NEW YORK'S FIRST SUBWAY BUILT MORE THAN FORTY YEARS AGO

Curious History That Surrounds a Grating Opposite City Hall Marking a Forgotten Enterprise of "Certain Prominent Citizens."

THE grating in the pavement opposite City Hall lets air into a subway—not into the Subway, but into another one, a block long, that was built forty-one years ago, in six nights, while the world (particularly Tammany) slumbered, and that carried many wondering citizens, Horace Greeley among them, during its brief life of a year, until Tammany, having got back its astonished breath, knocked the aspiring infant on the head.

Perhaps Mayor Gaynor does not know when he sees that grate that it is a memento of a time, forty-one years ago, when the subway question was responsible for just as many dreams and hopes and lost dollars and tempers and philippics and justifications and hot feeling all around as it is to-day.

In 1868 there was first some vague talk about building a subway. The men who wanted to do it were very cautious in the way they went about trying to make arrangements. They even kept their names from the public. The newspapers referred to them as "certain prominent citizens."

At first, it seems, they openly asked the city, alias Tammany, for permission to build the subway. The answer was that the "certain prominent men" should put up $300,000 with the Controller, the money to be forfeited in case the road were not constructed at a certain rate of progress and finished by a specified time. The prominent men evidently were not comfortable in their minds as to the probable ultimate fate of this $300,000. At any rate, they gently and quietly dropped their project. The deposit was to be made previous to January, 1869. It was not made, either in full or in part, nor was any more ever heard about it.

However, the exciting proposal to build a railroad underneath the city had actually been made. People could not forget about it. They were frankly frightened. THE TIMES of March 15, 1869, editorially exclaims: "It is said that the Legislature is quite likely to charter a project for building what is called an arcade railroad under Broadway. We can scarcely believe it. When this wild scheme was dismissed a year or two ago we hoped and believed that we had heard the last of it—and so did everybody else."

The public and THE TIMES, though, were justified in their distrust of the scheme. These prominent men wanted to build a subway with a vengeance. What they wanted to do was to dig down, the whole width and length of Broadway from the Battery away uptown, for seventeen feet. They proposed to restore the street by building a roof over the chasm. This plan, as has been said, died a natural and unobtrusive death. The next move toward a subway was in the early part of 1869. It didn't seem like a move at all. Legislative power was obtained to construct a pneumatic tube from Warren Street to Cedar Street for the purpose of blowing small and large parcels, indeed all kinds of express business, between these two localities.

Then queer rumors began to fly around.

In the latter part of 1869 a young man, dressed in working clothes, and looking rather mussed and dirty, went down in the middle of the night to the cellar of the Rogers-Peet Building. In this cellar he groped around until he found an opening he was looking for. He went through the opening and landed in an underground tunnel, dark except for flaring lights here and there. There was an air of excitement and feverish work in this tunnel. Whatever talking there was was done in whispers, although a shout wouldn't have been heard on the street. The young man applied for work. He got it and spent that and the following night in very hard and earnest digging.

And then The Tribune came out with a full exposé of the subway that was secretly being built.

The young man was a Tribune reporter.

The substance of the article was this: In the last week one block of subway tunnel had been dug and built by night. It extended from the southwest corner of Broadway and Warren Street to Broadway and Murray Street. So that nobody should see the earth that was dug away it had all been carted to the big cellar of the Rogers-Peet Building and dumped there. If The Tribune had not exposed what was going on a subway under the whole length of Broadway was to have been secretly built. A car was in the tunnel. Also a big machine that was going to blow the car from one end of the track to the other.

It seemed incredible. Who had ever heard of being blown through the earth to one's destination?

New York wavered between perplexity and indignation.

The Beach Construction Company—the men who were planning to build the subway—were equal to the occasion. They promptly announced that they would stop work for a while so that the public could come down and see the wonderful new tunnel. First reception day, March 1. Admission, 25 cents! Proceeds to be given to charity!

Then Mr. Beach, who was at the head of the company, and who partly owned The Scientific American, got out a few explanatory remarks in his magazine preparatory to the opening of the tunnel to the public.

The men who had gotten the grant for their pneumatic tube for express parcels saw, he explains, that it would be little more expense to construct an underground railroad for the blowing of passengers as well as freight.

Mr. Beach gracefully ignored the fact that his company had forgotten about getting a franchise. He evidently took it for granted that everybody knew that it was either a case of skinning the Ring—Tammany's fairest who then presided over the city's activities—or being skinned by them.

What one doesn't see is how the company could ever have dreamed of building a Subway under Broadway without the fact that they were doing so leaking out. Did they expect to find hospitable cellars dotting the whole length of the Boulevard! Probably they believed that the further on the tunnel got, the better were their chances to be allowed to finish.

The magazine article explains about the construction of the tunnel and the car. The date of this article is Feb. 19, 1870.

"Entering at the southwest corner of Warren Street and Broadway," the writer says, "we were soon initiated into the mysteries of which so much has been made by newspaper reporters. The simplicity of the principle of this mode of transit is not fully appreciated until one sees the thing itself.

"Let the reader imagine a cylindrical tube eight feet in the clear, bricked up and whitewashed, neat, clean, dry, and quiet.

"Along the bottom of this tube is laid a railway track and on this track runs a spacious car, richly upholstered, well lighted, and with plenty of space for exit. The whole arrangement is as comfortable and cozy as the front basement dining room of a first-class city residence.

"The tunnel has not only the positive comforts described, but it is absolutely free from the discomforts of surface car travel. The track is smooth and level. It is not cold in Winter. It will be delightfully cool in Summer." (?)

Here's more optimism:

"The air will be constantly changed in it by the action of the blowing machine. The filthy, health-destroying, patience-killing street dust of which uptown residents get not only their fill, but more than their fill—so that it runs over and collects on their hair, beards, and eyes and floats in their breaths like the vapor on a frosty morning—will never be found in the tunnel."

The first reception day arrived. Prominent citizens had been specially invited by card. All day people went down in crowds through the Rogers Peet Building to the tunnel, twenty-one feet below Broadway. Alfred E. Beach explained its advantages.

A person on going down first came into the waiting station. This was more like a room than our stations to-day are. It was only 120 feet long. It was fitted up in good style. The light came from outside.

The tunnel was eight feet in diameter. It was lined with brick. It was round in shape—a literal tube.

At the Murray Street end of the tracks stood the car. This was round and almost exactly fitted in the tunnel, as it would have to do, of course, if it was to be moved by air. It came within an inch and one-half of touching the tunnel walls. Boards over the floor made the bottom look straight, but the walls and ceiling were left round. The car was rather elaborately fitted up. It was about half the size of our present ones; it seated eighteen persons. It was lighted by a single zercon light. This subway had to be lit by gas, remember. Electricity had not yet been invented.

Breathing air was given by means of a smaller tunnel, four to five feet in diameter, running northeast to an airwell, covered by the grating opposite City Hall that was spoken of in the beginning.

The weirdest thing about the subway project—in fact, the only weird thing to us nowadays—is that the car was to be blown to and fro.

It seems that air was to be forced into the tunnel by means of a big blowing machine. The blower was moved by a steam engine of 100 horse-power. It could give a volume of 100,000 cubic feet of air per minute. This would mean that three-fourths of a ton of air would be thrown at the end of the car, far more than would be needed to move it.

When the air current was reversed a practical vacuum was produced in the tunnel, and the car was then drawn back in an opposite direction.

During the year the tunnel was kept open the car was actually moved back and forth by air. Mail, too, was run by air through smaller tubes parallel to the tunnel. It was found that the most terrific current of air did not hurt the thinnest of envelopes.

After the tunnel had been seen New York was amazed, but pleasantly so. THE TIMES the day after the first reception comments:

"Certainly the most novel, if not the most successful, enterprise that New York has seen for many a day is the pneumatic tube under Broadway. A myth or a humbug it has hitherto been called by everybody who has been excluded from its interior, but hereafter the incredulous public can have the opportunity of examining the undertaking and judging of its merits.

"Yesterday the tunnel was thrown open to the inspection of visitors for the first time, and it must be said that every one of them came away surprised and gratified. Such as expected to find a dismal, cavernous retreat under Broadway opened their eyes at the elegant reception rooms, and the light, airy tunnel, and the general appearance of taste and comfort in all the apartments, and those who entered to pick out some scientific flaw in the project were silenced by the completeness of the machinery, the solidity of the work, and the safety of the running apparatus.

In spite of all this, however, the Beach Construction Company did not feel by any means secure. Their tunnel was useless to them unless they were allowed to finish it. Could they get that permission?

Until they had done so, work on the Subway had to be stopped. The company issued the following notice:

"The company has temporarily suspended operations on the tunnel in order to give the public an opportunity to examine the works which are now open for inspection. The entrance is 360 Broadway, corner Warren Street, directly opposite City Hall. The ladies of the Union Home for the Orphans of Soldiers and Sailors, a most deserving charity, are in possession of the doors and receive the proceeds of the admission fee, 25 cents."

Then they went to work to convince the Legislature that it should pass the Subway bill.

Subway meetings were called, just as they are now. The company got all the citizens who were in favor of their scheme to sign a memorial.

In the meantime, the ring was pushing a little project of its own. If new transportation facilities were needed, they felt that they were the proper people to provide them. As a Subway believer put it: "If the people were determined to have rapid transit, the members of the ring were equally determined to possess themselves of the grant and, with characteristic knavery, make it a help in their continued robberies of the city treasury.

A Subway, the ring said, was impractical. The thing for New York to do was to build an elevated.

The transportation question was an exciting one that year. The different factions vividly described each other's plans, just as they are doing now.

Finally, in January, 1871, when the Legislature came together, the Beach Construction Company presented its bill, granting the necessary authority to proceed with the construction of the work. It backed this up by the memorial.

The Tammany ring fought the bill as hard as it could. Nevertheless, both houses passed it, the Senate by a large majority (figures unknown) and the Assembly by a majority of 102 to 11.

Tammany spent no time in merely being furious. It promptly got up an elevated railroad bill. (Probably if the Subway bill had been killed the building of an elevated would have been put off indefinitely.) The obliging Legislature cheerfully passed this, too.

It was up to the Governor now.

Here were the two bills. One granted authority to build an underground railway by private capital on specific street routes. The only available description of the other is one given by a member of the Beach Construction Company. With that explanation the description is given.

"The Tammany ring Viaduct bill gives to Tweed, Sweeny, Connolly, Hall, Hilton, Smith, their agents and associates, the most sweeping and dangerous powers, authorizes them to select their own route, to disfigure the city from one end to the other by the erection of a huge railway bridge or barrier, and to cap the climax, Connolly is authorized to pay over to them, from the City Treasury $5,000,000 to begin operations!"

On the afternoon of March 30, 1871, the final delegations for both bills went up to plead their causes before the Governor—Gov. Hoffman.

There were mass meetings all over New York that day. A large number of people were worked up over the question, one way or another.

The Governor gravely listened to the arguments of both delegations. Then he did a remarkable thing.

He weighed all the evidence promptly in the evening, after the delegations had gone home. Then, ever true to duty, he stayed up all night and wrote out his decision—a long, intricate decision. It appeared in the morning newspapers next day, April 1.

The newspapers expressed their admiration for his ability and industry in their editorial columns of the same day.

The Tribune—"The industry of Gov. Hoffman in preparing in a few hours the long and somewhat too elaborate veto of the Beach Pneumatic Railway bill will commend itself to the curiosity if not the approval of the public. But curiosity will be aroused on discovering that the veto is that of Tammany's Chief Engineer of Public Works, Mr. Tracy, and that it was long since prepared.

"At least all the reasons are the Engineer's, and most of the language is not the Governor's. Of course it was to be expected that, as long as Tammany had no hand in the scheme and saw no chance of converting it into a swindle, its influence would be used against it, but for the sake of decency its tracks might have been covered up."

The Sun came out with an editorial saying that the general impression was that the Governor would veto it. The Sun said that it considered this course of action on the Governor's part as probable because he wanted the Tammany ring to name him as candidate for President the following year.

But The Albany Evening Journal is the richest of them all. It blandly announces: "We cannot but congratulate Gov. Hoffman upon his admirable facility in reaching conclusions and still more remarkable expertness in preparing messages. On Thursday afternoon he accorded a hearing to parties interested for or against the Pneumatic Railroad bill. He had not then, of course, determined whether he would sign or veto it, since, if he had, it would have been superfluous to listen to arguments upon the question. Yet, upon the following morning, not only had he weighed the various points and made his decision, but he had prepared a veto message filling two solid columns of this journal and transmitted it to the Legislature! Such extraordinary readiness of decision and dexterity of execution are beyond all praise. The World once offered Mayor Hall the position of police reporter upon its staff. We are sure his Excellency the Governor will receive it as no disparagement when we say that in this marvelous dispatch on the pneumatic railroad he has shown qualifications for the highest journalistic station where such facility is as invaluable as it is indispensable."

But, however much the press and the public might rage, the Broadway underground had been killed. It closed up its little block of service. Several gentlemen were the poorer by hundreds and thousands of dollars, and the Ninth Avenue elevated went bravely up.

Shortly after Tammany was destroyed—according to The Scientific American, any way—that journal announced that "that wretched organization is no more."

But whether Tammany was temporarily broken or not, the Broadway Subway was finally so. It is a question whether it could ever have been successful. When the present Subway was built the plan of moving the cars by air pressure was considered. It was given up because it was decided that the walls of the stations could not stand the necessary weight of the air.

However, whether the old roadway scheme was practical or not, it was certainly enterprising. And when they want to build a subway under Broadway now, they will find the block between Warren and Murray Streets already dug for them.

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