Historians have long questioned the location of the restaurant immortalized in “Nighthawks at the Diner”, believed to be based on a scene in Greenwich Village and which Edward Hopper began painting in December 1941. Popular thought holds that the restaurant once occupied a now-vacant lot on Mulry Square, where Greenwich Avenue, West 11th Street and Seventh Avenue South converge. A recent proposal by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority to construct an emergency ventilation plant on this site led GVSHP to investigate the validity of this claim and to seek out other locations that may have served as Hopper’s inspiration.

Greenwich Avenue

As was typical of the artist, Hopper left few clues as to his subject’s whereabouts except for one statement recorded in Gail Levin’s 1998 biography in which he attributes his inspiration to a “restaurant on Greenwich Avenue where two streets meet”:

“Years later Jo confirmed her invention: “I was the one who thought up its name: Nighthawks. E. & I did all the posing for figures except the young blond boy in charge of the counter & he is practically ‘Capt. Ed Staples,’ dreamed up by E. himself & perished with a car load of modern masterpieces in a R.R. accident.” Her witness to their renewed collaboration is confirmed by sketches for a figure wearing the belted safari jacket that she had purchased for Edward at Abercrombie & Fitch.

Jo’s suggestion for a name stuck. The picture became a favorite with Edward, who confessed to liking it “very much… [It] was suggested by a restaurant on Greenwich Avenue where two streets meet. Nighthawks seems to be the way I think of a night street.” Another interviewer gathered that the picture was “based partly on an all-night coffee stand Hopper saw on Greenwich Avenue in downtown New York, ‘only more so.’” To a query about loneliness in the picture, Hopper responded: “I didn’t see it as particularly lonely. I simplified the scene a great deal and made the restaurant bigger. Unconsciously, probably, I was painting the loneliness of a large city.”

Mulry Square
Many people believe that Hopper’s diner once existed on Mulry Square; indeed, by superimposing the diner on the site, one can see a near-perfect replica of the painting. However, all evidence indicates that no one-story metal diner ever existed on Mulry Square.

Mulry Square today (source: Google Maps)
In the Landmarks Preservation Commission’s designation report for the Greenwich Village Historic District, written in 1969, Mulry Square is described as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GREENWICH AVENUE West Side (Betw. West 11th &amp; Perry Sts.)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#61 A (White Tower) diner now occupies the southerly part of the former site of an enormous brick building, over one-hundred-and-forty feet long, which was literally bisected by the southerly extension of Seventh Avenue in 1919.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The entire building was razed, and only a small triangular lot remained with a filling station (described under Seventh Avenue South) filling the northern apex. This large building was a brewery and was once a conspicuous feature of The Village, at the southwest corner of West Eleventh Street and Greenwich Avenue. It later became Monahan’s Express Company (stables) and, after the turn of the century, the Manhattan Screw & Stamping Works (a factory).

The hard, white cubism of the diner, although a good trade mark, relates to nothing else in The Village unless it be the filling stations on the Avenue. Where a commercial enterprise enters an Historic District, it should be realized that a special situation exists and that stock company designs are often not only inadequate but offensive to the entire neighborhood. To insure that the spirit of the district is not violated, special study should be given to this problem by the company architects to evolve something which would be compatible, if not in scale, at least in its use of forms, materials and architectural details.


This tells us two things:
1) Prior to the extension of Seventh Avenue in 1919, the lot housed a large brick brewery
2) In the year 1969, a gas station and White Tower diner existed on the site
Digging deeper, it becomes clear that no diner existed on Mulry Square at any point in the years between 1919 and 1969. By 1930, according to an alteration permit, the site was already being leased by the same White Tower diner described in the designation report.

Source: NYC Department of Records
The White Tower can be seen in this 1933 photo:

Source: New York Public Library, Percy Loomis Sperr Collection
A 1939 plot diagram shows that a gas station existed at the front of the lot, with the White Tower lunch room and gas station office in the rear.

Source: NYC Department of Records
The ca. 1940 tax photo also shows a White Tower on the rear of the site and a gas station in the front. This would have been taken just before Hopper began the painting in late 1941.

Source: NYC Department of Records
If one looks carefully, the remnants of the old White Tower are visible in the 1980 tax photo:

Source: NYC Department of Records
1-5 Greenwich Avenue
Having ruled out the possibility that Hopper’s diner ever existed on Mulry Square, we sought to uncover other sites along Greenwich Avenue that may have housed diners. Because December 1941 is within a year of when the city would have finished compiling a collection of "tax photos" of every building in all five boroughs (taken between 1939 and 1941 and now available for viewing on microfilm at the NYC Department of Records), the logical first step was to view the tax photos for all lots along Greenwich Avenue. While we could not locate a one-story, triangularly-shaped diner with curved glass in any of these photos, restaurants of varying scales and detail did appear. One such diner was at 1-5 Greenwich Avenue, shown below in the tax photo:

Source: NYC Department of Records
Greenwich Avenue today
The Jefferson Diner existed at this site as far back as 1937, according to a permit for its construction found in the online database of the Office of Metropolitan History (www.metrohistory.com):

Two photos from the Percy Loomis Sperr Collection of the New York Public Library show that its presence in 1939:
According to New York Times classified ad, the Jefferson Diner survived at least as late as 1943 – two years after “Nighthawks” was painted.


173 Seventh Avenue South
A one-story diner also existed at the corner of 173 Seventh Avenue South, just south of Mulry Square, which now houses an Empire Szechuan restaurant.
This diner was constructed in 1941, just after the tax photo would have been taken. It had been demolished by 1969, when the Greenwich Village designation report was written:

SEVENTH AVENUE SOUTH East Side (Btw. Perry St. & Greenwich Ave.)

#173 (179-179)

The restaurant constructed to the south of the service buildings along Seventh Avenue South is one story high of white brick. It has uniformly spaced windows separated by aluminum uprights with fixed glass lights. Above and below these windows are panels with buff-colored diamond-shaped tiles. They are located on the Avenue side toward the south end. A corner entry with brick steps and wrought iron handrails is located at the corner of Perry Street. It has a low, triangular-shaped canopy supported by a single lally column at the apex. This is the principal entrance to the restaurant. The Perry Street side (Nos. 3-5) is of white brick with round-arched windows and entrance door giving access to the bar.

#179-183

This small triangular block retains only two residences (Nos. 57 and 59 Greenwich Avenue), the balance being occupied by an assortment of latter-day service buildings. A gasoline filling station with service garage occupies the entire northern end of this conspicuous site with a restaurant (No. 173) extending south along the Avenue side where a diner once stood. Here existed an opportunity to make these utilitarian structures a credit to the neighborhood they serve. Actually no attempt has been made in the garage to use compatible materials or design details. These buildings, by their lowerness, are as much out of scale with the houses of the Village as some of the apartment houses are by their height. This is all the more reason that a filling station should be made compatible with its surroundings, in every way possible where its very scale works against it.

A Certificate of Occupancy from website of the Department of Buildings shows that a new building permit for a one-story lunch wagon was filed sometime in 1941, and that the structure was completed by March 18th, 1942:

Source: NYC Department of Buildings
Though the Certificate of Occupancy is dated 1942, an inspector’s report shows that work on this diner began prior to August 1941:

Further inspection reports chart progress on the building’s construction, and indicate that most of the work have been completed by October 1941:
Therefore, this diner would have been at least partially – if not entirely - constructed by the time Hopper began his painting in 1941.

**Conclusion**

Either one of these aforementioned diners – or any number of others – may well have inspired “Nighthawks at the Diner,” but it seems clear that there was never any such diner at the corner of 7th Avenue South and Greenwich Avenue as has been often alleged. Though none may have been the exact size and shape of the diner in the painting (and until we see a photo of the former diner at 173 Seventh Avenue South we cannot know for sure), Hopper admittedly altered his scene a great deal. In crafting his vision, Hopper most likely borrowed bits and pieces from several different restaurants.

In researching another of Hopper’s Greenwich Village-inspired paintings, “Early Sunday Morning”, GVSHP discovered that the artist may have intentionally intended to mislead his audience. Though Hopper claimed that “Early Sunday Morning” was based on a scene on Seventh Avenue, all evidence indicates that is was actually based on 233-237 Bleecker Street. Thus we take Hopper’s assertion that “Nighthawks” was “suggested by a restaurant on Greenwich Avenue where two streets meet” with some degree of doubt. The “Nighthawks” diner may have been anywhere in Greenwich Village, or for that matter anywhere in New York City. Though most likely, it truly existed only in Hopper’s mind.