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The NY Transit Museum: A Ride Back in Time

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1.6 billion riders every year. The most extensive public transport network in the world with 468 stations. One of the few and oldest systems that runs 24/7, 365 days a year. The busiest system in the Americas. Known for its colorful letters and numbers. Some decrepit stations and old cars. Some stations that are works of art.

What do you think I'm talking about? If you guessed 'The Ubiquitous New York City Subway', then you're correct! If you are a New Yorker like me, then you have ridden it, or seen some aspect of it sometime in your life since the subway entrances dot the city everywhere.

And most likely, you also had some interesting experiences on it too. There are those moments when you are riding on the 7 train and a group of Mariachi Singers hop aboard and perform while you try to sleep. Or you board a Times Square bound N train and half the car is empty because there is a homeless man talking to himself on the other end of the car.

The subway, when combined with the bus system, is the lifeline of New York City. Every day, students and adults alike ride the subway together to get to work and to school. They often endure delays and have commutes up to 2 hours. But without it, the entire city shuts down, as seen during Hurricane Sandy when subway tunnels and stations were flooded.

The NYC subway is not young, it's more than



100 years old, dating back to the late 1860s, with the advent of the elevated trains. During the post-Civil War period, New York entered a period where population and traffic grew so dramatically to an extent, a solution was needed to transport the people safely and ease the crowds of Lower Manhattan.

Elevated trains provided New Yorkers a fast and safe way around the city, but posed a problem to those who walked under them. This was the 1880s, there were no electric trains, just coal or wood fired locomotives. Imagine the burning embers falling and burning your head and clothes in a damp and dark environment. Not a good place to be.

People wanted the lights to reach the streets again, be able to walk without being burned, to be protected from the elements. The solution was building the trains underground and it was done by the Inter-borough Rapid Transit Company (IRT). Started in the 1900, the Subway system officially opened in October 27, 1904 with 28 stations designated in two lines, the IRT Broadway Line (1,2,3) and the IRT Lexington Avenue Line (4,5,6).

Eventually other lines were built by another private company, the Brooklyn Mass Transit (BMT). Then the city combined the IRT and BMT to establish the Independent Subway System (IND) in 1932, a city run agency. Soon after, in the 1940's, the elevated trains were torn down.

No new lines have been built with the exception of some stations on the F line, which opened in 1989, since 1936. Years passed till the subway

reached its low point in the 70's and 80's, where trains and stations were full of crime and graffiti, before the city said enough is enough and started renovations.

The one new line, the 2nd Avenue subway, first proposed in 1929, did not begin construction until 2007 and the 8.5 mile (13.7 km) line is finally expected to be completed by 2016 at a cost of \$17 billion.

If you're a frequent rider like me, have you ever thought how the system came to be? Why are there so many breakdowns? Why are there still stations breaking apart? Enter the New York Transit Museum in downtown Brooklyn, NYC. The museum, conveniently built in a formerly active subway station, has exhibits on how the system was developed and it even has vintage cars that you can ride in.

I visited this museum on New Year's Eve (don't ask why) with a fellow Stony Brook student whom I've known since grade school. It was a great museum, very informative and interesting, even if you're not a Civil Engineering major like me. You get to learn the fine details on how the system developed from the old elevated trains to the underground network that we know today.

And you get lots of interesting facts. For example, the Number Lines (1-7) are smaller than the Letter Lines (A-Z) in terms of train width, track gauge and station length. That means

two different cars for the city. The number lines were built by Interborough Rapid Transit Company



(IRT) while letter lines were built by IND (Independent Subway Company) and Brooklyn Mass Transit (BMT). These names are still present on the walls of many stations. You just have to search for them.

Although the admission fee is \$7, it's well worth it. Seeing vintage trains complete with ads of the time, really makes you think about the cars you ride on and their age. The oldest train type still currently used to this day is the R 32, built in 1964. So if you do that math, you are riding in trains that are 50 years old, imagine all the people who rode it and the miles the train traveled. It's amazing how long they lasted.

Plus at the end of your visit, there is the Hall of Turnstiles, the best part, where you see how turnstiles have changed over time.

The first payment to ride was a paper ticket for a nickel, then turnstiles took a dime, then the first token in 1953. Now we swipe a MetroCard, first introduced in 1994, but both cards and tokens could be used until 2003, the 50th anniversary of the token.

But enough of me going on. Visit it and immerse yourself to the history of NYC's beloved subway system. It turned out to be a great way to end the year.

web.mta.info/mta/museum

Note in 1st photo, simple light bulbs, no fans, and straps for the 'straphangers' as riders came to be called. In second, fluorescents, tiny overhead fans, bars instead

of straps. You can see all my photos at

aasquared.org/gallery/ny-transit-museum-2014

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