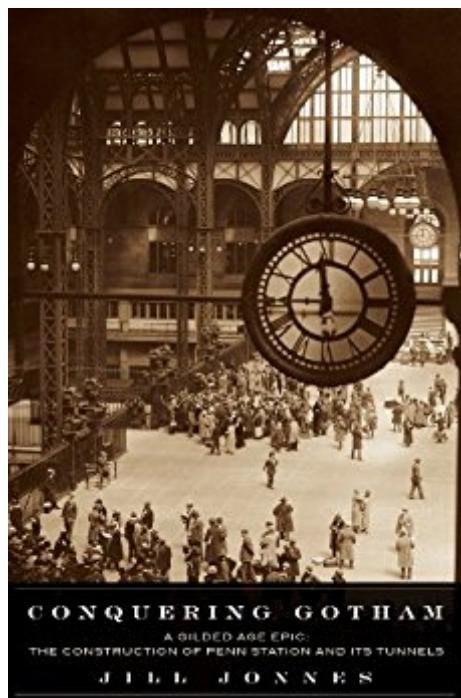


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# Conquering Gotham: Building Penn Station And Its Tunnels



## Synopsis

“Superb. [A] first-rate narrative” (The Wall Street Journal) about the controversial construction of New York’s beloved original Penn Station and its tunnels, from the author of *Eiffel’s Tower* and *Urban Forests*. As bestselling books like Ron Chernow’s *Titan* and David McCullough’s *The Great Bridge* affirm, readers are fascinated with the grand personalities and schemes that populated New York at the close of the nineteenth century. *Conquering Gotham* re-creates the riveting struggle waged by the great Pennsylvania Railroad to build Penn Station and the monumental system of tunnels that would connect water-bound Manhattan to the rest of the continent by rail. Historian Jill Jonnes tells a ravishing tale of snarling plutocrats, engineering feats, and backroom politicking packed with the most colorful figures of Gilded Age New York. *Conquering Gotham* will be featured in an upcoming episode of PBS’s *American Experience*. From the Trade Paperback edition.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Anything about the Pennsylvania Railroad grabs my interest. When the biggest railroad undertakes

construction of the biggest station in the biggest city in the USA, the subject swells on my radar. The author covers the dreaming, the planning, the maneuvering and the unimaginable deployment of men and machines (and no doubt quite a few animals) that toiled so that Penn Station could arise. Not so widely known, and I have to include my self in this uninformed group before reading Conquering Gotham, is the fact that Penn Station never really succeeded. It failed to ignite a boom in Hell's Kitchen real estate that was predicted by its advocates, and for the final decade of its life was part of a (misguided) argument that held up the grimy monument as one of the causes of Hell's Kitchen's misfortunes. Much like the PRR's flagship Broadway Limited which was second to none in any aspect of First Class train travel, but a very distant second to the rival 20th Century Limited of the New York Central, Penn Station just wasn't as successful as it could or should have been. This in no way lets the short-sighted money people who caused Pennsylvania Station's shameful destruction off the hook. Thank you author Jonnes for bringing all this history to life.

Making my first visit to New York and arriving via Amtrak, I was fascinated by Penn Station. Knowing what is there now is not what was there when (and loving the visit to NYC), I decided I needed to learn more about it. This is a fascinating story of engineering along with quite a bit of plain old ingenuity. The elements of the story - the tunnel, the station, the politics, the cronyism - all interlocked with New York at the turn of the last century is a tale of an amazing age of change. The station only lasted 50-some years, in some ways doomed from the beginning by the cars that were already running around on the streets at the time. The tunnels, however, are still there and serving magnificently. It's hard to imagine this all transpiring without the vision of Alexander Cassat, the president of the Pennsylvania Railroad who made it all happen. After you read this, be sure to search the internet for the story of the station's demolition, it will surely sadden you to see it.

This book is interesting but ultimately disappointing. The title and description do a magnificent job overselling the book as a cutaway look inside an urban landmark. Rather than a treasure trove of unknown details and secrets of a subway and train terminal that millions of people use on a daily basis, it is dry narrative of the men who constructed it. For instance, it's more than 100 pages into the book that ground is finally broken on the tunnel and nearly halfway until Penn Station begins to take shape. The author is prone to superficial tangents on Tammany Hall, Vanderbilt, bridge construction, New York politics and the presidency. These digressions have the air of trying to fill space or had substance to a weak story. That is a strange feeling since the subject matter is so rich. After filling so much space with unnecessary details, the book rushes to completion after Penn

Station opens. The destruction of the General Waiting Room to make way for Madison Square Garden is by far the best written part of the book but it gets but one chapter. For a reader after some urban anthropology, Conquering Gotham oversells and under delivers.

Very thorough history of how the idea and the implementation of the great endeavor to bring the Pennsylvania Railroad into Manhattan came about. Lots of background of the key players and the difficulties of construction. The history was helpful in the planning for a proposed new set of tunnels that I worked as Project Executive on before the project was cancelled by the NJ governor.

This book is a hefty piece of critical NYC history. It's hard to understand how much power Penn Station gave the city, and how scared we are for having lost it. The writing can feel a bit slow, but I didn't mind!

Great story, well told. Describes the planning and construction of the first tunneling under the Hudson River leading to the eventual completion of a PRR line from NJ under Manhattan to Long Island and the construction of Penn Station on Manhattan. This book dovetails nicely with "The Bully Pulpit" in covering the period 1900 to 1910 with a focus on New York and the battle against corruption there. My only complaint is that the photos in the Kindle version are small and were digitized at low-res so when expanded they are very blurry.

For a building I never saw, the old Penn Station is much on my mind, particularly when I see buildings in Charlotte imitate one or another aspect of the great station. But nobody is as audacious as architect Charles McKim was, nor as pioneering as the Pennsylvania Railroad executives who pressed to dig a tunnel under the river to bring passengers directly to Manhattan without having to take a ferry from New Jersey. What an achievement! It is a tragedy that we don't have McKim's massive monument to celebrate it with.

Penn Station resides in the mind of those of us who remember it. Jill Jones explains why this icon died. We live and die by Capitalist values: especially in Manhattan. This book is a great read. Underneath these things is the "social ramble". Jill Jones does a wonderful job of explaining how Mary Cassatt, the Gare du Quai d'Orsay, the IRT, Manhattan Property Values, Westside whore houses, the canny Vanderbilt mind and Historic Preservation merge and mix.

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