



## < Tunnel to Terminus: The Story of Penn Station

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JACKI LYDEN, host:

It would have been hard getting all those mouthwatering barbecue supplies into Gotham a hundred years ago. Back then, Manhattan really was still an island and getting there was slow.

Ms. JILL JONNES (Author, "Conquering Gotham: A Gilded Age Epic: The Construction of Penn Station and its Tunnels"): If you looked at the Jersey shore on those days, it was very industrialized, 10 railroads came to a halt. On the shores of the Hudson River there and there were six ferry lines to handle 90 million passengers coming back and forth.

LYDEN: That's Jill Jones, author of a new book called "Conquering Gotham." It tells a story of one man's epic struggle to build a network of tunnels linking Manhattan to the rest of the country.

Alexander Cassatt was the visionary behind these tunnels. He was the president of the Pennsylvania Railroad, and his plan included a colossal terminus for his rail lines - the original Penn station, a breathtaking monument to the gilded age.

Ms. JONNES: The Pennsylvania Railroad refer to themselves as the standard railroad of America, and it very much bothered them that they could not come into New York in style. And so throughout his career, getting into New York was Cassatt's obsession.

LYDEN: Cassatt had a number of ideas, initially at his disposal, but it was going to be either a bridge or a tunnel. How did he decide which to do?

Ms. JONNES: Cassatt went to Paris to see his sister, Mary Cassatt, the painter - by this time, it's now the summer of 1901. And while he was there, he got a telegram saying go look at the Gare d'Orsay, which had opened the previous year. And he goes to look and he realizes that the trains have come in with electrical locomotives.

Why is that important? Because the Hudson River is a mile wide and if you were to put a tunnel underneath it, everyone would be asphyxiated by the time they got to Penn Station. With electrical locomotives, you could now have a tunnel, and the tunnel would be only for you. Everyone else would still have to put their passengers on the ferries.

LYDEN: And in 1905 work begins, and that's about the last piece of good news that Cassatt and his men get through a bid.

Ms. JONNES: Yes. The project turns out to be incredibly difficult - it threw this incredibly soupy silt. And as the tunnel is getting finished they are realizing that the tunnels are moving. And as I was reading these board of engineers' minutes, I came to learn that essentially the Pennsylvania Railroad did not know, to their own satisfaction, if these tunnels were safe when they opened them.

LYDEN: It's so frightening to think of. I mean, we - no one really knows how many men lost their lives creating this thing. And there were accidents, people died frequently.

Ms. JONNES: Yes. In a Hudson River Tunnel, two people died. But the tunnels that were

really hellish to build were the ones under the East River, and there were four of them. And they flooded, they had fires, they cracked, they had so many problems. I mean, I just, in the end, had to guess that anywhere between 50 and 100 people died.

LYDEN: How many miles altogether?

Ms. JONNES: It's 16 miles of tunnels.

LYDEN: There's the other part of this enormous enterprise. They want to create this amazing railroad station. Cassatt has to appropriate four square city blocks of central Manhattan.

Ms. JONNES: Yes. And those four blocks happened to be in the Tenderloin, which is Manhattan's worst vice district. It's also known as Satan's Circus. And it's a chockablock with saloons and dance halls and brothels. It's very much the haunt of the criminals. So it's not all that appealing that they have to put their train station in this very unsavory neighborhood. And they have to buy everything secretly.

It is a fact that when the Brooklyn Bridge was built and it opened in 1884, the Tammany was paid \$65,000 in graft and Boss Tweed was on the board.

LYDEN: Tammany being the political machine at that time.

Ms. JONNES: Yes. The Tammany Tiger were the Democrats of New York. So when the word gets out that the Pennsylvania Railroad is coming into New York, Tammany, as I think I write in my book, licked its venal-trops(ph) and they let it be known that they expected to be paid \$300,000 in what was then known as boodle.

Fortunately for Cassatt, at this very moment, the mayor of New York overstepped himself, the Tammany mayor, and the electorate is so outraged that they actually vote for a new reform mayor, a man named Seth Low. And so Cassatt really has this very good fortune that he, exactly as he wants to, come into New York and build this gargantuan project and not pay graft. He has someone who's a complete ally and that is Seth Low.

As you can imagine when word got out that they - the Pennsylvania Railroad was building a station in New York, Cassatt and Ray were deluged with architects presenting themselves as the person to build this. But Cassatt chose Charles McKim of McKim, Mead, and White, that was in 1902 when he was also actually in Washington renovating the White House for Teddy Roosevelt. And he designs this absolutely extraordinary building.

McKim wants to use this very warm pink Milford granite. And Cassatt's - oh, I don't know. That sounds very expensive. Maybe we should make it out bricks. And one of the things about McKim is he was very, very persuasive. And so he did persuade Cassatt that that was the way to go. And then the other issue was what was known as the general waiting room, which is the most famous part of station, which was this incredibly luminous, very tall...

LYDEN: Hall.

Ms. JONNES: ...just - hall. A fantastic hall.

LYDEN: It's the largest room in the world.

Ms. JONNES: The largest room in the world. You could fit city hall of New York into that room.

LYDEN: What did New Yorkers say when they were invited in, in November of 1910?

Ms. JONNES: Well, it was very funny, almost, because New Yorkers then as now view themselves as great sophisticates. But they were overwhelmed and they all acted like out of town rubes, and they massed into Penn Station the night it opened in huge numbers -

something like 100,000 people swarmed in. The avenues were just thick with people.

And then the station - everyone was trying everything out. It had something like 158 water fountains - everyone had to drink at them. Everyone was going to have their shoe shined or their hair cut. That station was something like a little city. It was full of amenities and people were in tears over the beauty of it.

LYDEN: I'm in tears over not getting to see it. Why was it pulled down in 1961?

Ms. JONNES: The railroads became very regulated and their competitors were not. Their competitors were very subsidized by the U.S. government. And the railroads just - really much, were on hard times. And the people who ran the Pennsylvania Railroad had no appreciation for the station, nor did anyone else by and large.

The only people who spoke up was really Ada Louise Huxtable at the New York Times and the editorial board there and a couple of hundred architects in New York who actually went out in their - it was a quite wonderful pictures. They all had on their suits and their hats and the women wearing pearls and pumps and with their placards protesting.

The station had not been cared for, had become very grimy. So it was torn down. It took them three years. It was such a massive enterprise. And someone pointed out to me that the George Fuller Construction Company, which built the station, was also the company that tore it down.

LYDEN: The book is "Conquering Gotham: A Gilded Age Epic: The Construction of Penn Station and Its Tunnels." Jill Jonnes, thanks very much for being with us.

Ms. JONNES: Thank you so much.

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