by Gail Robinson
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This week, some subway passengers will have the eerie experience of entering their regular train to see that its exterior is no longer stainless steel, but wood; the plastic seats have been replaced by wicker; and instead of those computer-generated red-dots that announce each destination, there will be old-fashioned incandescent light bulbs hanging from the ceiling.

These are not the run-down trains that gained for the New York Subway system the designation as “The Most Awful Ride in the World” way back in 1938. They are even older than that; so old that transit officials are calling them “vintage trains" now. Some of them were built as early as 1904, the year the subway began.

The surprise rides in these old subway cars, which will be placed at random throughout the city, are meant to celebrate a special anniversary. On October 27th, the New York subway system turns 100. For weeks now, people haven't just been riding the subways; they've been watching films about it, and listening to lectures, taking guided tours, and attending museum exhibitions.

The subway centennial is one of an unusual number of anniversaries being given elaborate commemorations in New York this year, many of them centennials -- among the most notable besides the subway, Times Square and the fire on the steamboat General Slocum that killed more than a thousand people; among the least notable, the centennial of the Friar's Club .

What was it about 1904, which also saw the birth of Cary Grant, Graham Greene and Campbell's Pork and Beans -- and, some claim, the invention of the ice cream cone and of the hamburger as well?

In New York alone, where immigrants swelled the population and the city exploded with social movements, new businesses and new technology, the year saw the birth of the first public high school for the sciences, Stuyvesant High School and the Explorers Club to promote both science and adventure ; the Afro-American Realty Company to develop property in Harlem and encourage black people to move there; and the Hispanic Society of America , whose museum in upper Manhattan celebrates Spanish culture. (There are special events commemorating all of these centennials except the realty company.)

But if a lot happened in 1904, that is not the sole reason why there are so many centennial commemorations this year.

Curators and historians certainly like these events. "If you're going to get news organizations to pay any attention at all to history, you have to give them a news peg" and anniversaries provide that, said Kathleen Hulser, public historian at the New York-Historical Society , which is itself celebrating its own bicentennial, as well as marking the bicentennial of the death of Alexander Hamilton.

Anniversary observations, observes Sarah Henry, deputy director of the Museum of the City of New York , "give you a very interesting opportunity to look at where we were then and where we've come to."

But it is not just the professionals who are looking back at New York City history; the general public seems interested as well. Attendance at museums and historical sites has increased.

“I would venture to say that after 9/11, the New York City community was brought together not only by a shared tragedy and desire to rebuild our city and our lives, but also by a palpable sense that we were living in a historic time," said Valerie Paley, editor of the New-York Journal of American History , which put out an issue on anniversaries. "Perhaps it is the need to take a look at the past, to put the present in perspective, that is driving that impulse to recognize the city's history in a different way.”

This is certainly not the first time that New Yorkers have suddenly become intensely interested in their history. It has happened, some suggest, at least twice before -- ironically, exactly 200 years ago, when the New-York Historical Society was formed...and 100 years ago. The oldest existing house in Manhattan, the Morris-Jumel Mansion , which was built in 1765 and had served as George Washington's headquarters during the American Revolution, was turned into a museum in 1904. "The museum was created at the height of the colonial revival movement," reads a brochure celebrating the mansion's centennial as a museum, "a time when the romanticization of American history was prevalent and Revolutionary figures were viewed as idols."

THREE CENTENNIALS
General Slocum Fire

Until September 11, the General Slocum fire was the deadliest disaster in New York City history. It killed at least 1,021 people who had set out for a pleasure cruise up the East River.

“If you had ancestors who were in New York City in June 1904, quite possibly they had some role, however minor, in the Slocum disaster" -- knowing a victim, contributing to a relief fund, helping to treat the victims, said Ken Lieb, who has organized events to commemorate the tragedy. "The same thing happens with 9/11 . . . the gamut of people involved,” he said.

For decades, as Edward O’Donnell has written (see related article), the June 12 disaster was largely forgotten. But recently, Lieb said, interest in the tragedy had increased, partly because of the 100th anniversary.

Most of this year’s remembrances, though, are of triumph, not tragedy. “People prefer to remember happy things, so you celebrate victories, not losses,” Hulser said.

The Subway

Whatever irate straphangers may think, the celebration of the subway marks a triumph. One hundred years ago on October 27, the first subway left City Hall. The trip so thrilled then-Mayor George McClellan that he drove the train himself , refusing to relinquish the controls to the motorman.

But the subway represents more than a technical achievement, said Peter Derrick, author of “Tunneling to the Future,” who will discuss his book in a Gotham Gazette book chat on the subway's birthday, October 27. The train enabled people to move out of densely packed neighborhoods. “All the anecdotal evidence we have is that they were able to have much better lives,” Derrick said. “It’s the only time people were able to move up the ladder without making more money.” (
See related article)

Some hope the subway anniversary can spur a better transit system for the future. (See related articled
by Gene Russianoff of the Straphangers Campaign). Mike Wallace, director of the
Gotham Center for New York City History
, which will hold a forum on the
subway
on November 10, said ideally such events should examine important issues. Noting that cars came along at the same time the subway did, he would hope to see someone look at “rail versus road â€¦ an assessment of the worthiness, expense and ecology of these two systems, which have been struggling for the city’s soul.”

Times Square

This year’s third major centennial marks the year that the city gave a new name to an old square, at the behest of the publisher of the New York Times, who wanted to match the rival New York Herald’s square eight blocks south. The Times moved its headquarters to the area a

year later.

Times Square gained ground as the city's entertainment district in 1904 because of the subway, as James Traub explains. (See article by Traub) With the shady characters and tawdry businesses now pushed out by chain stores and franchise food, writers and critics have used the anniversary to ponder the Times Square of today.

THE PAST IN THE PRESENT

The New-York Historical Society, celebrating its 200th birthday, had been planning an exhibition to coincide with the hundredth birthday of Times Square. It canceled that exhibition, though, and focused on a five-million-dollar blockbuster, an exhibition on Alexander Hamilton , the Revolutionary war hero, first Secretary of the Treasury, the founder of the "New-York Evening Post" and the man now on the ten-dollar bill (a huge blow-up of which is draped across the society's building), who died in a duel with Aaron Burr the same year the historical society was founded.

Some historians were publicly aghast, accusing the New York museum of forsaking New York and going national. Some even looked at the funders -- new board members Richard Gilder and Lewis Lehrman, both conservative businessmen (Lehrman was the Republican candidate for governor in 1982), --- and the curator -- a Hamilton biographer and a long-time editor at the conservative National Review -- and wondered if there was...if not a vast right-wing conspiracy... at least a political agenda.

Whatever the merits of the accusation, it would certainly not be the first time that the past has been used to weigh in on the present. Indeed, it is the major argument for studying history. The exhibition does call Hamilton the most modern Founding Father, indeed, "the man who made Modern America," and the largest gallery of the exhibition includes huge screens that alternate quotes from Hamilton with filmed vignettes of modern American life.

"The reason al-Qaida and its helpers and patrons struck the World Trade Center was that the towers symbolized modern America -- Hamilton's America," the curator, Richard Brookheiser wrote
in City Journal.

THE PAST IN THE FUTURE

Will any of the events commemorated this year engage the imagination of the public of 2104? Is

something happening right now that will merit a centennial celebration in 100 years?

In a city famous for bulldozing its past, it should come as little surprise that one of the biggest celebrations of the nineteenth century commemorated Evacuation Day, the day that the British troops left New York City, their last outpost in the former colonies. In 1883, speeches, parades and banquets hailed the 100th anniversary of Evacuation Day. One hundred years later, however, in 1983, New Yorkers were focused on the centennial of the Brooklyn Bridge; Evacuation Day had been forgotten.

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Centennial Calendar

ALEXANDER HAMILTON BICENTENNIAL

Alexander Hamilton: The Man Who Made America Modern
This exhibition explores the life and impact of Alexander Hamilton (1757-1804).
New York Historical Society
Through February 28, 2005

" Alexander Hamilton: In Worlds Unknown "
An original multimedia play.
New-York Historical Society
Showing though February 2005

The Age of Alexander Hamilton
A lecture series on Hamilton including his role in the U.S. financial revolution, Hamilton and the Constitution, and why he was never elected president.

SUBWAY CENTENNIAL

Several exhibitions at the New York Transit Museum commemorate the 100th birthday of the opening of the subway:
--"The City Beneath Us: Building the New York Subway" includes photographs of subway construction. (Through spring 2005)
--"Centennial Celebration" commemorates the 1904 opening of subway with artifacts, maps, and drawings. (Through spring 2005)
--"'The World's Safest Railroad': How Ivy Lee Promoted New York's Subway System, 1916-1932" in the museum's Grand Central Station annex, features ads and publications for the subway system. (Through October 31)
--"Subway Style" 100 Years of Architecture and Design in the New York City Subway, in Grand Central Station, displays artifacts to examine the aesthetic side of the transit system. (Through November 5)

" The Riders and the Rebirth of City Transit "
An exhibition on how activism has improved mass transit.
Municipal Art Society
Through October 30

“ Around Town Underground ”
Subway related art by some of New York's finest printmakers.
New-York Historical Society
Through November 7

“ Three on the Subway ”
Photographs of the subway over the past 30 years by Bruce Davidson, Camilo Jose Vergara, and Sam Hollenshead.
Museum of the City of New York
Through January 17

“ Tunnel Visions: Subway Photos, 1904-1908 ”
Photographs documenting the construction of the underground lines from 1904 to 1908.
New-York Historical Society
Through February 20, 2005

“ 100 Years of the New York Subway: A Look Back and A Look to the Future ”
This forum will put the subway in historical perspective, bring the story of the subway up to date and take a look at what might happen to it in the future.
CUNY Graduate Center
November 10

(For a more complete listing of subway events, go to http://www.mta.nyc.ny.us/nyct/cen/events.htm)

NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY CENTENNIAL

“ Impressions of New York”
Prints from the society’s collection depicting New York City, from 1626 to 1995.
New-York Historical Society
Through March 6, 2005

HISPANIC SOCIETY OF AMERICA CENTENNIAL

Hispanic Society
The museum of Spanish art, history and culture is commemorating its centennial with special events.

“Capella de Ministrers-Iudici Signum”
A concert of Renaissance music
October 26, 6:00p.m.

Convergence and Diversity: Art of the Hispanic World

A series of gallery talks to highlight artworks from the museum's collection.