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**In December 1963, New York Central held a gala 50th birthday celebration at Grand Central Terminal in Manhattan.** Richard J. Solomon

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which opened in 1968 on the eve of the merger with Pennsylvania Railroad.

Central was an intermodal innovator. In 1921, its subsidiary L.C.L. Company started a service using small containers shipped on 50-foot flatcars that were transferred to trucks at freight terminals for local delivery. Although successful, the ICC viewed containerized railroad traffic as anticompetitive and demanded significant rate increases that squashed the business, before it could gain widespread acceptance. In 1957, Central debuted another intermodal container concept called Flexi-van that simplified transfer of containers between train and truck without the need of expensive equipment. Although it rapidly caught on, ultimately it was less successful than the trailer-on-flatcar concept promoted by PRR's Trailer-Train affiliate, and Flexivan withered after the Penn Central merger.

The legacy of the New York Central survives. Most of its primary freight corridors were key to Penn Central and Conrail's traffic flows; in many instances, especially in the Midwest, former New York Central routes prevailed over former PRR lines. Today the core of New York Central's lines remain active as parts of CSX and Norfolk Southern freight routes and are key portions of Amtrak's eastern route structure. ■

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mail a letter, secure a room, or engage in any of countless other activities at the myriad businesses within the walls of Grand Central Terminal that make it a city within a city.

“The greatest railroad terminal in the world” was the unequivocal declaration of writer Hugh Thompson in the title for his 1911 *Munsey’s Magazine* article describing the still-building Grand Central, and for once “the world’s greatest” was no exaggeration.

The New York Central Lines’ new Grand Central Terminal was opened to the public in February 1913, after a decade of construction

and an expenditure of perhaps \$65 million. It was truly the most magnificent of all the stations erected in that golden age of the passenger train, when the great and powerful railroad companies endeavored to surpass each other in the massive scale and opulence of their terminals; architectural historian Carroll L. V. Meeks called the era the “megalomania” phase of station building.

There were other stations that enjoyed greater critical acclaim for the beauty of their architecture. Even in New York, rival Pennsylvania Railroad’s huge Pennsylvania Station by

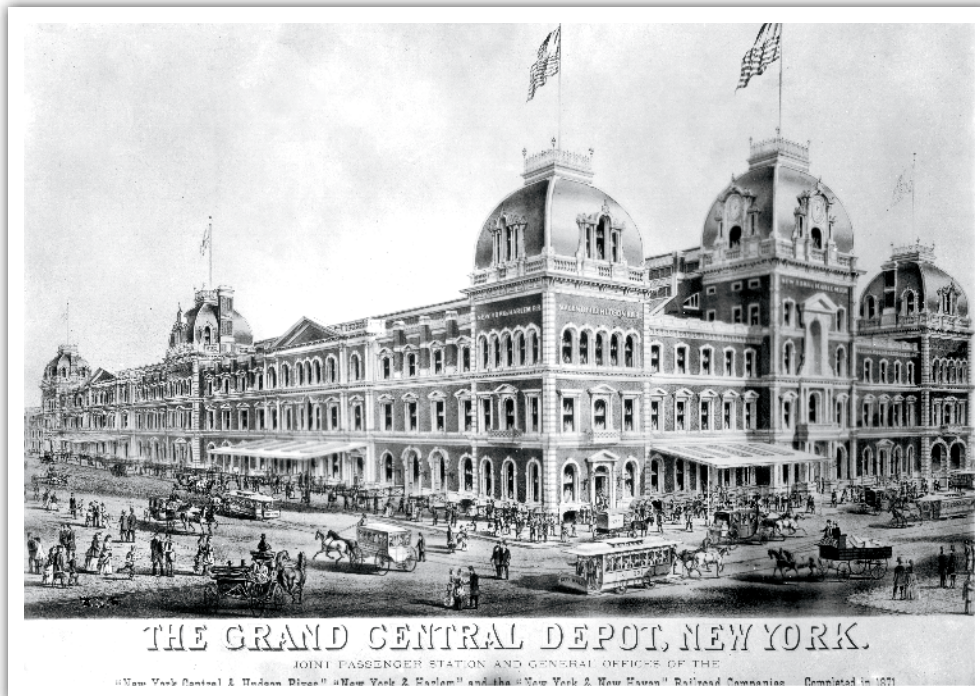
McKim, Mead & White generally got higher marks from the architectural critics. Too, Grand Central was far from being the world’s greatest terminal from the point of view of traffic. In 1913, for instance, the year Grand Central opened, Boston’s South Station — then the busiest in the U.S. — handled almost three quarters again as many passengers as Grand Central and more than twice as many trains.

But all of this was beside the point. Grand Central Terminal represented an extraordinary and unequaled merging of an inspired work of civil engineering, a landmark achievement for the still-young profession of electrical engineering, and a distinguished example of functional architecture. In the sheer, breathtaking magnitude of its overall scope, and the brilliance of its execution, the New York Central’s New York terminal project was unique. Almost a half century after it was built, architectural historian Meeks was to call Grand Central “one of the outstandingly successful stations of history.”

### TERMINAL PREDECESSORS

The present Grand Central is the second station to occupy the 42nd Street and Park Avenue site — or the third, depending upon how one regards an 1898 reconstruction of the first Grand Central. New York’s earliest terminals had been located farther downtown, but an 1854 act of the Common Council prohibited the operation of steam locomotives on Fourth Avenue below 42nd Street. This dictated the uptown site as the location for the new terminal that was placed under construction by Commodore Vanderbilt in 1869 for his newly organized New York Central & Hudson River Railroad.

Vanderbilt’s first Grand Central, which was two years abuilding, was one of the great American terminals of the 19th century; and



The genesis of today’s Grand Central Terminal was this depot completed in 1871 that served the trains of three railroads suitable for a growing metropolis. Penn Central



Smoke of 700 trains a day (date of this photo: Nov. 19, 1906) and a tunnel accident lead to electrification after the prohibition of steam in 1908. New York Central

its builders said it would accommodate the traffic for a half century to come. Yet, so fast did the traffic grow that the railway was obliged to construct an additional trainshed for the terminal scarcely a decade later. The alteration and enlargement of the terminal building carried out in 1898 was sufficient to increase its capacity to accommodate 60,000 passengers a day. But even this was not enough, for already commuters were traveling to and from their daily work in ever increasing numbers aboard the trains of the New York Central and the New Haven, which shared the station. In less than a decade the number of trains in and out of Grand Central almost doubled, from a daily average of 280 in 1894 to 505 in 1900.

Still greater expansion of the existing terminal was not a feasible solution to the Central's congestion problem, for Grand Central was set down in the midst of what by then was some of the world's most expensive real estate.

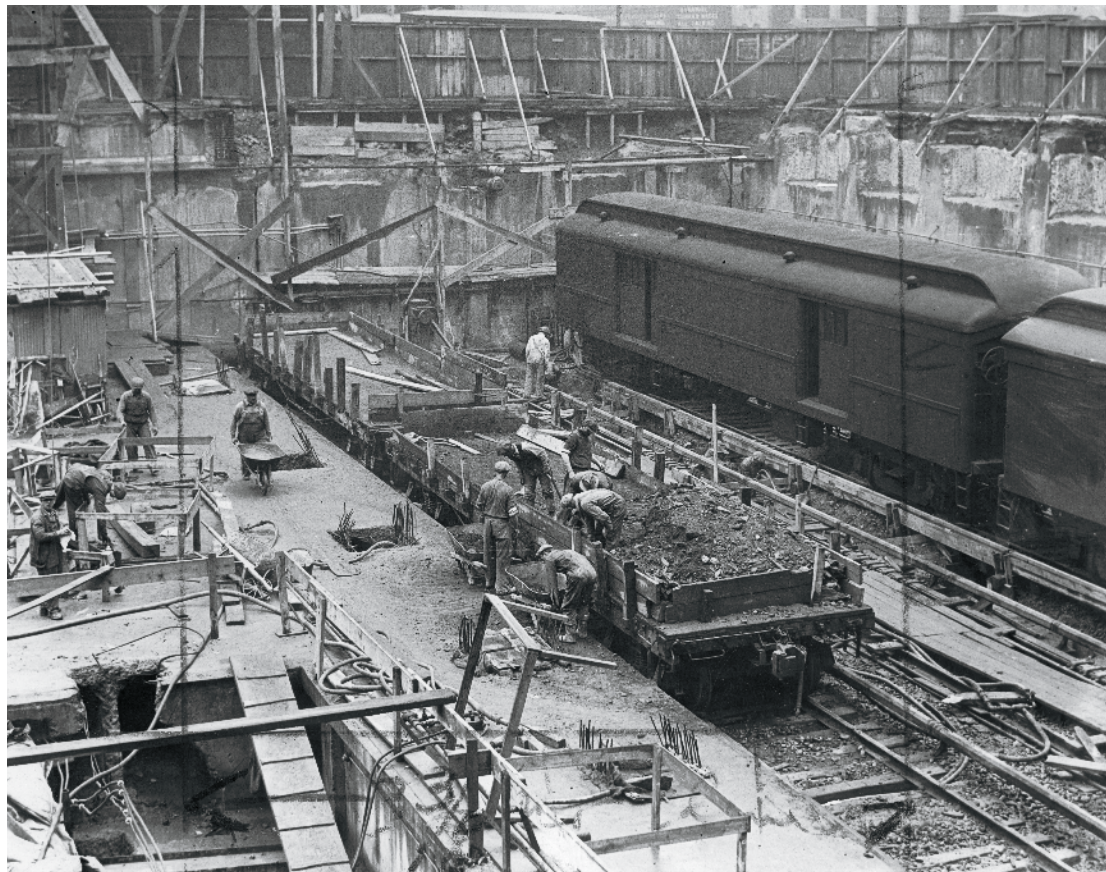
The Central suffered from another serious New York terminal problem as well, and the solution to this second problem was to prove the key to that of the first. Smoke and cinders from the locomotives of some 700 daily trains had become an intolerable nuisance for Manhattan residents along the railroad's tracks. Even more critical was the problem of the 2-mile Park Avenue tunnel that carried trains into Grand Central. The tunnel — actually a partially covered cut — frequently was so choked with smoke and steam that reading signals was impossible.

This condition contributed to several serious accidents. A collision in the tunnel on Jan. 8, 1902, which took the lives of 15 New Haven commuters when a train ran a red signal in the smoke-filled tunnel, was instrumental in the passage of state legislation the following year prohibiting the use of steam locomotives south of the Harlem River after July 1, 1903.

Thus, compelled to action by the legislators, the Central moved forward with a terminal electrification project that had been under consideration since about 1899. For the still-new field of electric traction, the project was to be a work of unprecedented difficulty and magnitude.

Little more than a decade had passed since electric traction had come of age with Frank J. Sprague's successful electrification of a Richmond (Va.) street railway system, and except for a 4-mile tunnel electrification by the Baltimore & Ohio at Baltimore in 1895, electric traction had not been successfully applied anywhere to the movement of heavy mainline rail traffic.

The New York Central electrification — which was planned by a special Electric Traction Commission that included traction pioneer Frank Sprague himself — went far beyond the immediate requirement for the electrification of trackage in Grand Central and its Manhattan approaches. Ultimately, electric operation was extended throughout



Workers prepare the future site of Grand Central Terminal with subgrade work in this undated image. The work appears to involve transferring aggregate from the rail car to wheelbarrows. *Classic Trains* collection



Park Avenue of the early 20th century was nearly devoid of traffic, relative to how it appeared in the second half of the century. At right is the new Grand Central Terminal. *H. Reid* collection



Sunlight streams down on the Tennessee marble floor of Grand Central's main concourse during World War II. New York Central

the length of the Central's two principal suburban routes, and the project required an initial equipment fleet of more than 200 new electric suburban cars and locomotives. The magazine *Scientific American* called the project the application of electric traction "on a vast and sweeping scale," and assuredly at the time of its opening in 1906 it was an electrification without parallel elsewhere in the U.S.

Electrification, because it eliminated the problem of ventilating locomotive gases, provided the railroad with a simple solution to its need for greater terminal track space without the prohibitive cost of additional real estate. A new terminal, to be erected on the site of the old, simply would be double-decked.

### THE WILGUS PLAN

The basic concept for the new Grand Central was developed by NYC Vice-President and Chief Engineer William J. Wilgus, a civil engineer of remarkable ability and accomplishment who also headed the special commission formed to plan the terminal electrification, and who had planned the 1898

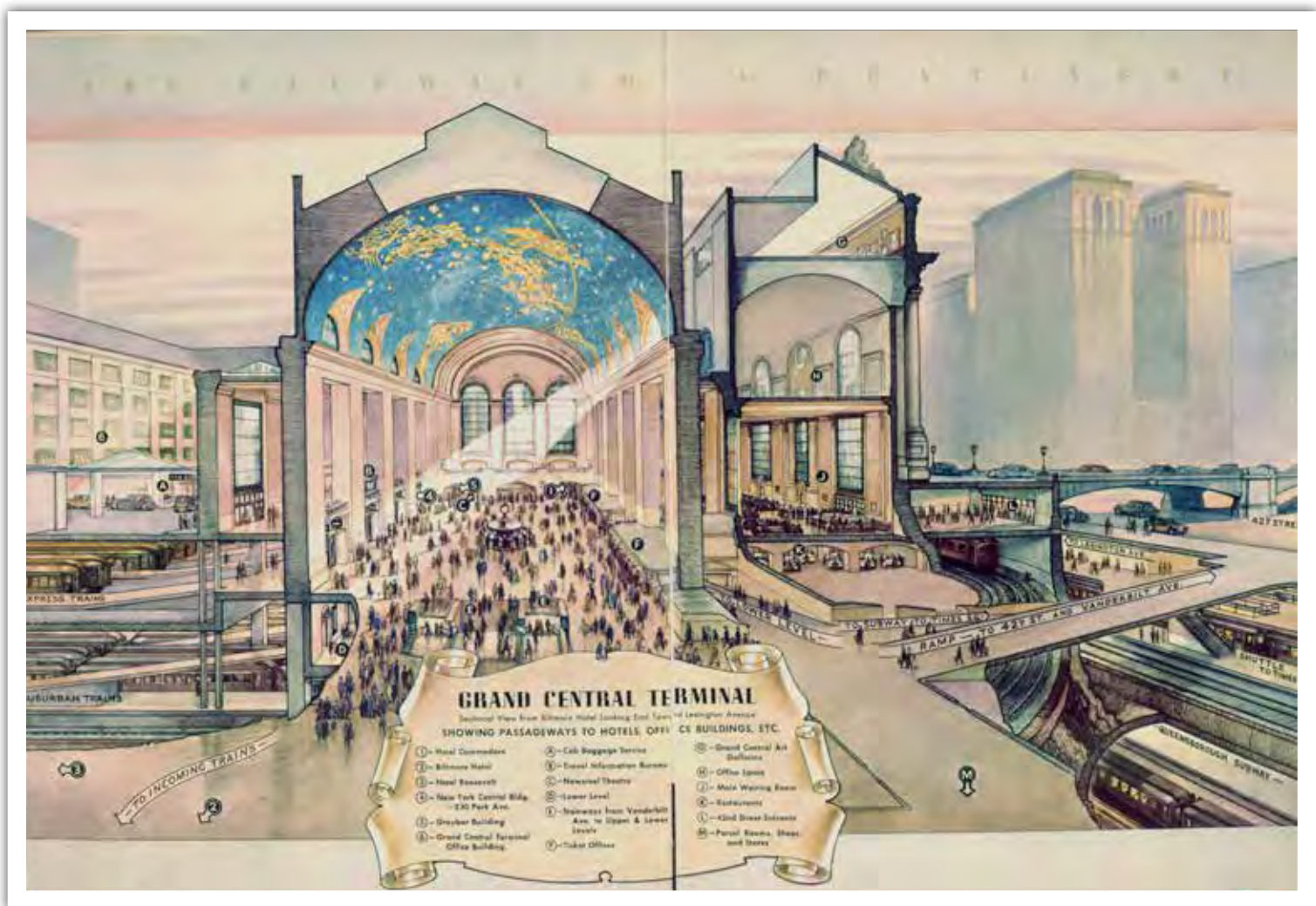
rebuilding and expansion of the original Vanderbilt-era Grand Central.

Like a number of his contemporaries in 19th- and early 20th-century engineering, Wilgus was a largely self-made engineer who doubtless would have failed to reach his high position in today's degree-conscious professional world. Wilgus was born at Buffalo, N.Y., in 1865, and he completed his formal education at the age of 20 with a Cornell University correspondence course in drafting. He began his career with posts in surveying and drafting, rapidly worked his way up to more responsible engineering positions on several Midwestern railroads, then joined the New York Central & Hudson River as an assistant engineer in 1893. Wilgus was appointed the railroad's chief engineer in 1899 and was named a vice president in 1903, when he was only 37 years old.

The Wilgus plan for the new terminal was unlike anything that had ever been done before. As the plan evolved, an upper tier intended for long-distance trains would have 31 tracks. A gradually sloping ramp would carry suburban trains to a lower tier that would

have another 17 tracks. Loops at the inner end of both tiers would permit inbound trains to turn and clear the terminal after discharging passengers. On the suburban level provision was made for a later connection with a Park Avenue subway, an arrangement that would have permitted suburban trains to continue south of 42nd Street. The inclusion of storage tracks in the terminal area would greatly reduce the number of empty equipment moves through the congested Park Avenue tunnel between the terminal and the railroad's Mott Haven Yard in the Bronx.

By depressing both terminal levels below street level, the Wilgus plan permitted the crosstown streets north of the terminal to be extended across the terminal tracks on bridges, removing a long-standing source of municipal irritation with the railroad. And because electrification eliminated the smoke problem, it was possible to plan for the eventual construction of buildings on "air rights" over the Central's tracks. Indeed, anticipated earnings from this source were a key part of Wilgus's economic studies that had helped to



The breathtaking extent of Grand Central Terminal is evident, if only partially revealed, in this cutaway illustration from 1938. New York Central

justify his entire terminal proposal to the railroad's directors.

Once Wilgus had established the basic concept for the terminal, the railroad company turned to the task of selecting an architect for the design of the new head building. A design competition early in 1903 brought entries from such distinguished architects as Chicago's Daniel H. Burnham, chief architect for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition and later the designer of such notable terminals as the Washington and Chicago union stations; Stanford White, New York's own celebrated classical designer and architect of the splendid second Madison Square Garden of 1889; and Philadelphia's Samuel Huckel Jr., who had daringly placed a statue of William Penn atop his design for the Philadelphia City Hall.

### SURPRISING CHOICE OF ARCHITECTS

Surprisingly, the prize went not to one of these notables but to the relatively unknown architectural partnership of Charles Reed and Allen Stem of St. Paul, Minn. But if it was not well known to the general public, the Reed &

Stem firm had an established reputation within the railroad industry. Reed, who largely developed the Grand Central design, previously had designed terminals for five different railroad companies; and by the time the partnership was terminated by Reed's death in 1911, the firm had designed some 100 railroad stations.

The Reed & Stem firm was well known too to the New York Central & Hudson River. At the time of the Grand Central competition the firm already was working closely with Wilgus in the design of the railroad's new station at Troy, N.Y.; and as a point of interest, Charles Reed was Wilgus's brother-in-law.

Although there were those who suggested that the firm was selected because of this close relationship with Wilgus, there can be no doubt that Reed produced an architectural concept for the terminal building that matched and complemented the vision of Wilgus's overall plan in an extraordinarily successful way. In order to move Grand Central's crowds easily and smoothly between street level and the terminal's two below-ground concourses, the architects designed a

system of broad, gently sloping ramps that proved to work exceptionally well. Nothing quite like it had ever been done before.

Another part of the Wilgus plan that presented a knotty problem was the engineer's requirement that the design provide for the continuation of Park Avenue through the site of the new terminal building. Other architects satisfied the requirement with designs in which the terminal building straddled the Park Avenue extension. However, Reed proposed the idea of an elevated "circumferential plaza," which wrapped the traffic lanes of the extension around the outside of the building, preserving the unity of its interior spaces.

And finally, Reed conceived the idea of the lofty room that was Grand Central's main concourse, which to this day remains perhaps New York's finest interior space.

By June 1903, the New York Central's plans were sufficiently well advanced to obtain the necessary city approval, and work was started within the month. It was to be a few months short of a decade before the great work could be considered essentially complete.

# Inside Grand Central Terminal

are also entrances from 43rd Street on Depew Place and Vanderbilt Avenue, the former entering the main concourse directly and the latter by the gallery.

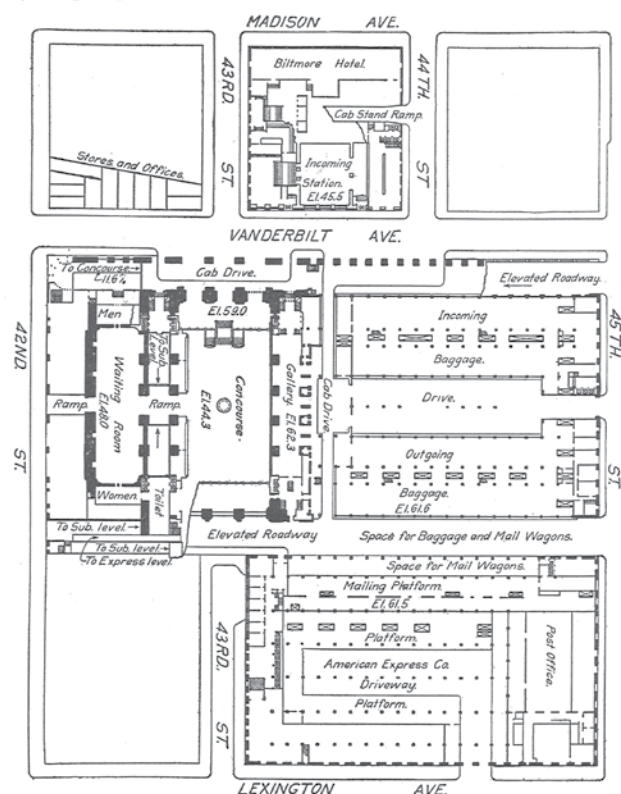
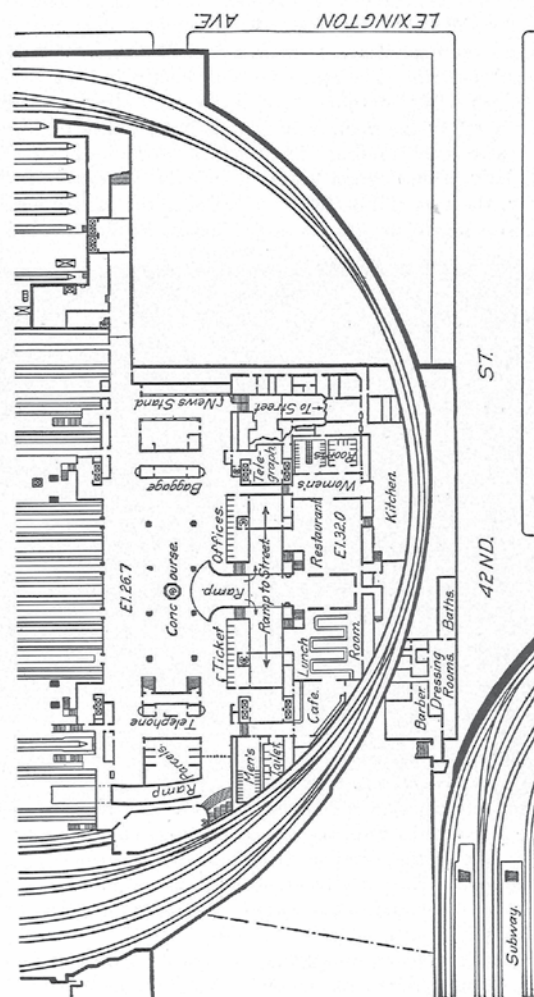


FIG. 122.—Floor plan of Grand Central Terminal, Street level.

A person entering the station from the center entrance on the 42nd Street front passes through a short vestibule and down a ramp to the main waiting room, 65 ft. by 205 ft. in size and 3½ ft. below the street. This room is finished in buff stone and marble. It has an artistic beamed



## CONSTRUCTION ON AN EPIC SCALE

The execution of the terminal construction was to prove a task of extraordinary difficulty. The new double-deck, below-ground terminal would require the excavation of a pit 35 to 40 feet deep, two blocks wide, and a half-mile long. The excavated area would extend the full width of Park Avenue from 50th Street to 45th, and all the way from Vanderbilt Avenue to Lexington Avenue between 45th and 42nd streets. Two million cubic yards of rock and one million cubic yards of earth had to be dug and blasted from the site. An average of 400 cars of excavated material was hauled out of the site every day for years.

Although 17 acres of real estate had been added to the original 23-acre site, the new terminal occupied essentially the same site as the old; and throughout the period that the terminal gallery was blasted out of Manhattan's granite, the old terminal was demol-

ished, and the new one was built in its place, the builders had to maintain a normal traffic of 800 daily train movements without the slightest interruption.

Construction proceeded generally from east to west. First, new yard tracks were constructed on newly acquired land at the east side of the site. Then, section by section, old tracks were taken out of service, the deep terminal gallery was drilled and blasted out, and the new double-deck track structure of steel and concrete was constructed. As each new section was completed, another section of the old tracks was removed, and the process was repeated.

Between 45th and 50th streets the excavation necessitated intricate underpinning of the buildings fronting on Park Avenue. For example, an extensive system of "needle beams" had to be installed to support the walls of the Steinway Piano factory.

Throughout construction, the railroad was obliged to keep open the footbridges that carried pedestrians across the old terminal yards along the alignment of the interrupted cross-town streets, and this required some ingenious engineering. At 45th Street, for instance, an excavation 70 feet deep had to be made for the installation of a baggage subway beneath both levels of the future terminal. In order to clear the excavation area of the many supporting columns for the 45th Street pedestrian footbridge and a 36-inch-diameter gas main that crossed at this location, the railroad's engineers suspended the footbridge and the gas main from a 172-foot-long wooden truss. The truss, mounted on wheels, was advanced from east to west as the excavation progressed.

To provide drainage of surface water from the deep gallery excavation, a new 6-foot sewer was dug to the East River, almost a mile away. Much of the sewer was drilled through



Prior to the High Line, trains, trucks, and wagons jam 11th Avenue, nicknamed “Death Avenue” for the frequent collisions. New York Central

required the realignment of the High Line’s ascending grade at 35th Street. Builders installed a new grade just south of 34th Street, but the work was never completed because by then the High Line was without traffic. A large portion had already been demolished, from Gansevoort Street to the St. John’s Park Terminal. Five years later, a section of the West Side line was reconfigured to allow Amtrak Empire Corridor trains from Albany and points beyond to enter Pennsylvania Station.

Hopes flickered for a rejuvenation of the High Line in the late 1980s, when city officials announced their plan to phase out the giant Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island. Conrail saw the High Line as a potential conduit for outbound shipments of municipal solid waste, recyclables, and construction debris.

But the politics were just too complicated, according to Jonathan Broder, Conrail’s General Counsel. Local property owners took legal action to prevent trash hauling on the High Line; the mayor’s office wanted it torn down; and changing market conditions made the economic equation unworkable.

What’s more, Manhattan’s West Side, the borough’s last bastion of industrialization, was becoming gentrified. Realizing the winds of change weren’t blowing in its favor, Conrail bailed on the plan. “Since then, the High Line has existed in a state of suspended animation,” says Broder.

And that’s the feeling one gets when walking on the structure today. These are not exalted city vistas as from the Empire State Building or other lofty heights. The High Line

is only once-removed from the streets, yet it’s still on intimate terms with them. It’s a modest vantage point, offering fascinating vignettes of the urban tapestry that is Manhattan. The experience is not without irony, because over the years this raised platform of steel and concrete has become carpeted in plant life: wild grasses, wildflowers, even a grove of ailanthus trees. This is especially amazing when one considers that each seed and particle of soil arrived here airborne. In fact, it’s said that some High Line plant species are not even indigenous to the area.

### What next?

The future of the High Line, whether it will be demolition or refurbishment, revolves around the question of who will pay. In 1992,



property owners came close to getting their wish of having it torn down. But a consistent sticking point has been the need to indemnify then Conrail, and now CSX, against any demolition and liability costs that exceed a federally set limit of \$7 million.

Friends of the High Line have outlined a proposal for greenway conversion, based on a cost-per-square-foot analysis, with a projected price tag of about \$43 million. The property owners' group counters that the actual cost would probably be two or three times that amount. Robert Hammond of the Friends acknowledges all estimates are speculative, and no specific funding has been identified. However, he stresses city and state support are essential for any preservation scenario to succeed.

For its part, CSX says it just wants to extricate itself from paying about \$400,000 a year in taxes and maintenance fees on a property it has no plans to use. The Surface Transportation Board has directed the railroad to negotiate with the underlying property owners for the line's demolition, while remaining receptive to a potential filing for a Certificate for Interim Trails Use. Said CSX's Debra Frank, "CSX will take its cues from the community, and attempt to do what's best for local interests, while honoring its obligation to shareholders."

Any final decision needs the approval of local government as well as the STB. Even Norfolk Southern, as co-purchaser of Conrail, is entitled to some say in the matter. Thus the High Line's fate is inexorably bound in a web of red tape and conflicting interests.

Nowadays, New Yorkers pay the price for a vastly depleted rail infrastructure, and each time city planners think about reconstituting some aspect of a rail network long gone, cost estimates seem to start at a billion dollars. One wonders if the ghost of Robert Moses isn't getting a good chuckle out of all this, especially since 30,000 big rigs a day cross the Hudson River on the Verrazano Narrows and George Washington bridges alone.

But New York is a dynamic, constantly evolving entity. Whose crystal ball can predict the future of this city's transportation needs? Perhaps West Side development will transform the old viaduct into a perfect corridor for light-rail transit or some other form of freight- or people-moving technology. Wouldn't railbanking be the ideal way for the city to hedge its bet?

Steeped in history, suspended in time and space, the High Line's fate now very much hangs in the balance. "I hope that somebody is creative with it," says Conrail's Jonathan Broder. The Friends of the High Line of course agree. ■

*JOE GREENSTEIN, who died in 2006, was a freelance writer and photographer based in Brooklyn, N.Y. Besides railroading, he was active on the New York art scene, known for his paintings, constructions, and kinetic artworks. He was educated at Brooklyn's Pratt Institute.*



The "10th Avenue Cowboy" flags a tri-power locomotive leaving 18th Street Yard in 1941. The High Line is visible above. Horse and rider helped wrangle traffic on street trackage. New York Central



A tri-power locomotive switches at Merchants Refrigerating Co. at the south end of 10th Avenue. Elevated trackage included many similarly elevated industry spurs like those seen here. New York Central



**New York Central E8 No. 4044, one of the movie's uncredited stars, displays the short-lived script emblem on its nose.** Jim Shaughnessy, Center for Photography & Art collection

In his effort to find Kaplan, Thornhill is now pursued by the police, who believe he has killed the diplomat, and by the people who kidnapped him in the first place. The chase begins at Grand Central Terminal as Thornhill tries to track down Kaplan, who has supposedly gone to Chicago.

The film is classic Hitchcock and is filled with true-to-life filming on city streets, railroad stations, airports, and a famous chase scene atop Mount Rushmore (legend has it that Hitchcock wanted to have Grant overcome by a sneezing fit while in Lincoln's nostril). But, for the person who enjoys the scenes of Grand Central Terminal, LaSalle Street Station, and two-tone gray cars, along with a ride aboard the *20th Century Limited*, these are among the highlights of the film.

The scenes at Grand Central Terminal were actually filmed on location, including the main concourse; the ticket window featuring character actor Ned Glass, who calls the police; and the gate to Track 29. But the shooting

at GCT ends there. After concluding that filming, the cast traveled by overnight train, presumably aboard the *Century*, to Chicago.

As with any film, the script was a process of evolution. Accordingly, it is sprinkled with changes and their dates. These become more important as the mystery unfolds. Thornhill is now being pursued by the police and is trying to board the train. What we see is Thornhill walking alongside a two-tone gray sleeper lettered for New York Central, named *Imperial State* No. 10006, a four-double-bedroom, four-compartment, two-drawing-room sleeper built by Pullman-Standard in 1939. While the car looks real enough, with passengers in each room well lit so as to be seen, it is not the real *Imperial State*, but instead one of four blunt-end 10-roomette, six-double-bedroom sleepers delivered to the Southern Pacific in 1950. Upon a close examination, one sees a rear-end marker light and rounded end of the car, hallmarks of the four SP sleepers. As he steps into the next car, we see that the gray

striping has been wrapped around the end of the *Imperial State*, an oversight that was easy to miss. Also, the interior of the vestibule is brown, not gray.

### IN A HOLLYWOOD DISGUISE

The reason for these seemingly minor details is this entire scene was filmed in Los Angeles, using Southern Pacific equipment painted to look like NYC cars. It seems that while NYC was willing to make allowances for Hitchcock to film in Grand Central, the railroad couldn't afford to lose two tracks and a platform for a day of shooting. Thus, this scene had to be shot out on the West Coast and MGM used what equipment could be provided by local railroads. Stay tuned ... there's more to the story here.

Thornhill steps inside and we see a hallway made up to look like the inside of a Pullman car, but like all of the scenes aboard the train, this was shot on a set (out of plywood painted gray). This is his first encounter with Eve

Kendall (Saint). After eluding a pair of detectives by ducking into a bedroom, he glances out the window, and in addition to the famous red carpet woven with the *20th Century Limited* drumhead logo, we see another Southern Pacific blunt-end 10-6 sleeper on the track opposite, labeled with only the No. 10005.

Once the train begins moving, the script reads: "Somewhere along the Hudson River, the *20th Century Limited* comes around a bend, speeds toward CAMERA (sic) and races by." This was intended as a transition to indicate to the viewers that we are now aboard the train, but, instead, the camera has moved to the vestibule of one of the rear cars to show the exterior of the train as it rounds a curve north of Peekskill. This is one of those changes mentioned earlier and it is the better transition that affords us the feel of being along for the ride. In this case, the train really is the *20th Century Limited*.

Once inside, we are viewing the train's lounge car, featuring two veteran character actors, Harry Strang and Howard Negley, both dressed in authentic NYC uniforms and caps. These scenes and those that follow were made well after the shooting in New York. To the trained eye it is obvious that the lounge car is a set, since by August 1958, the lounge cars *Atlantic Shore* and *Lake Shore* had been replaced by the twin-unit diner/kitchen/lounge set from 1948, whose lounge sections were of a much different floor plan.

After exiting from the lavatory where he has been hiding, Thornhill enters the dining car where he is seated with Kendall, who knows exactly who he is. Through the window we see the Hudson River, filmed on another day from the point of view of the train, probably shot from a vestibule, but it all looks as though they are really dining aboard the train. The film crew rode up the Hudson filming for an extended period of time to get the shots that would be looped during the dining car scene. The interior is made up to replicate the actual dining car used on the *Century*, right down to the menus (although the one Thornhill examines is a generic NYC menu, not a specific *20th Century Limited* menu), glassware, and silver, but not the china. Hitchcock didn't overlook many details.

It is during the dining car scene that Thornhill remarks that he's been "playing hide-and-seek with the Pullman conductor ever since we left New York." Of course, NYC ended its contract with the Pullman Co. that July, and although the script was written well before that, it was another one of those details that most didn't pay any attention to. At the time, the Pullman conductor was a staple in American passenger travel and few, if any, took notice of it.

Moments later, we see where Saint had to dub one of her lines in post-production. The script has Kendall saying to Thornhill, "I never make love on an empty stomach," but the production company was afraid the line was



**(Top)** Cary Grant and Eva Marie Saint walk alongside the *Imperial State*. New York Central assembled several four-compartment, four-bedroom, two-drawing-room cars and 22-roomette sleepers for this part of the film. Licensed By: Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. All Rights Reserved.

**(Bottom)** Eve Kendall (Saint) locks eyes with Roger Thornhill (Grant) as he emerges from a sliding door. All bedroom scenes were shot on sets, with few details overlooked. The Everett Collection