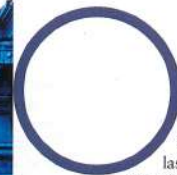




The copper-clad, 95-year-old railway terminal has just been restored. Nearby Pier A offers a panoramic view of New York's altered skyline.

## “THE CITY AT THE NATION’S Hoboken’s hardworking history exudes an undeniable gritty charm — and its view of Manhattan

## FRONT DOOR” is incomparable. By Robert Klara



ON SEPTEMBER 26, 1918, THE MEUSE-ARGONNE OFFENSIVE began. The attack on the German lines in France lasted for 47 days, until the war’s end, and remains the longest battle in American history. During the assault, Gen. John J. Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Force, made his troops a surprisingly blunt promise: By Christmas, he told them, they would be in heaven, they would be in hell, or they would be in Hoboken.

Even with eternal bliss as a possibility, it’s a good bet that most of the mud-caked doughboys prayed they’d end up in Hoboken. The small and often overlooked New Jersey city, in the shadow of Manhattan’s skyscrapers, had been the last place they had stood on American soil, and if they were fortunate, it would be the first place they’d set foot there again. The lucky ones did, and before Christmas.

Today Hoboken is known, in a plain but accurate phrase, as the Mile Square City, but an earlier nickname has more of a ring to it: The City at the Nation’s Front Door. If Manhattan has historically been the gateway to America, tiny Hoboken, the island’s mainland neighbor, and with it part of the once-busiest port in the world, lived its great days with oversized responsibilities. It was among the most important transportation and industrial centers of the early twentieth century and home to one of the greatest railroad terminals ever built.

Hoboken invented the slide rule, ran the first American-built steam locomotive, and played the first organized game of baseball. It gave America Maxwell House coffee, Lipton tea, and Frank Sinatra. But it’s a place few vacationers even know about. “The idea of tourism in Hoboken is a foreign concept,” admits the director and curator of the Hoboken Historic Museum, Bob Foster.

That might be because for years the city has had to main-





tain its identity right beside what locals like to call “that city across the river.” But they needn’t be insecure. An easy jump from Manhattan by train or ferry, the place has one thing Manhattan will never have: an unobstructed view of itself.

Despite Hoboken’s renown as a transportation hub, the best way to get around it is on foot. Laid out in a grid of rectangular blocks almost wholly within a few feet of sea level, Hoboken is very walkable. The east-to-west streets bear numbers—First to Fourteenth, increasing as you move north, or uptown—while the north-to-south thoroughfares have names. Washington Street is Hoboken’s social backbone. An object thrown here will strike a bar or a restaurant before it hits anything else. Hoboken’s single hill is occupied by the Stevens Institute of Technology, whose Castle Point Observation Terrace, 100 feet up, is as high as things get.

Anchoring the grid from the bottom of town is the old Lackawanna Railroad Terminal, the city’s most visible landmark. Built in the days when a train station was meant to be a grand entrance to a city, the Lackawanna still fits that role. To get there, climb aboard the PATH train—the “tube” across the Hudson from New York—at any of its five stations in Manhattan for a \$1.50 trip. PATH, the Port Authority Trans-Hudson, was originally the Hudson & Manhattan Railroad and, in continuous operation since 1908, is one of the oldest subways in the world. After leaving Manhattan’s Christopher Street station, it takes an ear-popping dive under the river and a squeaky climb through the Jersey silt before clattering to rest in a cavern of concrete vaults where stairs lead up to the terminal’s concourse level.

Hoboken came of age before the turn of the last century, when commerce moved by water and rail. It was ideally situated for both. Recognizing the advantages of the city’s proximity to Manhattan together

with its mainland presence, the mammoth shipping lines of Hamburg-American and North German Lloyd drove their pilings into the New Jersey shoreline in 1863. Five years later the Delaware, Lackawanna & Western Railroad laid tracks down to the water, where it built a wooden station and took over ferry service to New York. The synergy between ships and trains transformed the town from a bucolic hamlet into an engine of capitalism.

The Lackawanna Terminal is as imposing a presence today as when it opened in 1907. Designed by Kenneth Murchison, a noted railroad architect, the Beaux Arts confection, sheathed from curb to cornice in lavish ornamental copper, was the fifth terminal on its site and was meant to replace for eternity the four that had burned before it. Strip away all the copper, and the structure is a concrete bunker.

There are, to be technical, two Lackawanna terminals, one for ferries and one for trains. The ferry building juts out long and low over the water, while the railroad wing anchors it by land. Murchison’s creation was a masterpiece of intermodal transportation; the docks were just a few minutes’ walk away, the trolleys even closer.

Though the Lackawanna ran its last ferry in 1967 and its last train five years later, this is still a very active railroad station. Some 30,000 people move through it daily to use the commuter trains of New Jersey Transit, which recently completed a full restoration of the waiting room. During the day, light streams down through a Tiffany stained-glass skylight to the benches and mosaic-tile floor below. At night the room basks in the glow of four monumental bronze chandeliers.

Beyond the waiting room, a shadowy expanse of train shed stretches far down to a tangle of rails in the distance. These tracks once sent passengers as far as Buffalo, where they could connect for Chicago, where they could connect for any-

**THE SYNERGY BETWEEN SHIPS AND TRAINS TRANSFORMED THE TOWN FROM A BUCOLIC HAMLET INTO AN ENGINE OF CAPITALISM.**



The terminal’s majestic waiting room still speaks of the romance of travel to distant places, even as present-day commuters seem barely to notice their surroundings. At far right, a horse-drawn steam pumper waits downtown in 1912.

ALL UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED: JOSEPH RODRIGUEZ/BLACK STAR; FAR RIGHT: LIBRARY SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, STEVENS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY/HOBOKEN, NJ







where. Once completed, the shed immediately became the railroading standard, replacing the high single-arch structures that dominated the Victorian era with a breakthrough design featuring a series of low peaked roofs with long, open, lengthwise notches to allow smoke to escape from the idling steam engines. The concept still serves today, venting the top-exhausting diesel engines of New Jersey Transit.

Just north of the terminal, a long recreational pier that reaches out into the Hudson can offer you a haunting look at the Lackawanna's empty slips. Even maritime-minded visitors will, admittedly, need vivid imaginations. The grimy bustle of the old waterfront has vanished. Bill Miller, an author and ocean-liner historian, recalls watching it all in wonderment as a child in the late forties: "The Holland-America piers were filled with freighters delivering Heineken and crates of tulips and cheeses. We shipped Fords and Chevys and a tremendous amount of grain to feed postwar Europe. At the American Export lines, you'd smell the spices from India and the oranges from Israel."

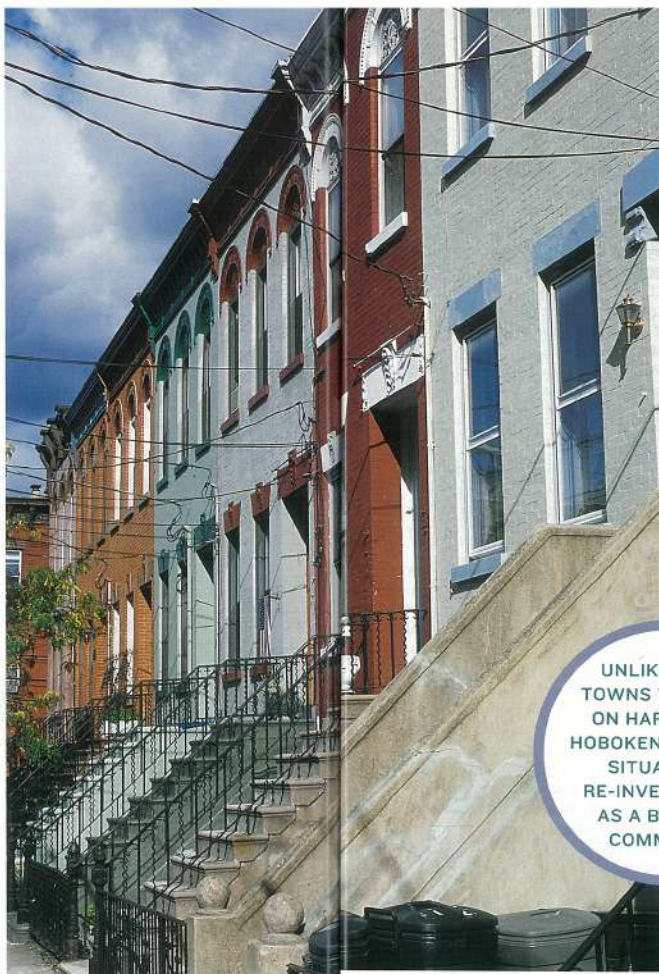
Tulips, spices, Chevys—all gone. Pier A is now a park. But beneath the grass and benches this remains an important nautical site. It was here that America dispatched and welcomed home two million soldiers from the battlefields of World War I. On August 31, 1918, the busiest day of all, 51,356 young men shipped out for Europe. Many of them returned to the same spot in wooden coffins. A World

War I memorial stands uptown in Elysian Park, but perhaps the most fitting tribute to them is the vista beyond the pier. The view of the Manhattan skyline is not only stunning; with the sound of water licking the pilings and the smell of brine everywhere it can bring a sort of peace.

"I used to defend Hoboken by asking people from New York City, 'What kind of view do you have?'" says the petite, salty Dorothy Novak, wiping down the counter of Schnackenberg's luncheonette, which her father opened on Washington Street in 1931. The booths are made of wood, and a rickety screen door bangs shut behind you as you enter. "People tell me this is like stepping into another decade," she adds. She's speaking of her shop, but she could be describing Hoboken itself. For though the great ships and the longshoremans are gone, the city they built survives, looking much the same.

In the 1950s and 1960s, when air travel choked off the passenger business and containerization drove the freighters to deep-water ports, Hoboken went through a period of neglect and abandonment. But unlike other industrial towns that fell on hard times and never got back up, it was well situated to re-invent itself as a bedroom community. Gentrification began in the 1970s. Today its row houses, brownstones, and tenements, the working-class quarters of the turn of the last century, are in great demand. And they are everywhere.

Many of the buildings were put up by the Hoboken Land & Improvement Com-



Washington Street row houses, once neglected, are now in great demand. Above left, Dorothy and Mark Novak are the second and third generations of their family to own Schnackenberg's. Right: Marlon Brando and Eva Marie Saint filmed *On the Waterfront* in Hoboken.

BOTTOM RIGHT: PHOTOFEST



UNLIKE OTHER TOWNS THAT FELL ON HARD TIMES, HOBOKEN WAS WELL SITUATED TO RE-INVENT ITSELF AS A BEDROOM COMMUNITY.

pany, which was created in 1838 by John Stevens, a colonel in the Revolutionary Army and the founder of Hoboken. Stevens purchased a square mile of land in 1784 with the idea of using its waterfront for shipping and of developing the rest "as an exclusive section." In the 1820s and 1830s he had some success in promoting it as a pleasure resort, drawing thousands of well-to-do Manhattanites across the river to a lush green esplanade known as River Walk and the park he named Elysian Fields. But bluebloods and longshoremans seldom shared the same neighborhood, and the arrival of shipping companies ensured that the city's future would be an industrial one.

Between 1900 and World War I, Hoboken was home to more than 250 manufacturing plants that made everything from wallpaper to silk stockings. At Third Street between Grand and Adams, an imposing clock tower dating from 1906 rises above a building now holding residential lofts that once belonged to the manufacturing firm of Keuffel & Esser, which made instruments that helped plan the Brooklyn Bridge and in 1891 invented the slide rule. The old Standard Brands building, recently converted to rental apartments, stands at the top of Washington Street. There Sir

Thomas Lipton manufactured his invention, the tea bag, beginning in 1919. Not one to underutilize the factory's massive freight elevators, he used to ride his limousine straight up to his office.

As a blue-collar town Hoboken couldn't boast of too many famous residents, and it was wholly unaware of one that it did have. In the early years of the last century, a wrinkled, gnomic woman could be seen tottering up and down Washington Street, in rags. Her name was Hetty Green, and she happened to be the richest woman in America. Heir to a

whaling fortune, the reclusive Green was the shrewdest moneylender of her day. Known to her colleagues as the Witch of Wall Street, she occupied a cold-water flat in a building that still stands at 1200 Washington Street. There, sitting on a fortune estimated at \$200 million, she dined on oatmeal.

It is said that Hoboken's most famous son, Frank Sinatra, didn't think much of the city. The story goes that in 1948, while performing at the Union Club (which survives as condominiums today, at 600 Hudson Street), he was booted off the stage and swore he'd never come back.

Martin Sinatra, a Hoboken fireman, and his wife, Dolly, welcomed their only child into the world on December 12, 1915, in an apartment house at 415 Monroe Street. The house burned in 1967, and a bronze star marks its location, but plenty of Sinatra is present next door at No. 417, a former candy store where, as a boy, the singer craned for the customers. Now it's a museum, open only on weekends, run by Ed Shirak, a fan, writer, and local politician.

Shirak displays a clutter of photographs, rare records, and even one of Sinatra's silk handkerchiefs, but the real attraction is Shirak himself. In his navy blue suit and polka-dotted tie, he looks a lot like Sinatra. And when he sings Sinatra standards on the museum's small stage, he sounds a lot like him too.

"Sing 'My Way!'" a woman calls out from a group of elderly visitors on a recent Sunday afternoon.

"He really didn't like it, you know," says Shirak, with a knowing smile.

"For a song he didn't like, he sang it often enough!" she retorts.

Incidentally, Sinatra did return to Hoboken, but not until 1984. Through the years, however, he had bread delivered to his New York home from Dom's Bakery, which remains in business at 506 Grand Street.

In 1948 a reporter for the New York *Sun* named Malcolm Johnson won a Pulitzer Prize for a series of articles about graft and murder along New York's waterfront. The pieces attracted the attention of the novelist and screenwriter Budd Schulberg and the director Elia



Kazan. In 1953 Kazan and his crew dropped their bags in Hoboken, where they made a low-budget picture in 36 days: *On the Waterfront*. Produced by Columbia Pictures and starring Marlon Brando, Karl Malden, and Eva Marie Saint, it told the story of a priest's and a longshoreman's violent crusade against a pier-side mob, and it won eight Oscars.

Scrubbed though Hoboken may be today compared with Kazan's celluloid version, you can still walk down a spooky Court Street, where Brando was nearly run down by a truck, and sip whiskey in the barroom on the corner of Fourteenth and Garden where Brando bought Eva Marie Saint her first drink. Today it's called Frankie & Johnny's, and its owner, Dino Panopoulos, has

stretch of saloons, on River Street, was known as the Barbary Coast. "It had to be the greatest number of bars in a three-block area anywhere in the world," remembers Bill Miller, a native son. "If the crewmen couldn't pay their tabs, they'd make good with artifacts stolen from their ships: swords from Japan, a life preserver, gems. One guy took the 20-foot signboard off the wheelhouse and gave it to the barkeep."

The Coast was razed in the sixties, but you can easily get a sense of what it must have been like to elbow up to the bar next to a dockworker. Stop by Helmer's, a German beer hall at Washington and Eleventh that's been there since 1935, or visit the Madison, at Washington and Fourteenth, where the

serviced more than 4,000 ships. Today part of the building houses the small but worthy Hoboken Historic Museum, whose extensive collection, from signs to tools to union cards, was scavenged from the piers by its curator and director, Bob Foster, and other members of the museum, in the late seventies and early eighties, as one shipper after another went out of business.

"After World War I this place was a teeming horror," says Richard Widdicombe, director of the library at the Stevens Institute of Technology. Standing at Castle Point, he conjures images of industrial mayhem along the now tranquil shoreline below. "The entire waterfront was shipping. It was bar to bar on River Street. Up here was the only good spot."

It's not difficult to see why. The view of New York Harbor from the highest ground in the city is so grand that an admission charge would not offend (there isn't one). The Stevens campus, with its spacious lawns and rare elm trees, is also the only place where you can get a sense of what Hoboken looked like during the early 1800s, when the spot was the colonel's estate and thousands came to mingle in his gardens. The school is technically private property and sometimes closed, but visitors, if discreet, can usually make their way in without difficulty.

The colonel's son, Edwin Augustus, founded Stevens Tech in 1870, and its first classroom building still dominates the corner of Fifth and Hudson. A block away, on Sixth Street, the 1856 gatehouse to the family estate survives, built from the same greenish soapstone the Lenni Lanape Indians used to make their smoking pipes. The name Hoboken comes from *topoghan hackingh*, "land of the tobacco pipe."

Stevens is a haven of dormitories and lecture halls whose tranquility belies the abundance of inventions that have sprung from it. Among them were present-day standardized sizes of electrical wiring, gauges that kept hot-water heaters from exploding, and concrete barriers to separate opposing lanes of highway traffic. And one graduate came up with Bubble

Wrap. Some of the school's more important innovations have been top secret. The Davidson Laboratory, on Hudson Street between Seventh and Eighth Streets, tested models for the landing craft used in the Normandy invasion and later worked to develop the world's first nuclear-powered missile-firing submarine.

That John Stevens's son founded a school for engineers was not surprising. The colonel had been one of the foremost inventors of his age. He devised the screw-driven steamboat, the multitube boiler, and something visitors to Hoboken in the summer of 1826 would never forget, what he called his "Steam Carriage," which chuffed around a circular track at speeds approaching 12 miles an hour. Stevens offered rides to spectators, many of whom were horrified at the prospect. Later those who took him up on it could say they had ridden the first steam locomotive built in America. It is in the Smithsonian Institu-

THE STEVENS CAMPUS IS THE ONLY PLACE WHERE YOU CAN GET A SENSE OF WHAT HOBOKEN LOOKED LIKE IN THE EARLY 1800S.

tion today. Historians disagree on exactly where the tracks were located; several put them where the school's Davis Athletic field is now, and it's worth a moment to nudge your foot into the earth there, where the invention that built industrial America likely made its debut.

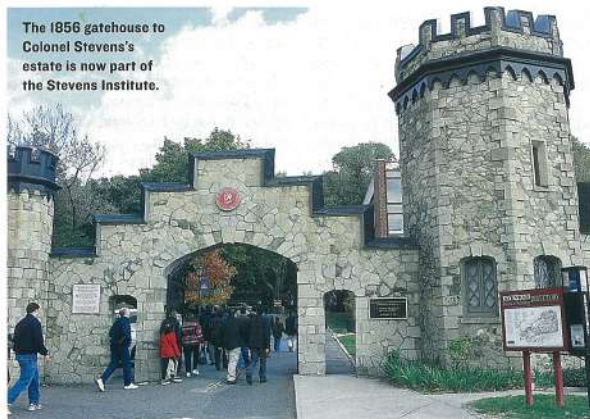
Railroading's birthplace is not Hoboken's only hallowed ground. Don't leave town without spending a few minutes in Elysian Park. There the colonel's River Walk, following a waterside meander from the ferry slips, rounded the bluff that Stevens Institute stands on and opened onto the Elysian Fields; and there, one summer afternoon in 1846, the Knickerbocker Club arrived from Manhattan to face off with a local team called the New Yorks. They came to play a new game called "base ball" that had been growing in popularity but was not very structured. On that day the teams standardized the rules and played the first organized game

on record. In the park, you're standing roughly in the outfield. Walk a block or so to the intersection of Washington and Eleventh, and you'll find a plaque that marks the Knickerbocker's 25-1 victory. "Until this time," it says, "the game was not seriously regarded."

From a floating dock just south of the Lackawanna Terminal, you can buy a three-dollar ticket for the New York Waterway ferry, which runs on the half-hour and takes about 15 minutes to deposit you at the World Financial Center in lower Manhattan. As the boat slowly pulls out from the Lackawanna slips toward the New York City skyscrapers, you'll be struck by the extreme disparity between skylines. You can't help admiring Hoboken for standing up to its imperious neighbor, for its stubborn refusal to be anything but itself, for just being there. "Hoboken's a unique small town," Dino Panopoulos says. "It's so close to New York, but it has its own identity. People here think it's the center of the universe." \*

Robert Klara is an editor and freelance writer who lives in Manhattan.

The 1856 gatehouse to Colonel Stevens's estate is now part of the Stevens Institute.



managed to turn it into an upscale restaurant without offending the resident ghosts. Panopoulos prepares serious steaks in his kitchen and displays, in a locked cabinet, a gaffing hook that's even more serious. "This was a longshoremen's bar," he says proudly.

The longshoremen's most enduring legacy in Hoboken may well be its bars, or rather, their prodigious number. Ever since the founding of America's first brewery there, in 1642, Hoboken has always been wet. The city essentially ignored Prohibition. The most notorious

hand-painted glass ceiling panels have survived for a century, or the Elysian Café, at Washington and Tenth, where the grime on the ornamental plaster looks as if it's been around about as long. The beer is cold, which is still the point.

One important relic of the longshoreman's toils survives in the form of a low brick building at Hudson and Thirteenth Streets, the former Machine Shop, Hoboken's only remaining industrial structure on the waterfront, built around 1890 by the W. A. Fletcher Company. During World War II, workers in the building

## TO PLAN A TRIP

HOBOKEN IS EASILY REACHED from Manhattan by subway or ferry. This subway, properly called the PATH train, runs 24 hours a day from five stations in Manhattan and charges \$1.50 each way for the quick trip under the Hudson River. Visit [www.panynj.gov/path/pathfram.htm](http://www.panynj.gov/path/pathfram.htm) to see a system map, or call 800-234-PATH for more information. New York Waterway's ferryboats run seven days a week, crossing from West Thirty-eighth Street in Midtown Manhattan and Pier A at Battery Park. The fare is \$3.00 each way, and the best views are from the open-air deck upstairs. For schedules, go to [www.nywaterway.com](http://www.nywaterway.com), or call 800-53-FERRY.

Before visiting, you might want to take a crash course courtesy of the Hoboken Historic Museum, whose excellent Web site features a condensed city history, a map, and a comprehensive walking tour: [www.hobokenmuseum.org](http://www.hobokenmuseum.org). The museum itself, at 1301 Hudson Street, mounts changing exhibits and is open on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday evenings and on weekends. Call 201-656-2240. Ed Shirak's homespun Frank Sinatra museum,

From Here to Eternity, is at 417 Monroe Street, next door to the entertainer's birthplace. A labor of love, the museum cannot afford regular hours of operation, but Shirak will tell you when he plans to be there and will also schedule visits by appointment. For more information, call Lepore's Homemade Chocolates at 201-659-4783, or leave a message on the museum's answering machine, 201-659-9440.

Hoboken's selection of restaurants and bars can be daunting. Visit either [www.hoboken.com](http://www.hoboken.com) or [www.hobokeni.com](http://www.hobokeni.com), both of which offer comprehensive listings and other information helpful to visitors. The ones mentioned in this story can be found at the following addresses and numbers: Schnackenberg's Luncheonette, 1110 Washington Street, 201-659-9836; the Madison, 1316 Washington Street, 201-386-0300; Elysian Café, 1001 Washington Street, 201-659-9110; Helmer's, 1306 Washington Street, 201-963-3333; and Frankie & Johnny's, Fourteenth & Garden Streets, 201-659-6202.

