

# SHIP ABLAZE

*The Tragedy of the Steamboat  
General Slocum*

EDWARD T. O'DONNELL

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## PRAISE FOR *SHIP ABLAZE*

*“[Edward T.] O’Donnell vividly recounts the fear and crushing panic on the boat that day ... fascinating ... researched with care and written with sensitivity.”*

—*Library Journal*

*“With a novelist’s touch, Ed O’Donnell tells the tale of a forgotten tragedy, and offer lessons we can still learn from a single terrible day in New York. The stories and characters in this remarkable book will live with you in years to come.”*

—*Terry Golway, author of So Others Might Live: A History of New York’s Bravest—the FDNY from 1700 to the Present*

*“The book grips readers like a first-rate novel, giving a detailed feel for the events and its victims and offering a window into a bygone age.”*

—*Worcester Telegram & Gazette*

*“Riveting ... not only a portrait of a time and a tragedy, Ship Ablaze rises to the highest use of narrative history: that in every time there are the innocent and the brave—and there is hope.”*

—*Michael Capuzzo, author of Close to Shore*

*“Strong material met with solid storytelling.”*

—*Kirkus Reviews*

*“In O’Donnell’s deft hands, the disaster becomes more than just a historical event—it’s a fascinating window into an era, a community, and the lives of ordinary people.”*

—*Publishers Weekly*

*“Before the World Trade Center disaster, the burning of the General Slocum ranked as the worst tragedy in New York City history. In less than half an hour it snuffed out a thousand lives and transformed the ethnic map of Manhattan. No one has told this extraordinary story of horror and heroism better than Edward O’Donnell.”*

—*Kenneth T. Jackson, President of the New-York Historical Society and Jacques Barzun Professor of History and the Social Sciences, Columbia University*

*“Ship Ablaze feels like viewing a daguerreotype in color; a rare occasion to identify with the past and not merely be taught by it—bridging the gap, however briefly, between 9/11/2001 and 6/15/1904.”*

—*Raleigh News & Observer*

*“Complete yet concise, and beautifully documented with photographs ... there is no better tribute to one of the largest ethnic cornerstones of our nation.”*

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*—Boston Irish Reporter*

*“O’Donnell has combined keen scholarship with dramatic pacing to create a riveting tale.”*

*—Newark Star-Ledger*

*“Ship Ablaze is a century-old disaster story brought to life with awful intensity and heartbreaking clarity. Edward T. O’Donnell’s incisive narrative races with the doomed steamer Slocum up New York’s East River, illuminates the thousand obscure lives lost, and picks through the negligence for which no one was held sufficiently accountable.”*

*—Gerard Koeppe, author of Water of Gotham*

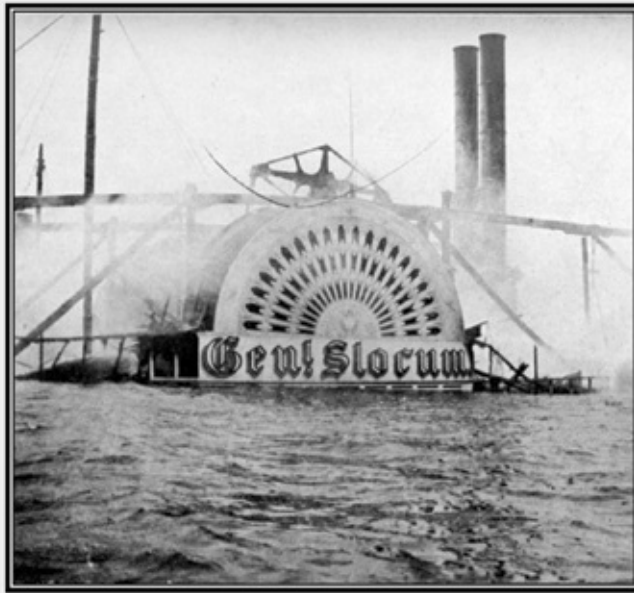
*“O’Donnell finally gives this tragedy the treatment it deserves.”*

*—Irish America*

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**ALSO BY EDWARD T. O'DONNELL**

*1001 Things Everyone Should Know  
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# SHIP ABLAZE



The Tragedy of the  
Steamboat *General Slocum*

EDWARD T. O'DONNELL

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*to the innocents lost in*

*the catastrophes of  
6/15/04 and 9/11/01*

*and the bereaved  
left behind*

*and the city  
that always overcomes*

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## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

**L**ike any good historian, I have endeavored to tell an engaging story while remaining true to the standards of evidence and documentation. As a work of nonfiction, this book is based on the real-life experiences of real people. Every character and event mentioned is real, and their descriptions are drawn from voluminous newspaper accounts, court testimony, interviews with survivors and their descendants, and other historical sources. The same is true of all the dialogue presented in this book. Every word quoted in this book is based on these sources and none is invented.



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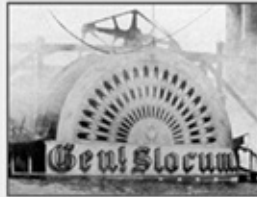
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**DIAGRAM OF THE GENERALS LOCUM**

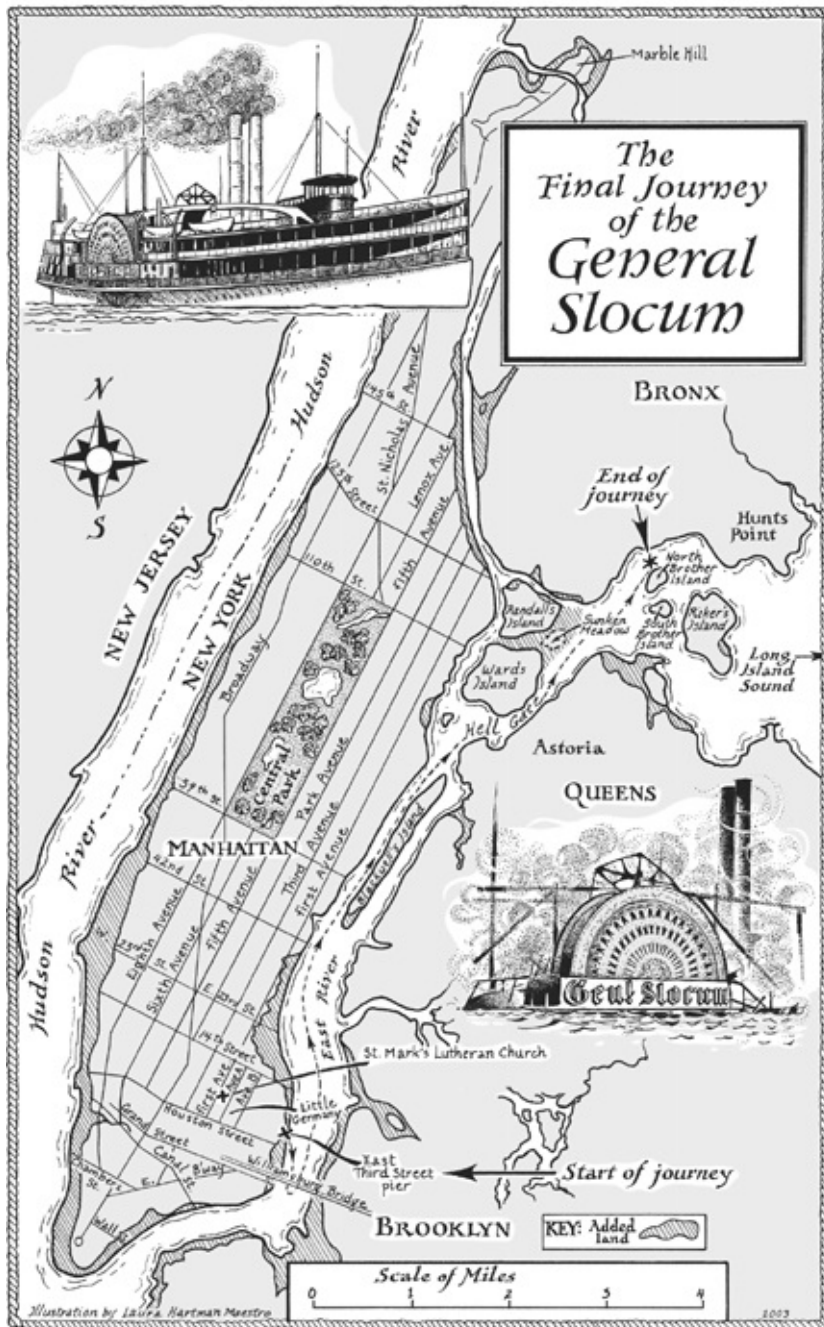
*Part One*



HOPE



# Map of the Final Journey of the General Slocum



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## THE ENVY OF ALL

*OUT ACROSS the slate gray expanse of swirling water, it was hard to miss. Freshly painted for the new season then just beginning, it fairly glistened in the midmorning sun. Two hundred sixty-four feet from stem to stern, topped with three vast open decks stacked one atop the other, the steamboat drew notice as it plied its way upriver. It was hardly the only boat out that morning, for today, as on every day, the East River was choked with boats of every shape, size, and purpose. Yet as a passenger steamer jammed with people bound on a pleasure excursion, it presented a majestic image as it glided on with apparent effortlessness.*

*This veil of grace and beauty, pleasing as it was to the eye, failed to obscure the boat's most overwhelming aspect: raw power. The signs were every where, beginning with the flag attached to the boat's tall staff. From a distance the stiff bit of fabric seemed frozen, pulled taut in the direction of the stern by the force of the vessel's astonishing fifteen-knot speed. All about the flag a trail of thick but fast-dissipating black smoke billowed from two stacks amidships, revealing the presence of two raging boilers belowdecks. Along the waterline, twin wakes of white, seemingly boiling water flowed alongside the hull, churned by the boat's two mighty paddle wheels.*

*That something weighing nearly thirteen hundred tons could be compelled to move so fast yet so gracefully was still a wonder in 1904. Steam locomotives possessed far more power and attained greater speeds, but graceful was not a word that came to mind among those who rode them. Certainly the same could be said of the newfangled contraptions now in vogue among the restless nouveau riche—horseless carriages—despite the growing numbers of them on the nation's streets. And air travel? As far as most Americans were concerned, it remained the stuff of science fiction, despite Orville and Wilbur Wright's successful test of their flying machine six months earlier. In 1904, at the peak of the age of steam, when it came to speed, comfort, and cost, no mode of transportation could rival the passenger steamboat. Every day dozens plied the murky waters in and around New York City, and every day people stood and watched. This morning was no different. From nearby vessels captains, deckhands, and passengers looked on as the radiant boat passed. Along both shorelines hardened dockworkers paused to appreciate the spectacle, if only for a quick glance. High above the river on the brand-new Williamsburg Bridge, commuters craned their necks to watch. Through the windows of the metropolis's new soaring skyscrapers, secretaries and executives broke the monotony of the emerging corporate culture to steal a glimpse. All gazed with a conflicting mixture of admiration and jealousy, as a widow might when studying a passing wedding party.*

*They were drawn not merely by the boat, but also by the event it clearly represented. Most who noticed the boat were too far away to hear the joyous sounds of the band aboard or to see the festively dressed passengers talking, running, and dancing on the decks. They didn't need to see it, for the scene was easily imagined.*

*A thousand or so people were aboard a chartered steamboat. The specific group (a church? a charity? a club?) and the occasion (an anniversary? a wedding? an annual outing?) mattered little. Nor did the particular destination, though most likely this northbound excursion was headed for one of the many recreation areas along Long Island Sound. If it was like most outings, the day would be one long endless round of food and drink, dancing and games, and for the few who knew how, swimming. Later that evening the steamer would return bearing a load of sunburned, overfed, and exhausted revelers, not a few tipsy from the plentiful drink.*

*On this day, those aboard such a boat were the lucky ones, the ones able to get away even if just for eight or nine hours.*

*None were more aware of their good fortune that day than the thirteen hundred souls now cruising up the East River. Most were German immigrants or their children, members of St. Mark's Lutheran Church on Manhattan's Lower East*

*Side. Some of their number had scrimped, sacrificed, and saved their way into the middle class and a few were undeniably rich. The rest were working-class folk, the kind of people who appreciated every second of leisure time precisely because they had so little of it. They'd spent the previous 364 days anticipating the 17th Annual St. Mark's outing to Locust Grove on Long Island, and the day had finally arrived.*

*As the steamer's twin paddle wheels clawed at the water and propelled the vessel on its journey, they could be seen dressed in their best outfits moving about the vessel or gathered in clusters chatting excitedly about the fabulous weather. Everywhere little children scurried to and fro while a group of teenagers began to dance to the sounds of the German band. Hundreds more crammed against the steamer's railings on all three decks to drink in the urban panorama slipping slowly past.*

*For many it was a rare, perhaps even first, detached glimpse of the city that overwhelmed them day after day. Even though the unspoken theme of the day was escape, most were unable to take their eyes off the cityscape. No doubt many were struck by how calm and quiet the city seemed from the river. The familiar sounds of everyday life—clip-clopping horses, pounding hammers, grinding machinery, bellowing vendors—were barely audible on the river, especially aboard a boat humming with the drone of its engine at three-quarters throttle.*

*Already the excursion was having its desired effect. They were slipping, however fleetingly, from the gravitational pull of their chaotic, stressful urban world. One by one the relentlessly ordered streets passed by—14th Street, 23rd Street, 34th Street, 42nd Street, and so on—as if measuring the progress of their flight. With every passing minute their eyes drew in the enormity and complexity of their city. One moment endless rows of tenements much like their own downtown came into view, the next a cluster of upscale brownstone mansions. In the foreground along the water's edge they saw familiar collections of seemingly ancient warehouses and countinghouses, vestiges of a fast-disappearing waterfront economy. Beyond them loomed the future—dozens of skyscrapers newly opened or nearing completion.*

*Those first fifteen minutes aboard the steamboat put before her passengers their city in all its confusing, contradictory glory. New York was a city of hope and despair, of fabulous wealth and crushing poverty, of limitless possibilities and unimaginable pitfalls, of traditional Old World values and relentless, almost pathological newness. Every day the people of St. Mark's struggled to survive amid these competing forces. Every day, that is, except today. For one day, at least, they could leave it all behind.*

*Those who saw the steamboat that morning knew this, and so they looked on.*

*Part One*



# HOPE





## THE CAPTAIN

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He awoke to the same familiar sounds as on every morning—the creak and groan of wooden vessel at pier, the persistent *lap, lap, lap* of water against the hull, the squawk of a seagull, the peal of a distant ship whistle. Dawn was breaking over the Hudson River, and another day of furious maritime activity was about to begin.

It was still dark as the captain rolled off his bunk, dressed, and stepped out on the deck of his boat. The air was cold, but it being June 14, there was a noticeable springlike hint in it. Out across the frigid, seemingly motionless river he could see the sources of the morning's first sounds. Dark silhouettes of tugs and barges moved in the distance, punctuated here and there by colored lanterns. Seagulls stood on the ship railings and soared overhead looking for the first sign of breakfast. Closer by, the captain saw row upon row of boats at pier, most dark and silent as though sleeping, but a few like his with lantern light streaming from their cabin window.

Captain William Van Schaick, like a lot of old-time unmarried captains, lived aboard his boat. He did so less because of some romantic love of the sea and more to simply save money. At sixty-seven years of age, retirement was not far off and he needed to save every penny of his \$37.50 per week salary if he wanted to avoid living out his last days in poverty. He still paid rent, but less than half the going rate for a Manhattan apartment. Plus you couldn't beat the commute.

The onset of warm weather meant his busy season was upon him. From late May to early October he'd work nearly every day as New Yorkers clambered aboard his boat on group outings to the shore and day trips to see the big yacht races. Today was the eighth charted excursion of the young season for him. He'd been at it now for more years than he cared to remember, including the last thirteen on this steamboat, the *General Slocum*. In fact, he had been the only captain the steamer had ever known.

Tethered to a long, weatherbeaten pier, the steamboat rolled gently back and forth with the silent rhythms of waves left by passing vessels. In the faint predawn light then beginning to brighten the sky over the Hudson, the steamer *General Slocum* presented an imposing, dark silhouette. Unlike many of its fellow passenger steamers, many of which began their careers in other port cities like Boston, Providence, or Newport, the *General Slocum* was a New York boat through and through. It was built by the Devine Burtis shipbuilding firm in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn in 1890–91. Miss May Lewis, niece of the Knickerbocker Steamboat Company's president, joined a large crowd of spectators on the day of the launch in April 1891. Moments after she broke a bottle across its bow, the steamboat slid down the way into the chilly waters of New York harbor.

As befitting a locally built boat destined to ply local waterways, the Knickerbocker Steamboat Co. named it for Maj. Gen. Henry Warner Slocum (1827–94). A graduate of West Point, Slocum had served with distinction in the Union Army, including commands at Gettysburg and with Sherman's scorched-earth march to the sea across Georgia. Slocum parlayed his military record into a successful law practice and three terms in Congress between 1869 and 1885. Affixing the name of this much-admired elder statesman to the paddle box in large fancy lettering would, the owners hoped, lend the new steamboat an au-

of respectability, honor, glory, and history.

The steamer itself, however, conveyed a very different image. The moment its sharp hull sliced into the chilly waters of New York harbor on that cold spring morning in 1891, there was no question which passenger steamer stood supreme. No steamboat in and around New York could compare with the *General Slocum* in terms of design and luxurious appointments. At 264 feet in length and weighing 1,281 tons, the *Slocum* was not the largest boat of its kind in the harbor. Even its sister ship, the *Grand Republic*, was longer. But its sleek, wooden hull that swept gracefully upward from stern to prow indicated a steamboat designed for both speed and elegance as well as size. As was the custom of the day, the *Slocum*'s hull was painted a brilliant white. Above it the three stacked decks, cabin walls, rails, doors, and benches were varying shades of brown varnished wood.

The *Slocum*'s interior was likewise designed to provide up to twenty-five hundred passengers with a maximum of luxury and comfort. Two large open rooms called "saloons" on the lower and middle decks provided passengers with wicker chairs upholstered in fine red velvet and tables at which they could enjoy good things to eat from the kitchen and bar. Luxurious carpeting, fine paintings, wood carvings, and ornate light fixtures here and elsewhere in the boat's several lounges added to its ambience. Abundant windows allowed for a maximum of natural light and fresh air. For those who wanted more of both, there was the vast upper "hurricane" deck, some ten thousand square feet of open space enclosed only by a three-foot high railing. Towering above it all stood two large side-by-side smokestacks painted a flat yellow.

In 1891 no steamboat in New York could equal the *Slocum*'s beauty and opulence. No other could any steamboat match its combination of speed, size, and maneuverability. Deep inside the boat's hull, beneath the decks devoted to the needs and whims of the passengers, lay the enormous steam-powered engine built by the W. & A. Fletcher Company in Hoboken, New Jersey. Attached to it were two massive paddle wheels mounted on both sides of the boat. Each was nine feet wide, thirty-one feet in diameter, and studded with twenty-six paddle floats. With the engine running at full throttle, they could claw the water with such ferocity that the steamer reached the astonishing speed of fifteen knots. Even still, speed and size did not compromise maneuverability, for the *Slocum* was fitted with an ultramodern steam-powered steering system.

None of this was possible, of course, without steam. One deck below the W. & A. Fletcher engine were two huge boilers and an entire hold compartment full of several tons of coal. The age of steamboat travel had dawned nearly a century ago on the very waters where the *Slocum* now floated. In 1807, Robert Fulton became the first person to successfully apply steam power to a boat when he piloted the *Clermont* 150 miles up the Hudson River to Albany. Fulton's triumph announced the arrival of the industrial age, when new technologies would allow man to defy nature—in this case, the relentless downward flow of a major river. More precisely, it ushered in a new era, decades before the railroad, of steam-propelled travel. And with each passing decade, subsequent inventors and engineers made enormous improvements in steamboat power, efficiency, speed, and safety. By the time of the *General Slocum*'s launch in 1891, massive steam-driven ocean liners routinely crossed the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, carrying thousands of passengers and tons of cargo.

Much of the *Slocum's* mechanical format was visible for all to see. Mounted amidships just aft of the smokestacks stood a tall steel tower surmounted by a diamond-shaped lever. Attached to one end of the lever was the engine's twenty-foot-high piston rod. Attached to the lever's other end were two drive rods that led to the paddle wheels (see diagram). As the rhythmic pulses of steam from the boiler caused the piston rod to move upward and downward six feet in each direction, it moved the lever, which in turn moved the wheels. Despite its deceptively simple appearance, it was a highly complex system of energy generation and transfer, the product of more than two centuries of refinement in engineering.

For its first five seasons the *General Slocum* enjoyed a reputation as one of the city's finest passenger steamers. On weekends and holidays from late May to early October, it made two round-trips from Manhattan to Rockaway, a popular seaside retreat in outermost Queens on Long Island. At fifty cents for a round-trip, New Yorkers of every class enjoyed the two and a half hours (75 minutes each way) about the commodious *Slocum* almost as much as the intervening time at the beach. On weekdays and special occasions such as the annual international yacht races off Sandy Hook, groups paid top dollar to charter the steamboat.

But in that era of incessant advancements in technology and cutthroat competition between passenger lines, the *Slocum's* reign as the city's top steamer was short-lived. What had been cutting-edge technology and the very latest in first-class appointments in 1891 were by the mid-1890s rather unexceptional. Newer, bigger, faster steamboats with far more luxurious accommodations such as full dining rooms, lounges, and dance floors now commanded the attention—and dollars—of the city's swell set. By 1896 the *Slocum* had slipped to the second-tier rankings of steamboats, still very respectable and profitable, yet considerably less so than the day she went into service. The boat rarely sat idle during the peak season, only now and then was chartered by middle- and working-class groups like unions, fraternal societies, and churches.

Today it was the latter, a church group bound for Empire Grove on Long Island Sound. An hour after the captain awoke, the steamer buzzed with activity as the crew prepared it for the excursion. Tons of coal and water were brought aboard along with ample food, drink, and ice. Deckhands spiffed up the boat's appearance using mops and rags and then hosed the whole boat down. Most crews used their own boat's fire hose and pump for this morning ritual, but not on the *Slocum*. For as long as anyone could remember, they had used a hose and hydrant from the pier. And it was just as well, for anyone could see that the *Slocum's* weathered fire hoses were not up to the task.

It took only fifteen minutes or so to complete the wash-down. Cloudy gray torrents of water spilled from the boat's scuppers, carrying away layers of salt, seagull droppings, coal soot, and traces of fine cork dust. The latter fell every day from the twenty-five hundred tattered life preservers slowly disintegrating in their racks above the decks. Minutes later, the deckhands cast off lines and the *Slocum* headed down the Hudson River to a pier where more than a thousand passengers awaited, eagerly anticipating a day of fun at the shore, safe from the dangers of the city.

## EMPIRE CITY

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Not long after the *Slocum* glided down the Hudson for its scheduled rendezvous with its church group, a ferry pulled away from its landing in Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey. Jammed to the rails with rush-hour commuters, the craft moved slowly through the brackish water. In twenty minutes it would reach the landing on the Lower West Side of Manhattan, deposit its cargo of hundreds, and return for another load. Every morning hundreds of thousands of men and women of every profession and class made their way to the Empire City in this manner over the harbor, or across the Hudson and East Rivers. Every evening the process was reversed as dozens of ferries slowly drained off a sizable portion of Manhattan's workforce, taking them to their homes in Queens, Brooklyn, Staten Island, and New Jersey.

Most of the passengers on the ferry that morning lived permanently outside of Manhattan. But it being June 14 and the beginning of the summer season, some were professional men commuting from summer cottages rented for one or more weeks along the Jersey Shore. Among them was George B. McClellan, Jr., the mayor of New York City and son of the controversial Civil War general of the same name. Commuting to his office at city hall via the Hudson River ferry was an entirely new experience for him. Only yesterday he and his wife had moved into a seaside cottage at Long Branch for the duration of the summer and early fall. The idea had been his wife's, for she was worried that the mounting stress from the day-to-day rigors of office would ruin his health. They could certainly afford it on McClellan's annual salary of fifteen thousand dollars. As an added plus, the move would give them a chance to mix with the finest kind of New York society, since in the words of one guidebook, "The Branch" had been "for many years the most fashionable summer resort in the vicinity of New York." Residents of the area's fine hotels and private cottages, the guide continued, divided their days between "bathing in the morning, driving in the afternoon, and dancing in the evening."

At thirty-nine, McClellan, known as Max to his friends, was one of the youngest men to occupy the mayor's office. Born in late 1865 while his parents were in Dresden during a three-and-a-half-year tour of Europe, he enjoyed an upbringing that was both comfortable and focused. His parents, nurses, teachers, and professors at Princeton instilled in him the habits and attitudes of an aristocrat, or what democratically inclined Americans preferred to call a gentleman. Like others of his class, he attended an Ivy League college (Princeton) where he studied history, art, and languages as well as literature, math, and science. This grooming, plus a steady stream of famous personages into the McClellan household from the worlds of business and politics brought him to understand that he belonged to an American nobility, not an inherited status as in Europe, but one secured through the acquisition of wealth and training. With this status, he was informed, came certain obligations, chief among them public service. For Max, of course, there would be an additional requirement of no small magnitude—that he win the presidency and redeem the honor of the father to whom he was so devoted.

Until recently, he had seemed well on his way to doing just that. After a stint as the youngest man to serve as president of the New York City Board of Aldermen followed by several terms in Congress, McClellan's name was bandied about in 1900 as a possible

Democratic nominee for vice president, perhaps even president. His youth (he was only thirty-five) and modest national profile caused the boon to fizzle, but his journey to the White House seemed only a matter of time. Three years later the gentleman politician took caution to the wind and ran for mayor of New York. He hoped the high-profile job would give him the national exposure he needed to secure the Democratic nomination in 1904. Such a scenario seemed firmly grounded in reality, for the current occupant of the White House, Theodore Roosevelt, first gained national recognition as an anticorruption crusader while serving as New York's commissioner of police from 1895 to 1897. Four short years later he had managed to ride that fame, boosted by his "Rough Rider" exploits in Cuba in 1898, into the governor's office, the vice presidency, and, courtesy of an assassin's bullet, the White House.

The one big difference between McClellan and Roosevelt was party affiliation. As a Democrat, McClellan's political aspirations required that he join the most notorious political machine in the nation, Tammany Hall. Political machines operated in most American cities in this era, but none could hold a candle to Tammany when it came to corruption, nepotism, bribery, and voter fraud. Active as a political organization since the 1820s, Tammany achieved international ignominy during the reign of Boss William Tweed, whose corrupt exploits in the early 1870s were stupendous even by New York standards. "Tammany Hall thundered one outraged statesman in 1876, "bears the same relation to the penitentiary as the Sunday-school to the church." Reformers and readers of Lincoln Steffens's muckraking series "Shame of the Cities" in *McClure's* magazine that year saw little evidence that much had changed a quarter century later.

Nonetheless, when McClellan entered city hall on January 1, 1904, he was confident that any negatives derived from his association with Tammany could be overcome by his successful first six months in office. If by July 1904—the month when Democrats would convene in St. Louis to choose their nominees for president and vice president—he had shown himself to be a successful proponent of efficient and effective government, he might yet be nominated. Certainly there would be no denying him the nomination for governor of New York State in 1906. *The New York Times* agreed. "Mr. McClellan is yet young," the editor wrote in January 1904, "and he might go very far if, cutting altogether loose from even Tammany influence and bad Tammany men, he would assert himself positively and mightily as a Mayor determined to enforce the laws impartially and to be guided by no other considerations than those of the public interest. ... It is not merely a duty that confronts Mayor McClellan; it is an opportunity. As Mayor of this city he could make a reputation that would attract the attention of the whole country."

As of June 14 the young mayor had been in office exactly five and one-half months. Yet already the job had begun to overwhelm him. In large measure this was due to the day-to-day struggle of municipal politics. Steering a middle course between Tammany corruption and goo-goo idealism had proven far more difficult than he ever imagined. He had underestimated the power and resourcefulness of Tammany boss Charles Francis Murphy and found himself increasingly at odds with him. This was no small matter, for Murphy had the power to make—or break—a McClellan-for-president boon.

McClellan's sagging spirits also stemmed from the sheer enormity of his job, a fact made abundantly clear this morning as he approached the city from the waters of the harbor. The city before him off the ferry's bow loomed the southern profile of his domain, a colossal urban civilization of 320 square miles and home to more than 4 million people. Like many other corporations in its day, the city owed its vast size to a megamerger only six years earlier that had dissolved forty surrounding towns with names like Flushing, New Brighton, and the rest of the country's third-largest city, Brooklyn, into one City of Greater New York. Consolidation, as it was called, ended once and for all any talk that New York would surrender the title of the nation's largest city. Gotham had taken the upstart city of Chicago by its broad shoulders and shoved it firmly back into second place. The ebullient attitude of the city was best expressed by the *New York Sun* on January 1, 1898, the day the merger took effect:

*All hail to the new New York which comes into being to-day!... Long before the lives of many of those who read these lines are spent it will be the foremost capital of the world in population, in wealth, and in commercial and financial power. Nor can we doubt that there is to be developed a city which will surpass in grandeur any which has yet been builded by man. All hail the imperial city!*

All, it seemed, except for the man charged with running it. New York's population exceeded that of every state in the union save Illinois, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. The same could be said for its annual budget of more than \$100 million. Thousands worked for the city in dozens of departments, from street sweepers and toll takers to schoolteachers and engineers. And six years after consolidation, the mayor and other officials still wrestled with the challenge of knitting together the economies, bureaucracies, and transportation systems of the five boroughs into a single, efficient unit.

More than the sheer number of people there was, of course, the diversity. Up ahead off the ferry's port rail stood the twin totems of the city's heritage as the great melting pot of the world, Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty. Today, as on every day, thousands of newcomers would arrive on transatlantic steamers in hopes of starting a new life in America. Indeed, that very morning the city's papers informed the mayor and his constituents of a far war among the transatlantic steamship companies that promised a surge in immigration. "Ten-Dollar Rate," proclaimed a *Times* headline, "Brings Myriads of Immigrants."

His city was famous for being what writer Edwin Hill called "the great whirlpool of the races." And it had been since colonial times, when one visitor in 1643 counted eighteen languages among New Amsterdam's five hundred residents. Three hundred sixty-one years later it was the most racially, ethnically, culturally, and religiously diverse population on the planet. Fully 75 percent of the city's population were immigrants or the children of immigrants in 1904.

Other revealing glimpses of the massive and complex municipality passed before the mayor as his ferry moved steadily toward Manhattan. Directly off the ferry's bow loomed the tip of Manhattan island, a place now known as the Financial District. Its principal place of worship, a brand-new New York Stock Exchange built at a cost of \$3 million, was hidden behind a phalanx of recently constructed buildings called "skyscrapers." The first skyscrapers in the early 1880s had astonished the public by reaching the unthinkable height of ten stories, but by 1904, the city boasted no fewer than eighty skyscrapers, at least a dozen of which exceeded

three hundred feet in height. “It is as if some mighty force were astir beneath the ground” commented *Harper’s Weekly* in 1902, “hour by hour pushing up structures that a dozen years ago would have been inconceivable.”

An equally extraordinary feature of the Empire City was wholly invisible that morning not only to McClellan but to all save the several thousand workers engaged in its construction. Begun four years earlier and now nearing completion, the “subway” was the largest municipal public works project ever undertaken in American history—larger than all but a handful of state and federal projects for that matter. Starting beneath McClellan’s office at city hall, it ran to northern Manhattan, then under the Harlem River into the Bronx. Skeptical New Yorkers could scarcely believe the claims of IRT officials who predicted a fifteen-minute commute from Harlem to city hall (possible, they claimed, because of a brilliant mass transit innovation: a second set of tracks for express trains). Proof would come on opening day sometime in late 1904.

Eventually the mayor’s ferry *scrunch-thudded* its way into a V-shaped landing near the foot of Rector Street in lower Manhattan. As soon as the gangways touched the pier they were covered with hundreds of commuters scampering to work or to still another mode of transportation like a trolley or elevated train that would take them uptown. City hall was about one mile to the northeast, and McClellan, a man fond of walking several miles each morning from his home in Washington Square, welcomed the opportunity to stretch his legs. The first portion of the walk was anything but pleasant, as it took him from the reeking waterfront along narrow streets lined with tenements, warehouses, and factories. But within minutes he reached the cemetery of Trinity Church (wherein rested notables like Alexander Hamilton and Robert Fulton), turned left onto Broadway, and headed north to where two-thirds of a mile distant in the center of a small park stood city hall.

## STORIES

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Outside McClellan's office, the area around city hall swirled with frenzied movement and sound. Thousands upon thousands of Gotham residents were on the move, walking briskly along sidewalks that lined traffic-choked streets. They bunched at corners, as if waiting until their collective numbers reached a critical mass, and then burst across the streets through small fissures in the long lines of trucks, wagons, cabs, streetcars, and horse-drawn carriages. None seemed to notice the cacophony of sounds—police whistles, streetcar bells, vendors' shouts, horses' hooves—coming at them from every angle. With serious expressions on their faces, they leaned forward and moved in a determined manner that made clear they were not out for a stroll.

It was, in short, an ordinary, sunny Tuesday morning in the middle of June. The area around city hall was a transportation hub, and every day hundreds of thousands of commuters passed this way. "The rush and turmoil of traffic here," announced a popular travel guidebook, "are indescribable."

For some it was simply a place to hurriedly transfer between ferries, elevated trains, streetcars, and hansom cabs. For others the city hall area was their destination, for in 1904 this was the city's central business district as well as its political center. Wall Street and the financial industry lay a few blocks to the south. To the east and west were the city's Hudson and East River waterfronts, flanked by countless factories and warehouses. To the north stood more factories, shops, and office buildings. In every direction were restaurants, saloons, and newspaper stands. And right there in the immediate city hall area was Newspaper Row, the media capital of the nation.

Newspapers of every description and size emanated from the dozens of buildings that surrounded City Hall Park, but the heart of Newspaper Row consisted of an imposing assemblage of structures opposite the park's eastern edge along a street called Park Row. Despite their varied size and age, the signs adorning their facades let it be known that they were dedicated to the same enterprise. Just south of the ramp leading up to the Brooklyn Bridge stood the mighty *World* tower, the tallest in the world when completed in 1890. The paper was the great organ of Joseph Pulitzer and the city's top-selling newspaper. Adjoining it was a smaller, older building that held the offices of the *New York Sun*, a paper brought to literary and editorial prominence in the late nineteenth century by its editor and owner Charles A. Dana. Towering over it was the *Tribune*, once the nation's paper of record under the direction of its founder Horace Greeley and still a major player in 1904. To the south across Spruce Street on the next block stood the new American Tract Society Building wherein evangelical Christian literature in every form was published. At the far east end of the block, set back from the formal Row, was the *Journal*, owned by William Randolph Hearst, publisher, reformer, congressman, and presidential hopeful. Next was the *Press*, followed by the *Evening Telegram* and the *Daily News*. Anchoring the far end of the line were the old men of Newspaper Row, the *Globe and Commercial Advertiser* and the *Post*, established in 1797 and 1801 respectively.

Change, however, was in the air in 1904. Soaring high above City Hall Park at the corner of Park Row and Spruce Street was the headquarters of the *Times*. Founded on this site



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