Books

Review: "Conquering Gotham — A Gilded Age Epic"

The Construction of Penn Station and Its Tunnels, by Jill Jonnes '77JRN (Viking).

By
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Photographer Norman McGrath documented the slow and painful death of Penn Station. (Norman McGrath Photographer, Inc.)

In the first years of the 20th century, travelers between Chicago and New York who wanted to go really first class had two choices: the New York Central Railroad, with the *20th Century Limited*, or its great rival, the Pennsylvania Railroad, with the *Pennsylvania Special* (renamed the Broadway Limited in 1912.). These trains were comparable in speed, and either would have satisfied the most demanding traveler throughout the 20-hour journey. But there was a difference.

New York Central passengers set foot on Manhattan at 42nd and Park; Pennsylvania passengers never reached Manhattan. They were dumped—doubtless ceremoniously—in Jersey City. After its splendid dash across five states (not even deigning to stop in Ohio), the Special's locomotive sat fuming on the New Jersey shore while its passengers crossed the Hudson by ferry.

In 1900, Manhattan was still, from the point of view of the railways, very much an island. It had what we now call intercity rail service only to the north: The New York Central ran northward from the old Grand Central, then up the east bank of the Hudson to Albany and beyond.

No line was more irked by this state of affairs than the mighty PRR: the Pennsylvania Railroad. Although it lacked a near-monopoly of its core business, the PRR was the Microsoft of its day. Its very motto was "The Standard Railway of the World."

The president of the PRR at the turn of the century was the formidable Alexander Johnston Cassatt (1839–1906), whose sister was the artist Mary Cassatt. Born with the proverbial silver spoon, Cassatt earned a degree in engineering at Rensselaer Polytechnic before joining the engineering department of the Pennsylvania Railroad, where no matter who you were or what degrees you held, you began by oiling locomotives. Cassatt rose high at the PRR but retired at 42 to pursue the interests of his class, horse breeding in particular. In 1899 the railroad's directors asked him to come back, now as president. In his second life with the PRR, Cassatt was a creator whose works outshone the profits they brought his company. His greatest accomplishment was known as the New York Extension, comprising a spectacular Pennsylvania station, tunnels under the Hudson and the East Rivers (as well as under Manhattan), and the Hell Gate Bridge, linking New York and Boston by way of Long Island and the Bronx.

For the PRR to build a New York station, the Hudson had to be crossed by rails. Cassatt and his associates rejected the idea of a suspension bridge and opted for

tunnels, two under the Hudson and four under the East River. The tunnels were staggeringly difficult to construct, and the tale of how they were built is at the core of *Conquering Gotham*, by Jill Jonnes ’77JRN. This core is the soundest part of Jonnes’s work, resting as it does on her imaginative and dogged pursuit of the PRR’s scattered archives.

Although a number of the world’s rivers, including the Thames, the Severn, and the Mersey, had already been successfully tunneled, the Hudson held more forbidding barriers. Under it lay loosely packed and water-logged silt that gave nightmares to engineers, workmen, and the PRR’s board of directors. The tunnels were constantly flooding, and “sand hogs” routinely lost their lives. The death toll does not seem to have been computed, but it must have been in the hundreds. Tunneling the East River was no easier and no less costly. It took five years to drive five miles of tunnels from the New Jersey Meadowlands to Sunnyside, Queens.

There were political obstacles to bore through, as well. Pennsylvania Station was superimposed on the heart of the now-vanished Tenderloin district, a world of cheap bars and brothels that stretched between 23rd and 42nd Streets on the West Side. There was much illegal vice in the Tenderloin, and Tammany Hall made sure that the law was not mocked there except at the established rates. Because Cassatt’s project threatened a rich source of income, getting a franchise for the tunnels was a process that would have normally involved bribing a number of public officials, most notably the members of the Tammany-controlled Board of Aldermen. Cassatt was opposed to bribery; for him it was a genuine case of the principle and not the money. At the outset of his campaign, he had the support of the similarly high-minded Seth Low, who had recently descended from the presidency of Columbia to the mayoralty. But Low was defeated after a single term, leaving Cassatt to deal with a resurgent Tammany. He outwaited it, and got his franchise.

The next problem facing the PRR was that it had to buy about 200 small parcels of land covering four blocks without letting the sellers know the depth of the buyer’s pockets. Cassatt entrusted this task to Douglas Robinson, Theodore Roosevelt’s brother-in-law. Robinson appears to have been equal to the task: He managed to acquire the roughly 28 acres on which Pennsylvania Station was to sit.

Once the land for the station was secured, the architectural challenge was less daunting. Cassatt went to the premier New York firm of McKim, Mead & White. Charles McKim provided what was certainly the largest and arguably the greatest

railroad station ever built. It was also tragically short lived, being demolished just 53 years after its opening by Cassatt's clueless successors. To one architecturally inclined graduate student occasionally passing through Pennsylvania Station in its ill-maintained and grimy last days, it seemed still the most magnificent building of any sort in the United States.

On Pennsylvania Station as architecture, there is an important complement to Jonnes in the 2002 book *New York's Pennsylvania Stations* by Hillary Ballon, professor in Columbia's department of art history and archaeology. Ballon's own perceptive essay is supplemented by Norman McGrath's stunning photographs of the 1963–66 demolition of the station. Marilyn Jordan Taylor's confident account of the proposed Moynihan Station — which is slated to be built in and beneath the McKim, Mead & White–designed Farley Post Office building just west of that firm's murdered masterpiece — is a wrenching reminder that we should not necessarily put our trust in princes or public authorities. After 2002, the project seemed headed for the death of a thousand cuts after Amtrak withdrew, and it appeared to have expired in the dusk of the Pataki administration. But on March 23, 2007, with encouragement from Governor Eliot Spitzer's administration, a state authority approved key funding to move the project forward.

If one wants to know how Pennsylvania Station and its necessary infrastructure came to be, one must go to Jonnes, who knows the story better than anyone else. But she can also be careless about details.

Jonnes's errors rarely strike at the center of the narrative, but they weaken her closely woven social context. She tells us that Senator Nelson W. Aldrich of Rhode Island was the son-in-law of John D. Rockefeller. He was in fact the father-in-law of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and it was the Aldriches who conferred prestige on the Rockefellers, not the other way around. Jonnes refers consistently to the flagship Hearst paper in New York as the *Journal-American*, a title that did not exist until 1937, when the ailing Hearst Company consolidated its morning and evening broadsheets. She speaks of the New York Central running "on" Park Avenue when it had been underground for more than a quarter of a century. Additionally, Jonnes's prose is, to use no stronger word, careless. She uses the same terms in proximity far beyond the strictures of Fowler on "elegant variation," appears rarely to have met a cliché she doesn't like, and has an unfortunate and apparently obsessive affection for calling New York " Gotham." This may derive from her title; the subtitle — "a Gilded Age Epic" — has the additional problem that the events she recounts

occurred well after the Gilded Age, generally agreed to have ended with the Depression of 1893, and certainly dead with the 19th century.

None of these irritations makes *Conquering Gotham* a bad book or one not worthy of the interest of anyone seriously concerned with the majestic and sad history of the only real Pennsylvania Station. Rather, this excellently researched book is an irreplaceable study of how one generation built the greatest monument of Midtown Manhattan and another generation destroyed it.

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