

The Fort Orange Club Albany, New York

by Lew Toulmin

We stayed for two nights in the Fort Orange Club in June 2018 and were very impressed.

This report describes the club and city history, facilities, bedrooms, food, and club membership.

Club and City History

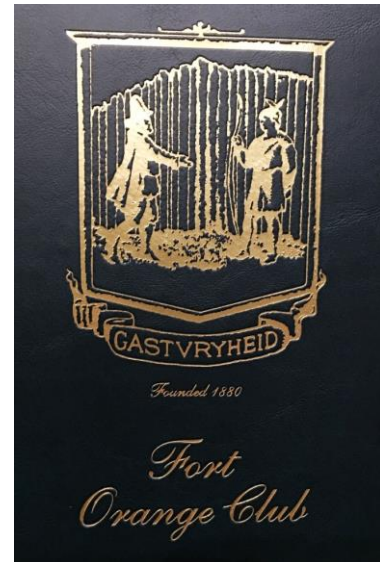
The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 and the arrival of railroads and steamboats in the 1840s and '50s brought prosperity to the city of Albany on the Hudson River, which was originally settled in 1614, six years before the Johnny-come-lately Pilgrims arrived in Massachusetts on the *Mayflower*!

In January 1880 the Ft. Orange Club was organized by 49 city and state officials and businessmen who wanted to create a club “elevated in character, worthy of the city, broadly representative and inclusive in membership, and faithfully maintaining a high standard.” The club was named after the fort built in Albany (then New Netherland) in 1624 by the Dutch West India Company.



Just five months after the initial meeting, in May of 1880 the club members purchased a distinguished 1810 mansion, the Hill/Soulden/Bender house, for \$30,000. This house had served as a family home, and as a boarding house which had once housed Aaron Burr. The house at 110 Washington Avenue was chosen because of its very close proximity to the New York state capitol building, other downtown centers of government, and the main business district. It was also just five short blocks east of the historic location of the original Fort Orange.

Over the years the mansion was dramatically expanded and refurbished, and these efforts won an award for preservation and decoration in 1997. Guests of the club have included



numerous governors of New York, other dignitaries, and US Presidents U.S. Grant, Grover Cleveland, and Theodore Roosevelt.

The club motto of “Gasturyheid” means “Hospitality” in Dutch.

Club Facilities

Club facilities include a formal dining room and the Tap Room for less formal meals, numerous meeting rooms, a large athletic wing with a pool, weights, yoga room, sauna, two squash courts, numerous cardio machines, and a wide selection of classes ranging from cardio boxing to “muscle madness.”



The décor is traditional club style, with dark wood paneling, numerous paintings and prints, and with the West Lounge done in the Arts and Crafts style. (Additional photos are included below.)



On weekends the club has limited services, with no breakfast service and with lunch and dinner only served on Saturdays. There is a staff member on duty 24/7, however, and bedrooms are available on weekends.

There are 71 clubs in the Ft. Orange Club reciprocal network, a middling number. Interesting clubs in the network include the Lenox Club, the only private club in the Berkshires of Massachusetts, with nine bedrooms; and the Western Club of Glasgow, Scotland, founded in 1825, with eight bedrooms.

The dress code throughout the club, according to the club rules, is “Relaxed Dress, except the main dining room, where gentlemen are required to wear jackets and females are required to wear appropriate attire.” Mobile phones can only be used for conversation in certain areas, and business papers cannot be displayed in the social dining rooms.

Reciprocal members generally pay via credit card upon departure.

The club is member-owned, does not have corporate members, and is not affiliated with Club Corp or other corporate networks.



Parking is very convenient and free to members and reciprocals, in a large ground-level lot beside the mansion. This is especially useful, since parking in downtown Albany is often difficult.

During our stay, we took a tour of the nearby state capitol and were astounded by its massive stone architecture and beautiful interiors. The structure took 32 years to build and its Victorian style is quite a contrast with the giant, 98-acre, modernist Nelson Rockefeller Empire State Plaza next door. The tour lasts an hour and is free. Be warned however that finding the tour office in the giant complex below the Plaza can be quite challenging, so allow plenty of time. See: <https://ogs.ny.gov/ESP/tours.asp> for more information.



Bedrooms

There are 21 hotel rooms in the club, with 10 remodeled and 2 more to be remodeled by the end of summer 2018. Our hotel room was spacious, with attractive appointments, recently redecorated, a king bed, blue décor, and a small bathroom en-suite.

Our room price for two nights (Friday and Saturday) was \$468. Current reciprocal prices for unremodeled rooms are \$221 per night including all charges and taxes; \$233 per night for remodeled queen or twin rooms; and \$246 per night for the one remodeled king room (#333), in which we stayed.



Food

We had a very impressive dinner at the club, in the Tap Room, consisting of a soup of artichoke and spinach (a “B+” at \$4); a braised peach salad with currants, pecans, lettuce and wine vinaigrette (excellent, an “A” for \$8); an intermezzo of a lemon sorbet by Blue Bunny (smashing, an “A+” at no charge); short ribs with a sweet soy barbecue sauce (an “A” for \$14); chicken leone (chicken breast with porcini mushrooms) with asparagus and leeks (a “B” for \$12); a soft drink and key lime pie for dessert (a “B” for \$5). The total was \$57.50 (including a “club charge” of \$8) for two persons. Service was excellent.

Club Membership

Women were admitted as members to the Ft. Orange Club beginning in 1989.

The membership process is rigorous. It involves nomination by two existing members who personally know the nominee, and who write personal letters describing the person's educational background, present employment, how long the person has lived in the area, club members who know the candidate, marital status, name of spouse and children, reasons why the nominee would be an asset to the club, interests, and community affairs and associations in which the nominee is active. The nominee must be known by three Trustees of the Club's Board of Trustees, before the nominee can be reviewed by the Membership Committee. After consideration by the Committee and then the Board, the nominee's name is posted for 21 days, and then a final Board vote is taken.

There are various types of members, including:

- Resident (in the seven surrounding counties); with an initiation fee of \$4860 and yearly total fees and dues of \$3745.
- Junior (age 21-35); with no initiation fee and \$2345 total yearly fees.
- Non-resident; with an initiation fee of \$3240 and \$2514 total yearly fees.

There are 550 members in the club. The Governor of New York is given honorary membership, if he/she is not already on the roster. Other members are largely drawn from the state legislature, lobbyists, state agencies, legal community, local businesses, and the presidents and faculty of local colleges and universities.

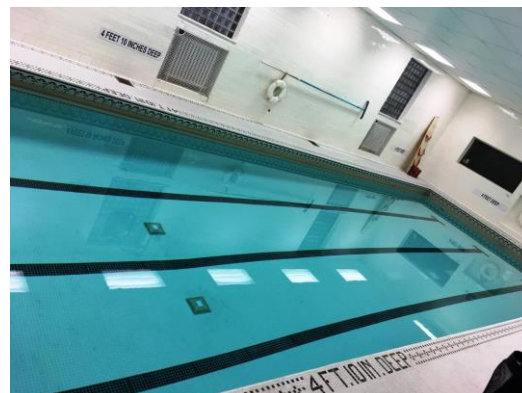
Summary

We were very pleased with our stay at the Fort Orange Club, and highly recommend it to other travelers.

For additional photos, see below.



A painting of the merchant vessel *Geldersche Blom* (Flower of Gelderland) arriving at Fort Orange/New Netherland in 1652, by L. F. Tantillo





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v1 31 July 2018