lifts up. These same tunnels that may have been used to transport slaves were later used to transport the alcohol into the restaurant during Prohibition," said Lefebvre, who also just completed a documentary about Chumley's. "I'm looking right at it."

It gets even more intriguing. Chumley's is a regular stop on both the "Pubs and Poltergeists" and "Ghostly Greenwich Village" tours, as it's been long rumored to be haunted by the spirit of proprietress Henrietta Chumley, a specter notorious for being very displeased when the tavern's new owners replaced the antique jukebox with a CD version.

"I've certainly heard and read about that assertion. Certainly a place like that is so full of history that if there was going to be a ghost somewhere, it wouldn't surprise me if it was there," said Berman.

The brokerage firm declined to comment on the ghost stories.