

Introduction

Life is just one damn thing after another.

—Elbert Hubbard, *A Thousand and One Epigrams*

What Elbert Hubbard said about life surely applies to history. History, our interpretation of the past, is necessarily replete with names, places, and dates—especially dates. So relentless is the march of events that the historical record finally blurs into “one damn thing after another.” Perhaps Hubbard (who detested the city) pondered his epigram as he sailed from New York on May 1, 1915, aboard the *Lusitania*.

Events by themselves signify little. It is for us to imbue them with meaning. The Greek historian Herodotus understood that. He wrote his history of the Persian Wars

in the hope of thereby preserving from decay the remembrance of what men have done, and of preventing the great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and the Barbarians from losing their due meed of glory.

In this chronology of New York City, I have attempted to follow Herodotus and preserve from decay the people, places, and events that comprise the city’s glorious story. It is incomplete, of course.

A chronology is only the sequence of events, “one damn thing after another,” and we must not confuse chronology with causation. Doing so, we fall into a fallacy of logic: *post hoc ergo propter hoc*—after this, therefore because of this. That one event follows another does not establish a causal link. In 1847, the Chinese junk *Keying* sailed into New York harbor. The next year, the first baseball game was played by a New York club in Hoboken, and the year after that, John Jacob Astor died. Can any rational soul believe causality is at play?

Still, at its core, history remains the record of human affairs, and to understand this dimension of the human experience, we begin by comprehending past events in chronological order. Otherwise we will be like the Japanese high school student who, when asked by a National Public Radio reporter whether he thought it was right for Japan to have bombed Pearl Harbor, replied, “Yes. We had to retaliate for the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.” In Einstein’s universe space is curved, but time?

Still, if history were merely chronology, it would scarcely exert such powerful claims on the present. Nor would we find the past an endless source of fascination. In *Debates with Historians* (1955), Pieter Geyl wrote, “History is an

argument without end.” The argument is rarely about what happened, or when it happened—such facts are generally agreed upon. Mr. Heaney, my eighth-grade social studies teacher, taught that the truly important questions begin with how or why. And in answering the hows and whys, the arguments begin.

Knowing what happened is never enough. We need to distinguish the significant from the ephemeral, the celebrity of the moment from the individual who makes a lasting contribution. That is the task of the historian. But history is also a compelling narrative. As Henry Steele Commager warned, “If history forgets or neglects to tell a story, it will inevitably forfeit much of its appeal and much of its authority as well.” What makes this book of value, I hope, is that the reader sees a complex story behind each fact, a human drama replete with heroes and villains, acts of courage and creativity, personalities braced by principle and riddled with contradictions.

One fact: in 1987, Governor Mario Cuomo ordered the final closing of the Willowbrook State School on Staten Island. But behind that single act lie decades of suffering and activism; it is ultimately the story of a sea change in the way our society treats the mentally retarded and disabled. Such a story deserves a dissertation, not a line in a chronology. In the same way we might consider the demolition of Pennsylvania Station in 1963, the dedication of the Prison Ship Martyrs’ Monument in 1908, or Mark Twain’s first public appearance at Cooper Union in 1867. Each event suggests a rich narrative. It is for the historian in each of us to make sense of these events, giving each its “due meed of glory” or damnation.

This book began as only a research tool. To unravel the convoluted history of the Long Island Railroad, I put together a chronology; it clarified matters somewhat but did not answer the big questions. I did the same for the Queensboro Bridge, the Croton water system, and the Queens Borough Public Library. This revealed some intriguing connections. Charles Dickens, I learned, visited the city in 1842, the same year water began flowing from the Croton Reservoir. Once I put the separate chronologies together, the project took on an independent life, and dominated mine.

I must have been mad to begin. A chronology of New York City can never really be finished. There is always another event, another building, bridge, or statue dedication. Another play opens; another television show goes on the air; another venerable institution shuts its doors; another person destined for fame is born; another revered New Yorker dies. Where does one make an end?

A better question: why begin? First, if any city deserves a full chronology, it is New York. This city has contributed more to American culture than any other. Who doesn’t understand the meaning of Coney Island, Fifth Avenue, Harlem, or Wall Street? Who wouldn’t instantly recognize the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty, the Unisphere, or the Brooklyn Bridge? Some-

times an event is important because it happened in New York; that is almost certainly the case with Bobby Thompson's dramatic home run in 1951. But other scenes could only have happened here. Where else would Carl Denham have brought Kong, the Eighth Wonder of the World, if not to Broadway?

Another reason to produce a chronology of the city is because it is fun. New York is a city with a personality, and New Yorkers have an attitude that sets the city apart from other American places. As Lauren Bacall put it in a 1996 interview in the *New York Times*, "I spent my childhood in New York, riding the subways and buses. And you know what you learn if you're a New Yorker? The world doesn't owe you a damn thing."

New Yorkers have created a perfect city, even as we make over our city anew every generation. Taken together, the names and events contribute to a marvelous, often surprising story. George Gershwin, Aaron Copland, George Burns, Ethel Merman, Tony Bennett, Edith Wharton, and William Bonney (better known as Billy the Kid) were born here. Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr died here, as did Tom Paine. Scott Joplin, Béla Bartók, Sergei Rachmaninov, Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, and John Lennon lived and died in New York. Herman Melville was born in Manhattan and died in Manhattan. Presidents James Monroe, Ulysses S. Grant, and Bill Clinton retired here; and Mark Twain spent more time in New York than on the Mississippi. The *America*, the yacht that gave its name to the America's Cup, was built here, as were the *Monitor*, the *Maine*, the *Arizona*, and the *Missouri*. Oreos, vichyssoise, the hot dog, Thomas's English Muffins, and Haagen Dazs ice cream were created here.

At the same time, it is impossible to understand American history without considering the city's role. From the inauguration of George Washington in 1789 to the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, from the Draft Riots of 1863 to the Stock Market Crash in 1929, events in New York resonated across the country. Think colonial and most people would identify Boston, Philadelphia, or those artificial re-creations Colonial Williamsburg and Old Sturbridge Village. New York is older than any of them. Consider the American Revolution and Boston, Philadelphia, even Trenton spring to mind. But the events leading up to Lexington and Concord have parallels in New York, including the Boston Massacre (see January 1770) and the Boston Tea Party (see April 1774). Bunker Hill and Yorktown are central to our national narrative, but too few know anything about the Battle of Long Island, fought in August 1776. Fewer still know the story of the infamous prison ships where 11,500 patriots perished in rotting hulks anchored in Wallabout Bay between 1776 and 1783.

Fundamental American rights and great legal principles were established here. The Flushing Remonstrance (1657) was the first expression of religious tolerance in the colonies. John Peter Zenger (1735) established the principle of freedom of the press, a right reaffirmed 236 years later when the *New York*

Times published the Pentagon Papers (1971). *Gibbons v. Ogden* (1824), affirming the primacy of the federal government in interstate commerce, originated in a dispute over ferry franchises on the Hudson River. And on two occasions the United States Supreme Court affirmed the legitimacy of historic preservation laws: the Penn Central case (1978) established preservation as an appropriate use of regulatory powers, and the St. Bartholomew's case (1990) reiterated the application of those laws to religious properties.

On the morning of September 11, 2001, New York was once again thrust into the heart of the American drama, as terrorists flew hijacked airliners into the World Trade Center. Dominating the skyline of lower Manhattan, the Twin Towers were potent symbols of American economic and cultural might, and their destruction reverberated around the world. Over 2,800 men and women died, far more than fell on the Normandy beaches on D-Day, but the dead were not soldiers; they were just New Yorkers—bond traders and lawyers and waiters and window washers. These New Yorkers were from Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas; they were Christians, Jews, Hindus, Muslims, and atheists. Across the country, Americans long accustomed to viewing the city as an exception, a place and a state of mind distant from the “heartland,” embraced New York like an estranged sibling.

When I began this chronology, I was confident that the one certainty historians possess is that we can know when something happened. Foolishly, I believed this project would require a mechanic's skill: find the date, enter the date, move on to the next date. Early on this proved illusory. I found conflicting dates for even relatively recent, easily verifiable events. To further complicate matters, during the colonial era there are two dates for everything because the calendar itself changed. Until 1752, the English adhered to old-style dating, while the Dutch had embraced the new style. For example, Peter Stuyvesant surrendered to the English on August 29 (Old Style) or September 8 (New Style). I've tried to be consistent by accepting the date used at the time, but it remains confusing.

The book is divided into sections covering half-century spans. Obviously, they vary greatly in length. The 20th century takes up the bulk of the volume, while the 18th century, at least until the American Revolution, is rather thin. Truth be told, not much happened in the first half of the 1700s. I did not endeavor to create a definitive chronology for the colonial decades. Why not? Because it has already been done. Readers craving a more detailed account of those years should consult the six-volume *Iconography of Manhattan Island*, by Isaac Newton Phelps Stokes (1915), and the three-volume *History of Brooklyn*, by Henry Stiles (1867). Certainly, I could have appropriated details from those venerable gentlemen (more than I have, I mean); but to what purpose? Generally, the *Iconography of Manhattan Island* is a magnificent source, but even Stokes can be frustrating. When did Governor Andros abolish Indian

slavery? Was it on December 5, 1679, or was it on April 20, 1680? The reliable Stokes offers both dates. Which should we accept? Does it matter?

Newspapers are full of facts, but one cannot always assume they are accurate. Not infrequently a writer will check the newspaper index to find a specific date and cite the date the newspaper story appeared, which, of course, is the day after the event. Still, how can a *Times* article about the Brooklyn Dodgers have the wrong date for their one and only world championship? And how can one source claim the final score in the last game at Ebbets Field was 2–0, while another makes it 3–0? I also found contradictory dates for the first game played there. In that case, the confusion can be traced to the exhibition played between the Yankees and Dodgers on April 5, four days before the Dodgers hosted the Phillies in the first official game (the Dodgers lost, 1–0).

Perhaps these are insignificant quibbles, but still I marvel at the frequency with which errors are introduced into the historical record, errors that are magnified with each citation. Once the mistake is in print, it is difficult to set it right. Even the massive, authoritative *Encyclopedia of New York City* has mistakes. Which sources can a historian trust?

Consider one final example of the historian's quandary. The "City" section of the *Times* on December 24, 2000, noted:

Anne Hutchinson fled Massachusetts with six of her children and a small band of followers and settled in the marshes near what is today the Boston Road Bridge in 1643. The Siwanoy, enraged by years of violence, abuse and pilferage at the hands of the Dutch West India Company, attacked the encampment, murdering Hutchinson, her servants, and all but one of her children. Susannah Hutchinson, 8, escaped, but was captured by the Siwanoy and held for six years before she was released.

Now consider the version in *History of the City of New York: Its Origin, Rise, and Progress*, by Mrs. Martha Lamb and Mrs. Burton Harrison (1877):

The Weekquaesgeeks stole upon the estate of Annie Hutchinson at Annie's Neck, and murdered her with all her family and people save a sweet little granddaughter of eight years, whom they carried into captivity.

The Story of the Bronx, by Stephen Jenkins (1912), states that

the savages made a descent upon her farm and wiped it out of existence, at the same time killing her and all her family and servants except a granddaughter, who was carried into captivity, but was afterwards restored; her two years captivity among the savages had converted her into one.

Another source, *A Sweet and Alien Land*, by Henri van der Zee and Barbara van der Zee, states that Susanna was Hutchinson's eight-year-old daughter and was held for two years. A Web site for the genealogy of the Hutchinson family claims Susanna was christened in 1633, which would have made her ten at the time of the massacre. In *Gotham* (1999), Mike Wallace and Edward Burrows do not mention the child at all, and Stokes, on whom I depended to provide a definitive answer, omits the story of Anne Hutchinson entirely as far as I can tell. Again, whom should we trust?

New York, Year by Year is only as accurate as the sources I used. Though I tried to apply my best historian's judgment to sort out contradictions, my goal of sterling accuracy is undoubtedly already tarnished. I, too, am surely guilty of repeating inaccurate details and introducing fresh inaccuracies through carelessness or ignorance. But I hope readers will forgive the occasional misstatements and find value in my effort.

Finally, a personal note: I have been fascinated with New York for as long as I can remember. Though raised on Long Island, I was born in Brooklyn, and my parents always made me feel that, as Bobby Short sings, "New York is my personal property." But I also developed an early connection to the city's history. Perhaps it was *New York, Past and Present*, the schoolbook a careless child left in the Barricini candy store in Flatbush, where my mother's mother worked; I looked at every page of that book over and over and over again, marveling that places around me had an exciting past. But it might be something else again. I am only here because the girl who grew up to be my father's mother was sick and missed the church picnic on June 15, 1904.