

Tours and Tales of New York

An email newsletter of Take a Walk New York

February 2017

We are participating this year in International Tourist Guide Day, held on February 21 since 1990. Locally, tours occur during lunchtime so workers can explore nearby sites, and they are kept short in deference to typical New York weather at this time of year.

Are you looking for a unique Valentine Day's gift? How about a custom tour of a New York neighborhood? Please see our website, www.takeawalknewyork.com, for descriptions of our tours, and contact us at takeawalknewyork@gmail.com to plan your custom tour.

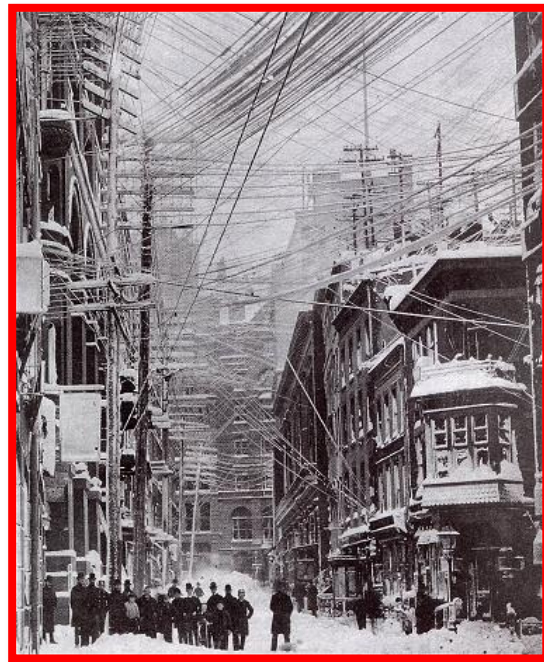
Laurie Lewis, Alan Cohen, and Deborah Harley

The Blizzard That Changed the Streetscape of New York

By Deborah Harley

Close your eyes for a moment and picture the streets of Manhattan. What do you see? Buildings, taxis, signs, store windows, subway entrances, bikes, people . . . more people? But what you don't see are utility lines overhead. Manhattan's utilities are underground — out of sight, out of mind. The wireless landscape is thanks to a multi-day blizzard in 1888.

Backtrack to 1882. That is when Thomas Edison gave the first major demonstration of incandescent lighting, illuminating 50 blocks of lower Manhattan. Within a year, some 500 wealthy homes were wired for the soft, glowing light. Electrification of the city became a foregone conclusion.



"Wired" New York City. From The New-York Historical Society.

Rapid assimilation of then-emerging technologies using electricity — telegraphs, stock tickers, alarm systems, and new residential lighting — had a chaotic downside. Private companies jockeyed to lay their wires above the streets of the city. Because no company was willing to share its resources, each mounted its own poles. Some cross-trees carried as many as 200 separate wires for various services.

Snapping lines became an increasing hazard. By 1884, the city passed legislation mandating all utility wires be laid underground, as Edison did in his 1882 demonstration. The rule was ignored.

Then came the great blizzard of March 1888, which was one of the most severe storms ever recorded in the United States. The storm started with mild temperatures, but by the second day the light rain had changed to heavy snow. It continued to fall for the next 36 hours, burying the city under 21 inches of snow. Drifts piled as high as 30 feet. With winds of more than 80 miles per hour, wires that had become coated with ice came crashing to the ground. So many fell that the city, concerned for public safety, started cutting down utility poles and wires.

One for the Record

As of January 2017, the Great Blizzard of 1888 is the fourth greatest snowfall amount recorded in any storm in New York City. Of course, that record could fall at any time. These are the top five snowfalls to beat:

February 11–12, 2006 — 26.9 inches
January 22–23, 2016 — 26.8 inches
December 26–27, 1947 — 25.8 inches
March 12–14, 1888 — 21 inches
February 25–26, 2010 — 20.9 inches

As can be predicted with such a heavy snowfall, travel throughout the city came to a standstill. Without deliveries, shelves in the few stores that were able to open quickly became bare. An elevated train derailed, leaving passengers stranded in freezing cars. A total of 200 people died during the blizzard.

To prevent future catastrophes, New York made plans to lay all utilities underground. Even the transportation system headed underground, with subways eventually replacing elevated trains in many areas.

Thus, a legendary snowstorm become an agent of change and launched a new era of progress. New York City would never look the same.

References: Edwin G. Burrows, M. W. (2000). Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898.
<http://www.boweryboyshistory.com/2013/02/frozen-in-time-blizzard-of-1888-knocks.html>
[http://www.nycsubway.org/wiki/The_Blizzard_of_1888: the Impact of this Devastating Storm on New York Transit.](http://www.nycsubway.org/wiki/The_Blizzard_of_1888:_the_Impact_of_this_Devastating_Storm_on_New_York_Transit)
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Blizzard_of_1888.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Blizzard_of_1888)
<http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/5-snowiest-blizzards-new-york-city-history-article-1.2507123>

February Tours

This month we are offering short tours, and participants can pay whatever they want. Advance registration is required. To register and to learn the meeting place, please email the guide (lewislaurie2rny@gmail.com). Tours are cancelled if nobody has registered or if the weather is extreme; if in doubt, call or text Laurie at 917-306-2868.

The Big Public Square on 42nd Street

You may have enjoyed a summer lunch hour in Bryant Park or twirled around on the ice rink there. Perhaps you've done some research or taken in an exhibit at the imposing New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue. But how much do you really know about these adjacent Midtown icons? What do they have to do with drinking water and a world's fair? What lies beneath?

This lunchtime tour is offered as part of International Tourist Guide Day, held every year on February 21, which falls this year on a Tuesday. For the benefit of people who are unable to attend then, the tour is also offered on Saturday, February 18, and Sunday, February 26. All tours begin at 1 PM and last 30 to 45 minutes. If the group is small, we'll end with a peek at buried treasures inside the library.

F E B R U A R Y						
Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat
						18 Square on 42 nd St 1 pm
		21 Square on 42 nd St 1 pm				
26 Square on 42 nd St 1 pm						

Please contact the tour guide (lewislaurie2rny@gmail.com) to reserve a space and to learn the starting location.