

Tours and Tales of New York

An email newsletter of Take a Walk New York

October 2017

October is often the best month to go on walking tours. The heat of summer is past, and the chill of winter has not yet set in. We hope you'll join us to take a walk in New York this month. If you can't make a scheduled tour, contact us at takeawalknewyork@gmail.com to plan a custom tour that meets your needs, interests, and timetable.

Laurie Lewis, Alan Cohen, and Deborah Harley

Happy Birthday, New York Subway!

By Alan R. Cohen

The subway system that New Yorkers rely on but love to hate celebrates its 113th birthday this month. The subway is now known for its antiquated and problem-prone signaling system, delays, funky smells, litter, and pizza-toting rats. But when the New York subway began, it was a technological marvel designed with beauty in mind.

At 2:35 PM on October 27, 1904, dignitaries boarded a five-car subway train at the City Hall station and rode uptown through the system's first 28 stations to the last stop at 145th Street. Then thousands of guests were treated to a ride through the system. Around 7 PM the paying public entered the subway for the first time.



The original City Hall station, designed by architects Heins and LaFarge. With an arched, tiled ceiling constructed by Rafael Guastavino, this station was the showpiece of the subway system. Skylights and chandeliers with the newest electric lights illuminated the now-abandoned station.

Photo by John-Paul Palescandolo, March 2008

To provide beauty throughout the system, architects Heins and LaFarge designed elegant kiosk entrances (a good replica can be seen at Astor Place on the No. 6 line), handsome oak ticket booths, and mezzanine illumination with skylights. Ceramic and mosaic tile work both decorated the stations and identified each one. But the new subway system had to be more than attractive. It needed to save time for commuters to the city's burgeoning neighborhoods.

To accomplish this, four tracks were laid: two uptown, two downtown. Each direction had both local and express service, a novel idea for urban transportation. The express tracks of the rapid transit system were capable of whisking passengers from downtown Manhattan to Harlem in 25 minutes at an average speed of 45 miles an hour.

The subway trains moved forward by electric traction, a major improvement over steam locomotion. Steam engines, which were used on elevated trains until the early 20th century, were noisy, produced noxious smoke, and took longer than electric traction motors to accelerate and brake. Concern for public safety was reflected in such advances as the “dead man” feature, which required the motorman to keep downward pressure on the throttle handle; if he didn’t, the train would automatically stop. To prevent trains from colliding, the system used track trip levers that activated the air brakes if a motorman did not heed a stop signal.

Mayoral Privilege

New York City Mayor George B. McClellan, Jr., operated the first subway run. He was just supposed to start the train with a ceremonial silver and ebony throttle handle, then give control to the motorman. The ceremonial handle was slightly larger than the actual throttle handles, and the mayor accidentally triggered the emergency brake with it just north of Brooklyn Bridge. After the motorman made a quick fix, the mayor resumed control. McClellan so thoroughly enjoyed being the motorman that he kept his hand on the throttle until 103rd Street. And all the while the real motorman kept his hand on the emergency brake—just in case.

From the start, the subway system could not meet the daily demand for service. Even after tracks and stations were extended throughout Manhattan and into the Bronx and Brooklyn, the demand exceeded the system’s capabilities.

The first subway was operated by the Interborough Rapid Transit system, or IRT. Although the city owned the subway, the IRT was actually a privately run, for-profit venture. Eventually the competing, privately owned and operated Brooklyn–Manhattan Transit (BMT) company entered the mix, followed by the city-built and -operated Independent Subway (IND). These three systems merged and became city-owned in 1940.

While you are waiting and fuming for your delayed train on a crowded platform, imagine yourself in 1904. Back then, New York’s subway system was the envy of the world.

October Tours

Most Take a Walk New York tours cover 1 to 2 miles, last 2 to 2½ hours, and cost \$25 per person. Advance registration is required. To register and to learn the meeting place, email the guide (lewislaurie2rny@gmail.com or alan.r.cohen@verizon.net). Please arrive a little before the start time. Tours are cancelled if nobody has registered or if the weather is extreme; if in doubt, call or text Laurie (917-306-2868) or Alan (917-363-4292).

Mansions of Fifth Avenue

Some magnificent mansions built about a hundred years ago still stand on the Upper East Side. They are interspersed among luxury apartment buildings—mansions in the sky. Hear about these palatial homes and the people who lived in them—New York City’s own rich and famous.

Laurie offers this tour on **Saturday, October 7, at 1:00 PM**. To reserve a place and to learn the meeting location, email her at lewislaurie2rny@gmail.com.

400 Years of History in Less Than a Mile

Lower Broadway is like an illustrated history textbook, with the pages out of order. This stretch of Manhattan illustrates American history from colonial times to the present. Take a walk in the footsteps of George Washington and Alexander Hamilton. Hear stories about heroes like them, as well as rogues like William “Boss” Tweed. Look at beautiful buildings, including the first department store, and stand over the original City Hall subway station.

Alan is offering this tour on **Sunday, October 15, at 10 AM**. To make a reservation and to learn the meeting location, please email him at alan.r.cohen@verizon.net.

If the time and date of our scheduled tours don’t work for you, contact us about a custom tour. See our website, www.takeawalknewyork.com for ideas, and email us at takeawalknewyork@gmail.com to start planning a New York experience that’s sure to please.

Central Park: Marvels of the Northern Half

Discover one of the best places to see fall foliage in Manhattan: the northern end of Central Park, especially the Pool landscape. Take a hike in the woods here, and you'll feel as though you've left the city. Visit New York's own Secret Garden, which will be splendid with chrysanthemums. If history rather than nature is your thing, fear not. You'll learn about the role this area played in early American wars.

Because the northern half of Central Park is so glorious in autumn, and because it changes daily at this time of year, we give you two opportunities to explore the area. Join Laurie on Sunday, October 22, at 1 PM or Alan on Tuesday, October 31, at 2 PM. To reserve a spot and to learn where to meet, email the guide at lewislaurie2rny@gmail.com or alan.r.cohen@verizon.net.

On This Corner: Astor Place

Today a busy hub near New York University, in the mid-nineteenth century the area around Astor Place was home to wealthy citizens and their cultural institutions. You can still see several of these institutions, as well as a replica of early subway entrances.

This brief tour, only 30 to 40 minutes long, involves little walking but lots of history. Laurie offers the outing on Friday, October 27, at 2:45 PM. That coincides with the time of the initial run of New York's subway system. Pay whatever you want for this short tour. To reserve a place and to learn the meeting location, email the guide at lewislaurie2rny@gmail.com.

OCTOBER						
Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat
						7 Mansions 1 PM
15 400 Years of History 10 AM						
22 Northern Central Pk 1 PM					27 Astor Place 2:45 PM	
		31 Northern Central Pk 2 PM				
To reserve a space and to learn the starting location, contact the guide (alan.r.cohen@verizon.net or lewislaurie2rny@gmail.com).						