

# Blackwell's Almanac

A Publication of the Roosevelt Island Historical Society



*Excavation of the 63rd St. MTA tunnel under the East River began in 1970. The structure is unique among New York City transit tunnels. How? See "Grand Central Madison: Some Photos and Facts," p. 10. Photo: Andrew Sparberg.*

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*Blackwell's Almanac*

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## The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire: How It Spurred the Labor Movement and the New Deal

It's Saturday, March 25, 1911. In the Asch building on the corner of Greene Street and Washington Place in Greenwich Village, 500 people, mostly immigrant women in their teens and twenties, are cutting and sewing and ironing women's blouses for the Triangle Shirtwaist Company.

Someone carelessly discards a cigarette and suddenly a spark ignites in a fabric scrap bin. Within minutes a blaze roars into existence and quickly envelops the 8th, 9th and 10th floors occupied by the company. The workers try frantically to get to the stairwells or elevators to flee the building. But they are trapped in a cramped space with narrow aisles encumbered by chairs, tables, baskets and bulky equipment. When they do get to the stairs, the doors are locked. Some are taken down in the elevators. When there is no longer room, the women try to slide down the cable or jump into the elevator shaft. Because the factory is filled with highly flammable materials, there are water buckets placed at intervals to help extinguish any such conflagration. Yet, adding to the horror, they are empty.

As they try to escape, many individuals are burned alive by the flames. Their bodies accumulate in front of the blocked exits. Many of those who successfully scramble onto the fire escape are pitched off as the structure collapses under their weight. When the firefighters finally arrive, it turns out their ladders are too short to reach the upper floors. So those waiting leap out the windows, falling to their death. In one of the most catastrophic workplace disasters ever seen in this country, 146 people perish. Numerous survivors are badly burned and injured.

**Common Conditions**

There was nothing unusual about the working conditions at the Triangle factory. Nor were workplace deaths unusual. The throngs of immigrants arriving on our shores from Italy and Eastern Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries produced an easily exploited (and apparently expendable) work force. They took jobs in "sweatshops," typically working from 7:00 am to 8:00 pm. That's 12 1/2 hours per day plus a daily half-hour for lunch, 7 days a week—or 87 1/2 hours a week for just \$6. At clothing manufacturers like Triangle, the workers often had to supply their own



*The Asch building with its top floors on fire. Later renamed the Brown Building, it is now a chemistry building at 23–29 Washington Place on the NYU campus. Photo: en.wikipedia.org.*

needles, thread, irons and sometimes even their own sewing machines. There were no bathrooms in the buildings; they were usually located in the ground floor courtyards. So exit doors were often locked to discourage the women from leaving and interrupting production.

It was not lost on even these unsophisticated newcomers just how deplorable their work situation was. In 1909, tens of thousands of garment workers from over 500 factories had staged a strike. They demanded safer working conditions plus a 20% wage increase, a vastly shortened 52-hour work week and extra pay for overtime.

Most of the factory owners agreed to higher wages and shorter hours. Triangle, however, was intransigent. They actually moved production outside of New York City for a time in order not to have to deal with the strike. They also hired thugs to beat up journalists sympathetic to the cause and applied political pressure to get the police to arrest strikers, who were subsequently fined and occasionally sentenced to labor camps. When the work stoppage ended in 1910, the Triangle workers resumed their jobs without any sort of union agreement—a situation that, as we know now, would end in tragedy.

Sadly, the owners of the factory, Isaac Harris and Max Blanck, were never really held accountable. Although they were charged with and tried for manslaughter, they were found not guilty. It is said that the judge himself may have been suborned to give instructions to the jury that made it difficult to convict. In another example of the blatant corruption leveled against these immigrants, the owners sidestepped a number of lawsuits filed against them by eventually paying every victim's family a sum of \$75. The owners, however, were paid \$400 per family by their insurers.

### **Anger and Activism**

Few events have so outraged the public as that fire. Just days later, plain, everyday, citizen New Yorkers filled the Metropolitan Opera House to participate in an emergency "call for action" regarding fire safety. A few days after that, some 350,000 people expressed their solidarity with the victims by joining a massive funeral procession held for them. And in April, workers' unions sponsored a protest march up Fifth Avenue that drew 80,000 participants.

In the end, blame for the disaster was attributed not only to the owners, but also to New York City government. Though the threat of fire in these sweatshops was well



*People and horses draped in black participate in a massive funeral procession. Photo: en.wikipedia.org.*

known (in fact, there had been previous incidents in Harris and Blanck enterprises), crooked city government had turned a blind eye. “No one was responsible for building safety. There were no clear regulations for fire safety and no modern fire equipment,” claims historian Richard Greenwald, who has written extensively on the subject.

sanitation upgrades and employment rules for women and children. The unprecedented “54 hour bill” capped the number of hours women and children could work. In the end, legislators completely rewrote New York State’s labor laws and created a State Department of Labor to enforce them.



*Even the 2011 centennial commemoration of the Triangle fire revolved around labor issues. Across the country, workers marched to protest the erosion of worker protections. Seen here are activists at the original building site in Greenwich Village. They are waving banners—many cut to look like shirtwaists—bearing victims’ names. Photo: <https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=Images+of+100th+anniversary+of+Triangle+Shirtwaist+fire&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8#vhid=odecTT4z6C3qhM&vssid=l>*

Contemporaneous voices agreed, leading New York State legislators to create the Factory Investigating Commission (FIC). This watchdog agency was charged with investigating labor conditions in garment factories, chemical companies, meat-packing plants and other industry sites throughout the state, and using its sweeping powers to demand corrective changes.

In the wake of its probes, over 20 new laws were passed that made the state responsible for fire, building and worker safety. They required the use of safety devices such as fireproof materials and stairwells, fire alarms, extinguishers and hoses, and ultimately banned smoking in factories. The laws also mandated regular factory inspections,

### **Action Goes Nationwide**

The notorious fire fueled progressive activity across the country. In particular, it gave a tremendous boost to organized labor, vastly swelling its membership. Reflecting union growth nationwide, New York’s Local 25 of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union had represented only a few hundred workers before the strike; it now grew to encompass more than 20,000 members.

One of the demands of the 1909 strikers had been for closed shops—sites where only union laborers would be hired, and any residual non-union workers would be treated the same as their union counterparts.

This was a radical demand

at the time of the strike and was not successful. Nevertheless, on the shoulders of this early demand and public sympathy after the Triangle disaster, closed shops eventually became standard practice.

The fire’s legacy did not stop there. Two reform-minded individuals from New York drew inspiration from the catastrophe when they later worked in Franklin D. Roosevelt’s administration. Both Senator Robert F. Wagner and Frances Perkins, one of the architects of the FIC and later FDR’s Secretary of Labor, were instrumental in shaping the New Deal agenda, including the National Labor Relations Act. The right to organize, minimum wage, overtime pay after a 40-hour work week and unemployment

compensation were all benefits that grew out of the Triangle tragedy.

Perkins was actually a witness to the infamous conflagration. As she stood helplessly by, she vowed forever after to be a zealous advocate for workers' rights. Among her contributions, she relentlessly championed the principle that working people should be able to live with dignity in old age. That was her motive for creating the most ground-breaking program of all—Social Security.

The Triangle Shirtwaist fire should never have happened. Still, it is an example of good coming from bad. Its sheer criminality so moved the state and the country, it catalyzed a new era of worker protections from which there was no turning back.

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*The Triangle Fire Memorial, dedicated on October 11, 2023. It consists of two stainless steel “ribbons” descending from the 9th floor site of the fire, embellished with the names of the victims closer to street level. Below is a plaque. Photo: Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition, NYC Cultural Affairs.*

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## Ancestry.RIHS

It was a sunny day, so there were many tourists visiting Roosevelt Island that winter weekend. It happens that Judy Berdy, President of the Roosevelt Island Historical Society, was at the Visitor Center kiosk when a woman came in to inquire about the island's sights. In the course of conversation, the visitor, Susan Bowling, mentioned that she thought her grandmother had gone to nursing school on what was, at the time, Welfare Island.

Judy took down the grandmother's name and proceeded to email a contact at the New York Academy of Medicine. Sure enough, there was a loose-leaf notebook kept by the Alumni Association of the New York Training School for Nurses at City Hospital. Montrose Davis Moore, from Shelby, North Carolina, appeared in the list of graduates for the year 1933.

Susan and her uncle Frank Moore (Montrose's son) were thrilled at the finding and it inspired them to do a little digging of their own.

It seems the Davis family was in some way related to the very prominent Duke family. In 1929, a disbursement from the tobacco magnate James B. Duke was made to Montrose and her siblings Henry, Stanley and Kathleen. They each received \$3,000—\$60,000 in today's money, and that inheritance changed Montrose's life, as well as her own children's lives. It allowed her to become a member of a coveted profession and earn a good living, even in the depths of the Depression.

After moving back to Shelby, Montrose became a private duty nurse and worked for the same family for decades. According to Frank and Susan, Montrose loved her work and was proud of being an RN. They, in turn, admire her courage in moving from a small southern town to study nursing in New York City. It seems her time here made quite an impression. Susan says she talked a lot about New York and she thinks her grandmother was "a city girl at heart."



## How Did American and British English Become Different?

Language virtually never stays static. Any language evolves over time, responding to new influences. And...if a language is transplanted to a distant locale with limited communication with the mother tongue, the language in each locale will evolve differently.

That's what happened with English.

Our American speech began with late 17<sup>th</sup> century English brought from Britain by the first settlers to the thirteen colonies. At the time the two modes of speaking were identical... and then they weren't. Oddly, our English has retained some older features that have since disappeared in Britain. One example is how we pronounce our *r*'s. We actually pronounce them (*fire* = *fi-er*, *winter* = *win-ter*), as did Britons long ago. But sometime in the 18<sup>th</sup> century it became fashionable among the English upper classes in southern England to soften their *r*'s (*fire* = *fi-yah*, *winter* = *win-tuh*). Eventually this affectation also spread to the lower classes in many parts of England (although not in Scotland or Ireland).

Another example is the past participle of *got*. You can identify the speaker's nationality by whether he/she says "I have gotten really good at this" or "I have got really good at this." American English has retained the old Anglo-Saxon (ie, Germanic) *en* ending, while the Brits have modernized.

On the other hand, British English has kept the older word *whilst* versus America's *while*. And it most often employs the older *shall* to express a future action by the speaker(s) or writer(s). For example, *I shall be away that weekend* or *we shall be away that weekend* as compared with the American *I will* or *we will be away that weekend*.

Both sides of the pond speak an English with a good deal of French in it, thanks to the invasion by William the Conqueror in 1066.

Norman French became the high language, used by the aristocracy in schools, at court and in universities. Eventually it melded with the Anglo-Saxon-based language of the masses and became Middle English. But, because of England and France's geographical proximity, there was another wave of French trendiness in the 1700s and 1800s, which America mostly missed out on. Britain adopted certain French spelling styles and vocabulary, especially in the realm of cuisine. Thus their *aubergine* is our *eggplant*; their *courgette* is our *zucchini*. Also, their *queue* (as in, *form a queue*) is our *line*.

### Linguistic (Not Just Political) Independence

Another major influence in decoupling American English from its British origins was a gentleman by the name of Noah Webster. No doubt the name is familiar; even now, well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, you probably have a dictionary in your home bearing his name.

Although he earned a law degree in 1778, like most supporters of the Revolution, Webster found it impossible to find a job while the British were fighting to subdue the rebel American colonists. Searching for another profession, he came across the writings of the English lexicographer Samuel Johnson and fell in love with language. Most of all he fell in love with the notion of democratizing the "American Tongue." That meant purging American English of its British aristocratic underpinnings in order to "establish a national language as well as a national government." It also meant making the written language accessible to all.

Taking a page from Benjamin Franklin, who held that "people spell best who do not know how to spell," Webster decided that our English should be more phonetic and logical. Most successful among his efforts were:

1. changing the *re* and *ce* endings in words such as *theatre*, *centre*, *offence* and *licence* (influenced by French) to *theater*, *center*, *offense* and *license*;

2. substituting a z for the British s in words like *hypnotise*, now *hypnotize*, and *publicise*, now *publicize*;
3. replacing *ou* in words like *flavour*, *honour* and *colour* with a simple *o*, as in *flavor*, *honor* and *color*; and
4. modifying unnecessary double consonants, for example *traveler* instead of *traveller* and *jeweler* instead of *jeweller*.

Webster experienced some failures, notably: *nabor* rather than *neighbor*; *wimmen* for *women*, *blud* for *blood* and *dawter* as a substitute for *daughter*. But because schoolbooks, previously imported from England, were in short supply during and after the Revolution, Webster's own textbooks, "American Grammar" (1784), "American Reader" (1785) and "American Spelling Book" (1789) gained dominance in the schools. This allowed his American English—in all its many deviations from British English—to become the educational standard. In fact, by the turn of the century, his speller was a best-seller. With some 100 million copies in print, the textbook was only outsold by the Bible.

### Reflections of the North American Continent

Webster also recognized that our very environment had already yielded, and would continue to yield, new words and usages the Brits would never encounter. Even without his efforts, it's likely that our language would have been infused with foreign words from immigrants, Native American words, pure Americanisms that grew out of our culture, scientific terminology and slang. But Webster fought to accelerate the process. And two important vehicles helped him accomplish this goal.

In 1793, then Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton appointed Webster editor of New York City's first daily newspaper, "American Minerva." It's an open question whether Webster actively broadened the lexicon employed in the publication, or whether the news gathered from as wide a radius as possible brought him an overwhelming rush of verbal richness. Either way, the newspaper transmitted to the city's

inhabitants an unprecedented linguistic vitality.

While Webster authored many books and pamphlets over the course of his life, his most passionate project was creating an American dictionary in order to codify the rampant expansion of the American vernacular. His "American Dictionary of the English Language," a cultural landmark, appeared in 1828. In it were:

- such Native American words as *canoe*, *maize* and *moccasin*;
- *prairie* and *dime* (an ancient tax on harvests amounting to one tenth of the crop) from French;
- the Dutch-derived words *cookie* and *landscape*;
- the German *kindergarten*;
- Spanish and Mexican contributions, including *mesa*, *canyon*, *stampede* and *hoosegow* (from the word *juzgado*, meaning a place where justice is administered);
- combined words like *bullfrog* and *rattlesnake*;
- neologisms such as *currency*, *gimmick* and *graveyard*.

This attitude of openness was the polar opposite of the policy adopted in Britain. The English considered their language "the language of empire." Thus men such as lexicographer Samuel Johnson, in his own "A Dictionary of the English Language," insisted on preserving the purity of Britain's linguistic tradition, ruthlessly rejecting new creations, vulgarities and foreign loan words (except apparently for French).

### More Areas of Divergence

The respective evolutions have continued. Each of the versions of English has made its own choices. America is such a fast-paced society, we sometimes shorten our communication by dropping words altogether. Consider *She writes me every week* compared with the British mandatory construction, *She writes to me every week*. Or, if you ask someone whether he/she would like to go shopping, an American response might be *I would*—with no verb whatever; whereas Brits will say *I would do*.



Collective nouns are another area of distinction. In America, for the most part we use a singular verb, eg, *My family has roots in Eastern Europe; Congress is adjourning this week.* By contrast, England usually prefers: *My family have roots in Eastern Europe; Parliament are adjourning this week.*

By far the biggest differences in our speech revolve around vocabulary. Some can be amusing, while others can be downright embarrassing. It is well known that American soccer = British *football*; *elevator* = *lift*; *vacation* = *holiday*; a car *trunk* = *boot*; and the *hood* = *bonnet*. What you may not know, to your peril, is: *to table an item on the agenda* means *to eliminate or delay its discussion* in American English, but *to open it up for discussion* in British English; a *rubber* is not a condom, but an *eraser*; *pissed* does not mean angry, but rather *very drunk*; *pants* would be translated as *trousers*, and would be interpreted to mean *underpants*; and most important of all, *fanny* means *vulva*, not butt, and a *fanny pack* would be called a *bum bag*.

When the automobile was being invented and improved upon in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, communication across the pond was still quite primitive. There was no radio and certainly no TV. The cinema was still in its infancy. Transoceanic phone calls were rare. Take a look at the sidebar to see how, each of us, in our own little linguistic bubble, named car parts and related terms. You'd think the auto was two entirely different inventions!

### What Next?

We've all heard George Bernard Shaw's pithy declaration that the U.S. and the U.K. are "two countries divided by a common language." And no doubt our existing differences will persist. But the world is becoming more and more homogeneous. Globalization has encouraged expanded cultural contact across continents. With the daily exposure of America to Britain and Britain to America afforded by TV, streaming services and social media, might the past not be prologue? Could our languages become closer rather than farther apart in the future?

US	UK
battery	accumulator
tow truck	breakdown lorry
parking lot	car park
camper	caravan
guardrail	crash barrier
divided highway	dual carriageway
station wagon	estate car
overpass	flyover
transmission	gearbox
gear shift	gear lever
yield	give way
rental car	hire car
turn signal	indicator
semi, tractor-trailer	juggernaut
jumper cable	jump lead
fork (in the road)	junction
truck	lorry
freeway, highway	motorway
fender	wheel arch, wing
license plate	number plate
pass (a vehicle)	overtake
sidewalk	footpath
gas, gasoline	petrol
mass transit	public transport
sedan	saloon
muffler	silencer
undivided highway	single carriageway
wrench	spanner
idling	ticking over
truck stop	transport café
windshield	windscreen
auto detailing	car valeting

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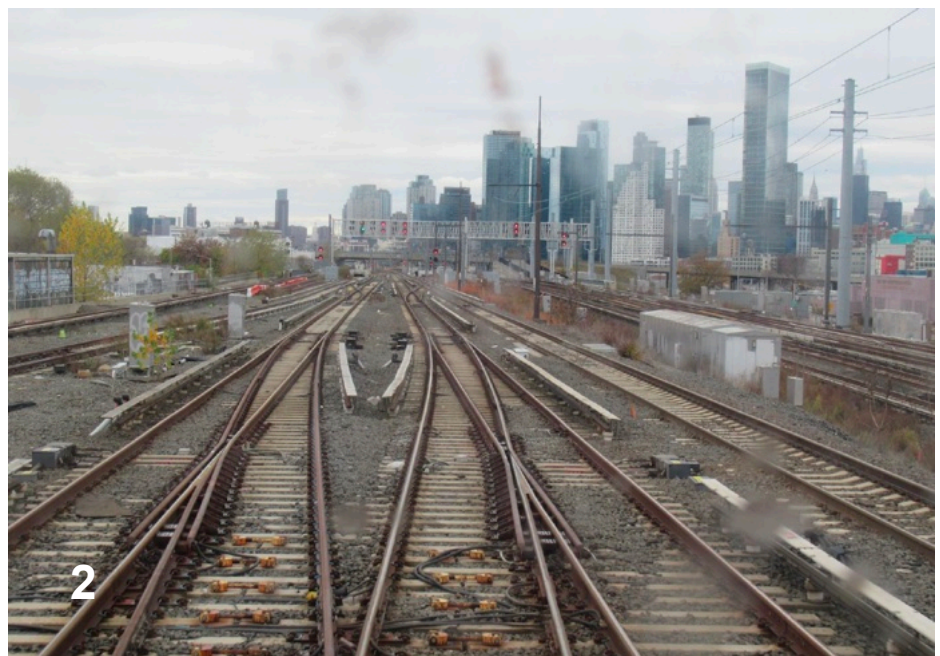
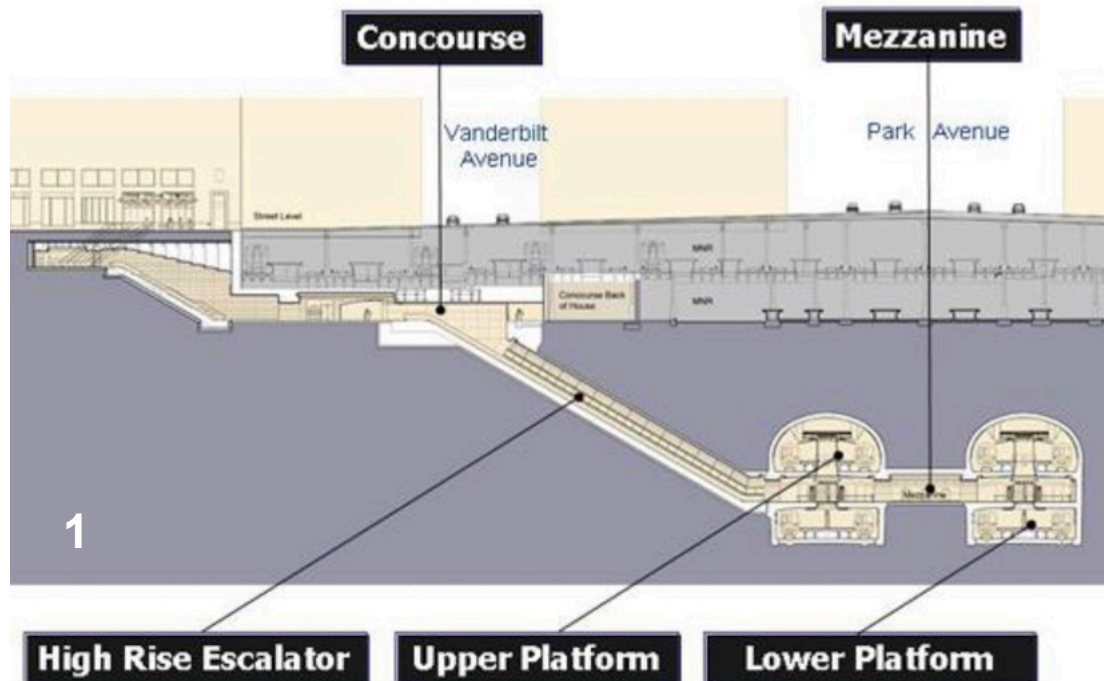
## Grand Central Madison: Some Photos and Facts

*On April 16, 2024, Andrew J. Sparberg, a retired MTA-LIRR manager, CUNY adjunct professor and general transportation guru, presented “MTA’s 1968 Program for Action: A Personal Photo Essay” at our local library. Sponsored jointly by our branch of the New York Public Library and the Roosevelt Island Historical Society, Sparberg’s talk and slides described the LIRR’s new service to Grand Central. Here is a brief summary. All photos are courtesy of Mr. Sparberg.*

In 1968, the newly formed MTA adopted plans to expand transportation options between Queens and Manhattan. The first step was to excavate the 63<sup>rd</sup> Street tunnel (see cover), a sister structure to the existing 53<sup>rd</sup> Street tunnel. Uniquely, the new tunnel had two levels—the only such tunnel in all of NYC. Why? The top level was to be used for our very own subway, connecting first the Q train and then the F between Queensbridge, Roosevelt Island and Lexington Av/63<sup>rd</sup> Street. The lower level was to be dedicated to the LIRR’s “east side access.”

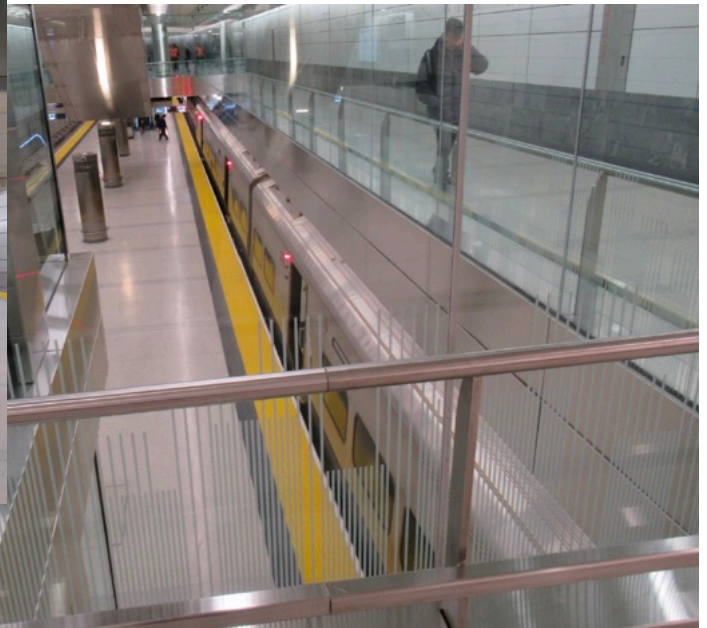
Groundbreaking for the tunnel occurred in February 1970. It took until 1989 for our subway to debut and till January 2023 for the maiden revenue voyage of the LIRR into GCM. Today, if you listen carefully from the upper level, you can hear the Long Island train as it rumbles through the RI station.

**(1)** Cross-section of Grand Central Madison. The concourse is at about the same level as the lower level of Metro North (gray). **(2)** The LIRR east portal just before entering the 63<sup>rd</sup> St. tunnel. It’s called the Harold Interlocking, named after its location at 39<sup>th</sup> St. and the former Harold Avenue in LIC.

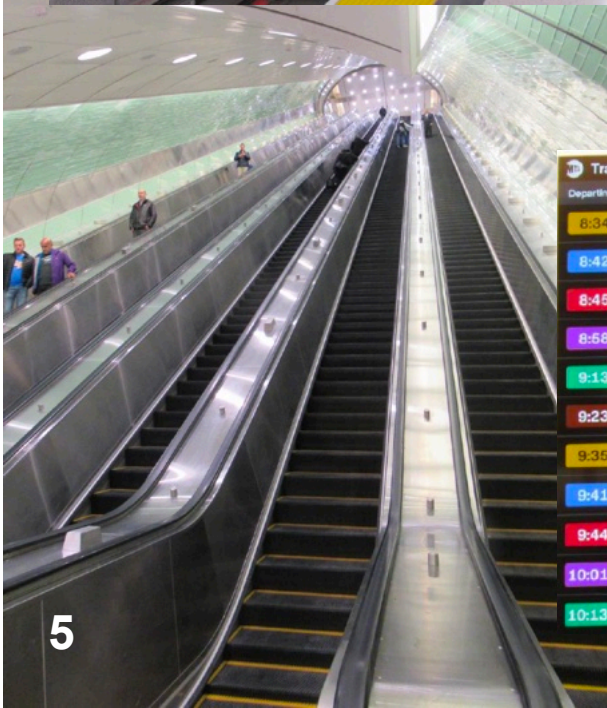




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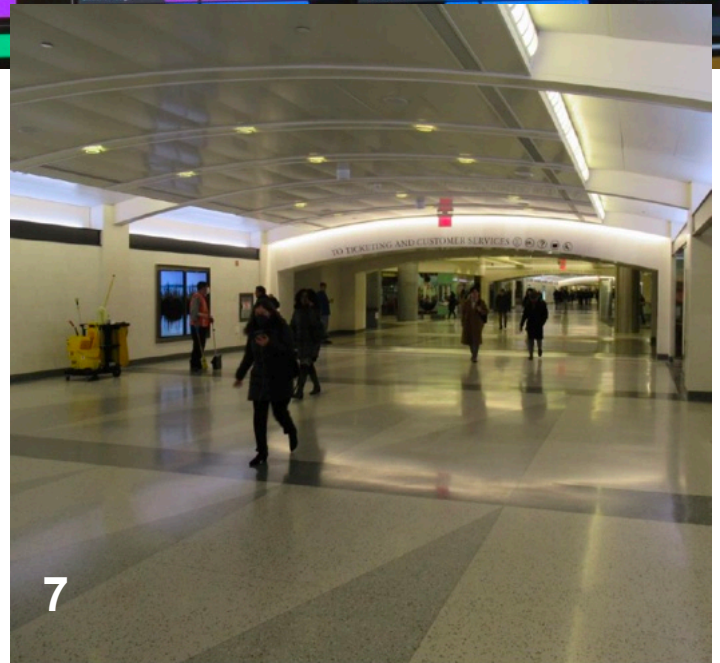
4



5

Trains to Long Island		8:32:55		Next train to...	
Departing Train	Track	Destination	Departing Trains	Track	Destination
8:34	Hempstead	201	8:42	Huntington	↓
8:42	Huntington	304	8:42	Babylon	↓
8:45	Port Washington		8:43	Babylon	↓
8:58	Roskonoima		8:43	Babylon	↓
9:13	Babylon		8:58	Great Neck	↓
9:23	Far Rockaway		9:13	Babylon	↓
9:35	Hempstead		9:13	Babylon	↓
9:41	Huntington		9:23	Far Rockaway	↓
9:44	Port Washington		9:35	Hempstead	↓
10:01	Roskonoima		9:41	Huntington	↓
10:13	Babylon		9:44	Port Washington	↓
			10:01	Roskonoima	↓
			10:13	Babylon	↓

6



7

(3) Arrival at GCM track 301 on lower level on Jan. 29, 2023, the service's first revenue day. At 140–150 feet below the surface, the LIRR lower level at Grand Central is one of the deepest terminals in the city, similar to the No. 7 terminal at Hudson Yards. (4) Looking at the lower level from the mezzanine. (5) The 45th St. bank of escalators between the mezzanine and the concourse measures 90 vertical feet from top to bottom, and a total of 182 feet in length. (6) The electronic departure board preserves the color coding for each LIRR branch that characterized the discontinued paper timetables. (7) Trekking the extensive concourse.

## **RIHS Calendar**

**Roosevelt Island Historical Society Lecture Series—FREE**

**@ the New York Public Library Branch, 504 Main St. No registration required.**

**Tuesday, May 14, 6:30 pm**

**In Person: Affordable Housing and the Future of Open Space**

Matthias Altwicker, AIA LEED AP, will discuss the history of affordable housing in New York, how Roosevelt Island fits into that history, and how ideas of open space that were supported by this housing are being reconsidered.

**Tuesday, May 21, 6:30 pm**

**In Person: Meet the Artist of the RI Mosaic “Double Take”**

Mixed-media artist Diana Cooper talks about her most recent work, “Double Take,” a permanent installation on RI commissioned by the MTA. The work appears in the recently published book “Contemporary Art Underground,” which documents the MTA Arts & Design collection in NYC.

**TBD**

**In Person: Urban Subway Construction**

Nasri Munfah, P.E., revisits his previous presentation about Eastside Access and the LIRR Connector under RI, expanding his focus to subway construction in urban areas, including the Second Avenue Subway and the Central Subway in San Francisco.

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