

Samuel Rea

Excerpted from *Forgotten Delights: The Producers*
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Artist: Adolph A. Weinman

Dedicated: ca. 1910

Medium and size: Bronze, 10 feet high.

Location: Entrance to 2 Penn Plaza, Seventh Avenue at 32nd Street. Standing at the top of the Seventh-Avenue stairs to Penn Station, turn right and go up 6 steps. Bear left to the front of the building that rises over Penn Station. The statue faces east, and falls into shadow early in the day.

About the statue

Rea would not look out of place at a Wall-Street conference table today. From his well-groomed hair and mustache to his three-piece double-breasted suit, overcoat and hat, he is impeccably turned out. His upright posture, level gaze and unlined brow mark him as calm, confident and ready to deal with major projects or sudden crises. "Mr. Rea's appearance was that of a man of great strength and power," recalled the *New York Times* (3/29/1929). "He was more than six feet in height, and his strong, rugged face was surmounted by a shock of iron-gray hair. He would deal with tremendous problems and immense figures almost as with trifles, and while his associates often were struggling with a problem he would snap out his decision and the problem would be ended." Rea carries a roll of plans for the Pennsylvania Station, and stands next to a model of part of the Station.

About the subject

"The station ... is the largest and handsomest in the world," declared the *New York Times* in 1910. "Any idea of it formed from description and pictures falls short of the impression it makes upon the eye." Commissioned in 1902, begun in 1906, completed in 1910, Pennsylvania Station was a magnificent building, from the steel and glass vaults of the concourse, to the coffered ceiling and arched windows of the waiting room, to the colossal columns and pediments of its exterior. (The General Post Office at Seventh Avenue and 34th Street, designed a decade later by the same architects, gives some idea of the monumental facade.) "No half-way solution should be attempted by the Pennsylvania Railroad Company," asserted Rea (1855-1929), who was in charge of the project to link the PRR's Jersey City terminal to Manhattan. "It should ultimately go into New York in such a manner as to answer the needs of the Company for the next half century at least, and on an equality with, if not on a more elaborate scale, than the New York Central and Hudson River Railroad Company."

Like Cooper, Vanderbilt, Ericsson and Holley, Rea (who worked his way up from the lowliest ranks of the PRR) was the sort of man who knew how to persuade nature and his employees do his will:

The drudge may fret and tinker, or labor with lusty blows,
But back of him stands the Thinker, the clear-eyed man who
knows. (See sidebar.)

The railroad tubes under the Hudson were the first such built in the Americas, designed by Rea after careful study of the recently constructed electric-powered London subways. Another set of tubes sent trains under the East River to the sprawling railroad yards in Sunnyside, Queens, where cars were serviced, cleaned, and assembled into outgoing trains. This was one of the most massive engineering projects of the early twentieth century—matched only by the construction of Grand Central Terminal a few blocks away, by Vanderbilt's heirs.

A few years after the completion of the Pennsylvania Station, Rea was named president of the PRR, a position he filled with energy and dignity until 1925, when he reached the PRR's mandatory retirement age of seventy.

The tubes still carry trains under the Hudson and East Rivers. The Sunnyside Yards still service trains. But barely fifty years after its much-lauded completion, the Pennsylvania Station was torn down by the very company that built it. What happened?

Although Pennsylvania Station and Grand Central Terminal were under construction at the same time, the circumstances under which they were built were very different. The city and state of New York decreed in the 1820s that only two railroads, the New York and Harlem River Railroad and the Hudson River Railroad, would be allowed to run lines into Manhattan. Under Cornelius Vanderbilt's leadership, these and other railroads were eventually consolidated into the New York Central Railroad.

While Manhattan's business district was still centered on Canal Street, Vanderbilt bought relatively inexpensive land for a terminal at 42nd Street. In 1871 he finished the construction of Grand Central Depot on that site. Within twenty years, the New York Central's volume of traffic required an even larger building, completed in 1913: the present Grand Central Terminal.

The Pennsylvania Railroad was the New York Central's most efficient and aggressive competitor. Its operations extended from the East coast to the Mississippi River and from the Great Lakes to the Potomac. But for over forty years, PRR trains reaching New Jersey had to transfer passengers and freight to ferries in order to cross the Hudson River, because the PRR did not have legislative permission to build a railroad into Manhattan.

By the late nineteenth century, when the PRR was finally granted permission to run such a line, the commercial center of the city had shifted north to the mid-40s. The price of land forced the PRR to settle for a site on the west side of Midtown, where real estate was less in demand.

The Vanderbilts laid a multitude of tracks underground north of Forty-Second Street and sold the "air rights" over them for construction of hotels and apartment buildings. There was no such demand for space over the PRR tracks. Result: in contrast to the New York Central, the PRR was paying taxes on a property in Manhattan that was devoted solely to railroad traffic, with no offsetting income. (In 1970, after the PRR had merged with the Central and gone spectacularly out of business in the largest corporate bankruptcy in U.S. history, the biggest asset remaining to the company was not its trains, tracks or buildings, but the air rights north of Grand Central Terminal.)

Meanwhile, by the early twentieth century, railroads were increasingly hampered by government interference. In 1906,

while Pennsylvania Station was under construction, the Interstate Commerce Commission was given the right to set “just and reasonable” rates for railroad freight and passengers. These rates could not be appealed in court. New labor laws favored unionization and higher wages. From 1900 to 1915 prices in the United States increased 35%. Wages of railroad workers increased 50%. Taxes paid by railroads increased 200%. During the same period the ICC permitted one rate increase for the railroads, of 5%. (See Schlichting p. 196.)

Furthermore, railroads were beginning to face serious competition for passengers and freight. In 1901 the first automobiles were mass-produced in America. Over the next hundred years roads were built at public expense nationwide, including the Interstate Highway System (began in 1956), and cars began to siphon off much of the PRR’s lucrative passenger traffic. The government funded the Port Authority Bus Terminal (less than ten blocks from Penn Station) and LaGuardia and Idlewild (now John F. Kennedy International) airports.

By the 1950s, the PRR’s major competitors—automobiles, buses, airplanes—had use of publicly financed and operated roads and terminals. Railroad travel during that decade fell to less than 25% of its peak during World War II. By the late 1950s, the PRR was running a \$72 million deficit.

The multi-million dollar upkeep and operating expenses of Penn Station came out of the pocket of the PRR, which also paid over a million dollars a year in New York real-estate taxes. With no relief in sight for its steeply declining revenues, the PRR decided to reduce present and future losses by going into partnership with Madison Square Garden to build a smaller, underground railroad station, with a sports arena and office space above.

The elegant home of the Chattanooga Choo-Choo (“You leave the Pennsylvania Station ‘bout a quarter to four, / Read a magazine and then you’re in Baltimore”) was demolished in the early 1960s amid cries of horror that insensitive capitalists were destroying a historic building of tremendous architectural beauty and importance. But who destroyed Penn Station: the PRR, which paid for its demolition as well as its construction, or the local, state and federal officials who hampered and harassed the PRR until it could no longer afford to maintain Penn Station?

Bibliography and further reading

Margot Gayle and Michele Cohen, *The Art Commission and the Municipal Art Society Guide to Manhattan's Outdoor Sculpture*. New York, 1988) p. 116. Smithsonian Institution Research Information System (<http://siris.si.edu>), Inventory of American Sculpture, control #IAS 87870109. On Rea, see Robert L. Emerson, “Rea, Samuel” (<http://www.anb.org/articles/10/10-01372.html>, American National Biography Online Feb. 2000, with bibliography). On the original Penn Station, see William D. Middleton, *Manhattan Gateway, New York's Pennsylvania Station* (Kalmbach Books, 1996), and Peter Moore, photographer, *The Destruction of Penn Station*, edited and with an introduction by Barbara Moore (D.A.P. / Distributed Art Publishers, 2000).

On the construction of Grand Central Terminal, see Kurt C. Schlichting, *Grand Central Terminal: Railroads, Engineering, and Architecture in New York City* (Baltimore and London, 2001), and *Transportation* in the forthcoming *Forgotten Delights* volume on allegories.

Provenance

Rea’s statue originally stood in a niche within Penn Station. It now stands above and behind the Seventh Avenue entrance to the underground Station. The plaque, added after the statue was moved, reads: “Samuel Rea, Vice Pres. 1899-1912, President 1913-1925, Pennsylvania Railroad Company, under whose able supervision the Pennsylvania Station and the extension of the railroad serving it into New York City, was designed and constructed. The original station was opened to the public in September 1910 and was redeveloped, providing for Madison Square Garden Center above street level, during the years 1963-1968.” Not owned by the City of New York; possibly owned by Amtrak or the Pennsylvania Station (see SIRIS).

The Thinker

*Back of the beating hammer by which the steel is wrought,
Back of the workshop’s clamor, the seeker may find the thought.
The thought that is ever master of iron and steam and steel,
That rises above disaster and tramples it under heel.
The drudge may fret and tinker, or labor with lusty blows,
But back of him stands the Thinker, the clear-eyed man who knows.*

*For into each plow or sabre, each piece and part and whole,
Must go the brains of labor, which gives the work a soul.
Back of the motor’s humming, back of the belts that sing,
Back of the hammer’s drumming, back of the cranes that swing,
There is the eye which scans them, watching through stress and strain,
There is the mind which plans them—back of the brawn, the brain.*

*Might of the roaring boiler, force of the engine’s thrust,
Strength of the sweating toiler—greatly in these we trust.
But back of them stands the schemer, the thinker who drives things through,
Back of the job, the dreamer, who’s making the dream come true.
—Berton Braley*

This essay is excerpted from *Forgotten Delights: The Producers*, the first in a series of books on Manhattan’s outdoor representational sculpture. *The Producers* includes essays on

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