

Grand Central

Transcript

Narrator: On the morning of January 8, 1902, the air around Grand Central Station was choked with smoke, cinders, and noxious fumes. Hundreds of trains converged at the station - a deluge of steel and steam far too great for the outdated train yard to handle.

For decades New Yorkers had complained about the horrid conditions at Grand Central. But a shocking tragedy that January day would change everything. Steam locomotives would be banished from the city and the crowded train yard condemned. A new Grand Central would arise -- a miracle of design and engineering.

Paul Goldberger, Writer: Grand Central is both grand and part of everyday life; incredibly practical, incredibly functional, and yet overpoweringly exciting at the same time. Grand Central is so much more than just a train station. In many ways, it's the heart of New York.

I got to know Grand Central really well when I was in college and would take the train down from New Haven all the time. And you felt as if you were arriving in the place. This was it. If you had any doubt when you got off the train and walked into that incredible concourse, you knew it was the center of the world, and you knew this was the place you wanted to go to. It encourages movement. And yet has a sort of stately dignity at the same time.

It's sublime. It reminds you of the greatness of human ambition. When we build so much beyond what we have to, and we do it not to glorify a king, say, as in a palace -- something like that -- but to glorify everybody. This is a building of extraordinary glory but is public in the deepest sense of the word. And it belongs to everybody.

Narrator: In 1869, the railroad tycoon Cornelius Vanderbilt bought a five-block parcel of land on Manhattan Island. It was in the middle of nowhere -- a 45 minute journey from the heart of

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the city -- bounded by slaughterhouses and breweries, and, on the far eastern edge, a squatters-slum known as Dutch Hill.

But it was on this 23-acre site, from 42nd Street to 47th Street, from Madison Avenue to, Fourth Avenue, that Vanderbilt decided to build a great rail station; a testament to the power and glory of his empire.

T. J. Stiles, Writer: There was a connection between Vanderbilt and his corporations that you don't see in other corporations -- this personalization of this great railroad empire. And you see that in Grand Central itself.

Narrator: Vanderbilt who was known as "the Commodore" made his first fortune in steamboats. In the twilight of his life, he acquired three railroads: the Harlem, the Hudson, and the New York Central. Together these rail lines gave Vanderbilt an empire stretching deep into America's interior, and, even more importantly, a monopoly for all rail service into and out of New York City.

The center of that monopoly would be an immense, domed depot called Grand Central.

T.J. Stiles, Writer: If you look at pictures of New York at this time, it's stunning how church steeples tower up over the top of the city. It's dense. It's crowded with people, and yet it is a low-rise city of small structures to the modern eye. And here's Grand Central, massively built. It had these enormous domes, and it was this huge expanse, stretching north from 42nd Street, crowned with this grand glass-and-steel train shed. And it really was a remarkable piece of infrastructure unlike any that existed in the world.

Narrator: In what would soon be the heart of the city, iron horses thundered down Park Avenue and came to rest inside a magnificent wrought iron and glass train shed. For a brief moment the Depot held the city in its thrall. "New York opened its eyes and gasped," one

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critic wrote. But as New York City rushed past 42nd Street, Grand Central's tangled maze of track, all running at street level, became an open wound for the city. In the words of *The New York Times*, Vanderbilt's Depot had become "a cruel disgrace to the metropolis and its inhabitants."

Kurt Schlichting, Historian: Train traffic to the city grows exponentially. And more and more people are using the Depot. There just aren't enough tracks in the train shed for passengers to depart. And, it's really reaching the saturation point. It's clearly not working.

Jill Jonnes, Writer: You now have hundreds of huge trains coming back and forth through the northern part of the island -- and remember these are coal locomotives -- spewing great amounts of smoke and cinders and noise.

T.J. Stiles, Writer: You have trains coming and going at all hours. They are racing back and forth, up and down Fourth Avenue, and there are accidents and there are fears of accidents and there are what we can only call urban myths about how many people are being killed on Fourth Avenue.

The New York Times launches a campaign talking about the slaughters that are taking place as people are run down by Vanderbilt's ruthless railroads that are crushing the individual. And you can see that the tensions of the age, the fear of the railroad as a corporation and as a force in society are being manifested in a very literal form of trains running down the helpless individual.

Narrator: Vanderbilt's reluctant response was to sink the railroad tracks just below street level. From 45th to 56th Street the New York Central built footbridges across the exposed tracks so that pedestrians could now cross the rail yard without risking life and limb.

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North of 56th Street tracks were covered, creating the Park Avenue tunnel. Vents were placed periodically along the tunnel to allow steam that the locomotives still belched to vent on to Fourth Avenue. It was no solution.

T.J. Stiles, Writer: Someone said that it was like a volcano going off every two minutes as the trains come through. And that is something that the technology simply doesn't allow them to fix.

Susan Eddy, Writer: Once the trains were in what was essentially a tunnel, the steam that they generated was far too much to allow for visibility. The tunnel is dark. The tunnel is smoky.

Kurt Schlichting, Historian: It's filled with steam. People are like sardines in a can, there's no relief from the heat. And we have to endure it because the railroad has this monopoly.

Narrator: By the turn of the century Vanderbilt's descendants made up the richest family in America, the New York Central Railroad the wellspring of their great fortune. That Grand Central Station, the centerpiece of that empire, was a death trap -- considered by many to be the worst train station anywhere in the world seemed to concern them not at all.

Prima Soemijantoro Wilson: The first time I saw Grand Central was when I was seventeen with my mother. And coming from and growing up in the plantation in East Java, it was just incredible.

It was rush hour and people, streamings of people, were just coming out from various directions and we just got stuck in the middle of that. They were in suits, had briefcases and faces full of purpose. My mom was holding onto my hand and she leaned over and said to me, she whispered, "someday you will be one of these people, someday you will live here, and you will be one of them." Every morning I pass by that corner, and I feel I can be anybody I want.

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Narrator: A light snow was predicted for New York City on the morning of January 8, 1902. It was cold and the skies clear at 7:48 when train 223, bound for Grand Central Station, arrived at the platform in New Rochelle, New York. The dozens of commuters that morning easily found a seat, as the railroad always reserved the last two cars for New Rochelle residents. At Grand Central trains from Bedford, Scarsdale, Yonkers sat idle, belching steam, waiting to enter the once-great train shed. As locomotives backed up, the passengers from New Rochelle found themselves stuck deep inside the Park Avenue Tunnel.

Susan Eddy, Writer: It's rush hour. The trains are packed like cattle. And because there aren't enough tracks to handle the number of trains, the number of suburban commuters that are now entering the city in the morning, there are regularly backups in the tunnel.

Narrator: A few blocks north an express train from White Plains thundered towards Grand Central. At its helm was John Wiskar, a newly promoted engineer who would later be described in the New York papers as ambitious and impatient. At 63rd street, Wiskar rushed past the first signal telling him to slow down.

Susan Eddy, Writer: He missed two sets of signals; he missed a flare. He missed a gong. And the train never slowed down.

Narrator: At exactly 8:20 in the morning John Wiskar's locomotive barreled into the last car of train 223, instantly killing 15 people, dozens more were bloodied and burned. It was the worst train accident in New York City history. In New Rochelle word of the tragedy quickly spread by telegraph, as a desperate crowd gathered at the station for news. The unfortunate were directed to the 17th police precinct in Manhattan. There the bodies of the victims were tagged and numbered, their clothing searched to identify the dead. In one pocket, the police found a curl of golden hair tied to a blue ribbon a keepsake of a child's first haircut. By six

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o'clock, all the bodies had been identified. Outside, three inches of snow blanketed New York City.

Susan Eddy, Writer: The 1902 crash really brought to a head all of the fears and frustrations and anger that New Yorkers had had with this center city train situation. It was noisy, it was dirty, it was dangerous. And now people were dying.

Narrator: In the weeks following the 1902 accident, New York was consumed with stories about the tragedy. It seemed as if the whole city was enraged, its patience finally worn out. For a generation it had suffered an inadequate and poorly designed Grand Central, even as the Vanderbilts and their railroad recorded staggering profits year after year. But this accident could not be ignored. As the Attorney General considered indicting the railroad's board of directors, the state of New York moved to ban all steam locomotives in Manhattan. There would be no more iron horses running up and down Park Avenue, no more smoke-filled tunnels beneath the heart of the city. To stay in midtown, the New York Central would be forced to be a pioneer in a new technology, one that had never been used on such an enormous scale before: electricity.

Kurt Schlichting, Historian: A deadline is created. Do something, or you can't operate your steam engines on Manhattan Island. And that was really a Draconian response to not just the particular accident in 1902 but to really the deplorable conditions at the Grand Central Depot.

Mike Wallace, Historian: This is the progressive era, so called. This is when, in fact, there are many people who are promoting far more radical schemes. The socialists are, in fact, very powerful, particularly in New York City. And their argument is, let's bloody nationalize the railroads. Let's, in fact, take them away from their owners altogether. So in the context of the array of solutions that are out on the political table, this is chicken feed.

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Narrator: The New York Central did not fight the mandate to electrify. They couldn't. Any resistance would have been futile. For not only was Grand Central beyond redemption, but the Pennsylvania Railroad had just announced a new, glorious electric rail station in Manhattan.

Jill Jonnes, Writer: The Vanderbilts' biggest rival is the Pennsylvania Railroad. And it's a very ongoing rivalry. And for 30 years, the Pennsylvania Railroad had been racking its collective brains to figure out how to get into Manhattan. It has a huge terminal on the Hudson River in Jersey City.

Mike Wallace, Historian: All of those iron horses kind of chugged into the New Jersey Shore, and they kind of pawed impotently at the waterfront, you know, and they kind of looked longingly over the small stretch of water. And there had been endless efforts to sort of solve this problem.

Jill Jonnes, Writer: And finally, technology -- the advance of electricity -- means that they now can come under the Hudson River and build tunnels and bring their trains in using electric locomotives.

Kurt Schlichting, Historian: They were going to build a rail station, on Manhattan Island. And in a stroke, the Vanderbilt monopoly was at risk.

Narrator: 23 acres of condemned track, an outdated, inadequate terminal building, invasion by a fierce competitor. It would be hard to exaggerate the scope of the problems facing the New York Central in the spring of 1902, or the brilliance of the man who confronted them. William Wilgus did not command a great fortune like Cornelius Vanderbilt. He was simply the railroad's chief engineer. And yet, like Vanderbilt, Wilgus would have an outsized impact on America's preeminent city.

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Susan Eddy, Writer: William Wilgus was not a highly educated man. He never went to college. Graduated from high school. He went to work for a mentor engineer for a couple years. And that was his resumé. But he was a man of vision. Wilgus was able to see down the road to where the problems would be and think of solutions that made sense before the problems ever arose, and perhaps that's what makes a wonderful civil engineer.

Kurt Schlichting, Historian: He's also a risk taker. In other words, he thinks of solutions that are ... are imaginative ones, that are a leap forward. And he's confident in his own abilities to solve problems.

Narrator: Wilgus confronted the 1902 crisis and saw within it opportunity. He understood, where others did not, that steam locomotives were only one of the problems that vexed Grand Central. The other was capacity. Far too many trains ran every day into the outdated train yard. But where to expand?

Wilgus proposed a radical solution: build down 60 feet into the Manhattan bedrock. He imagined a new Grand Central where electric trains would still run through the Park Avenue tunnel, but, at 53rd Street, the tracks would separate. The upper level would be for long-distance travel. Trains from Buffalo, Boston, Chicago, St. Louis would enter the new Grand Central on these electrified tracks. Below them, suburban commuters effortlessly would glide into the terminal. It was an elegant solution that not only rid New York City of the hated train yard, it increased Grand Central's capacity three fold.

Mike Wallace, Historian: Wilgus certainly sees that it is a one big whopping solution to the big problem, which is this train shed. And it may have been glorious in the old days, but it's a nuisance now. So, electrifying allows you -- plus you have to electrify -- it allows you to get rid of the shed; it allows you to cover over the yards; it allows you to, you know, have an underground station. Your waiting shed is tucked away out of sight, subsurface. Brilliant. Simple, brilliant. Wildly expensive.

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Narrator: The initial estimates of Wilgus' plan were staggering. At a time when the total yearly revenue for the New York Central was \$80 million, Wilgus projected a cost to complete of 40 million. Within a year that estimate jumped to 60, then 70 million. And even though the city and the state had mandated the project by banning steam in Manhattan, not a single dollar of public money went into Grand Central's reconstruction.

But William Wilgus was undaunted. Rather than scale back, and design a lesser Grand Central, he devised a revolutionary way for the railroad to self-finance the entire project.

Frank Priol, Architect: Now Wilgus recognizes his audience. He realizes he's dealing with businessmen. He suggests that the railroad take advantage of one of its primary assets: real estate. Because it can convert what is essentially a lost expanse of open scar on the city's topography -- this vast field of train tracks and equipment -- and turn that into one of the greatest single real estate residential developments in American history.

Narrator: Wilgus called his idea "taking wealth from the air." At Grand Central there was no land to build on, just train yard. But, once the tracks were electrified and buried below street level, the space above, the air itself, could now be leased to developers to pay for the entire enterprise. It was the first ever application of what would eventually be called "air rights," and it forever changed the American landscape.

Kurt Schlichting, Historian: Few New Yorkers who walk north on Park Avenue realize that below them are train tracks, that they're still over Grand Central, that you have these buildings that don't have any cellars. They're the fruit of Wilgus' vision.

Narrator: In August 1903, a year and a half after the crash, teams of Irish day laborers dynamited the first section of Vanderbilt's old train yard. Rail cars hauled away millions of cubic yards of debris, and then brought in massive steel girders needed for the new,

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underground Grand Central. 25 miles of water and sewer lines were removed and relocated; three million cubic yards of dirt and rock were excavated; and all of this was done without any disruption to the daily commuter service.

Kurt Schlichting, Historian: At Grand Central, the trains had to continue to run day in, day out, 365 days a year, while this -- the most complicated construction project in New York history -- was about to unfold.

Narrator: Wilgus broke the massive construction project into 12 separate sections or "bites," as he called them, and attacked each independently. Moving from east to west, the old track was removed, bedrock and dirt excavated, concrete poured, steel girders erected, and then finally, the new electrified rail lines laid down.

Only after years of construction, when all sections were complete, were they joined together into a seamless, underground terminal: one free of the soot, noise, and congestion that had plagued Grand Central for decades. On September 30, 1906, the first electric train made its inaugural run into Grand Central. At the controls was William Wilgus. Passenger service for the new electrified lines was still months away. At 56th Street, there was a 1000-foot gap in the third rail. But Wilgus simply accelerated as he emerged from the Park Avenue tunnel, and glided into the station. He could be forgiven if he thought that the rest of the project was to continue just as smoothly.

Charlie Pappas: I grew up in Astoria. Pete lived in the same apartment building. We were a team. Pete got drafted in '42. And I got drafted in '43. He was one of my best friends. So I figured when he was leaving, I was going to go see him off. They used to bring them all to Grand Central Station and put them on the train to take off. I walked in there. I'd never seen anything so big in my life with thousands of people in it, mostly GIs going off to war. I never put this in my mind that something will happen to him, and we'll never meet again. This was the last thing in my mind.

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Pete got shot down, and they never found a trace of his plane or the crew or nothing. When I visit Grand Central, I think about the last time I seen Pete alive and when he was leaving and how I hugged him and he hugged me, and I said "I'll be seeing you," you know. Terrible feeling, when you lose a friend like that.

Narrator: In 1907, just five months after William Wilgus' triumphant ride into Grand Central Station, electrified service began to the Westchester suburb of White Plains. Papers reported the commuters' delight with the new electric train although a few complained that it traveled at too great a speed.

The following evening, the Brewster Express left Grand Central Station on that same track. At Woodlawn, in the Bronx, as the train rounded a curve, it flew off the tracks. In an instant 20 people were killed and 150 injured. The wreckage stretched for over a mile.

Kurt Schlichting, Historian: The press exploded. They hadn't forgotten the other accident. And the first newspaper accounts claimed that the passengers who died had been electrocuted. They had come in contact with the third rail. A bitter, bitter battle ensues within the railroad. There's a lot of nervousness, and there's a question about who's to blame - who's to blame in the corporate hierarchy.

Narrator: That question would consume William Wilgus and force him out of his job. Three years earlier, on a crisp fall day in Schenectady, New York, the New York Central had put its new electric engine to the test. Seven train cars, filled with guests, were pulled at speeds that exceeded 70 miles an hour. "The question of electric traction for high-speed trains," Wilgus boasted to the press, "has been solved for all time." For the next six months the new engine was tested on miles of dedicated track. Even in the worst weather it exceeded expectations. But there was one problem that kept reoccurring.

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Kurt Schlichting, Historian: When the electric engine was being tested, the engineers reported a problem called nosing, and that was the tendency of a very heavy locomotive to push the rails apart. The train literally goes off the tracks because the tracks are being destroyed by the weight of the engine. General Electric and the railroad felt that they had solved the problem.

Narrator: Within days of the Woodlawn accident, the New York district attorney called for the indictment of high-ranking officials at the New York Central chief among them, William Wilgus.

Wilgus was stunned, personally wounded by the attacks. He and his team had known about the nosing problem, but in Wilgus' mind it had been solved. How could anyone blame him for the Woodlawn accident? Angry, Wilgus wrote a ten-page defense of his actions and sent it to the New York Central's senior vice-president.

Kurt Schlichting, Historian: The problem is the District Attorney is investigating this rail accident. Documents will be subpoenaed, and if this particular memo gets out in the public, it's going to cause an uproar. And so, Wilgus gets a visit from the chief legal counsel of the railroad, and the legal counsel says to Wilgus, you have to destroy this memo. This is too dangerous. This is the smoking gun.

Narrator: Under pressure from the railroad, Wilgus reluctantly destroyed his memo. But it was too late; he had lost the confidence of the New York Central. Wilgus was now seen by the board of directors as a dangerous liability, one that had to be shut out from major corporate decisions. When the railroad modified their electric engine, putting four-wheel trucks on the front and rear to evenly distribute weight, they didn't even bother to tell their chief engineer.

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Kurt Schlichting, Historian: The redesign is an admission that the original design of the electric engine, with all the weight on the driving wheels was the cause of the Woodlawn Wreck. Wilgus takes that personally. And in retaliation, what Wilgus does is he goes back, and he reconstructs all of his notes and files about all of this controversy surrounding the design of the electric engines. It's his guarantee that the Central won't go after his reputation. And the Central knows that he has those materials.

Narrator: In July 1907, with his reconstituted defense placed safely among his personal papers, William Wilgus resigned from the New York Central. For the rest of his life Wilgus would seek recognition for his design and engineering work on Grand Central Terminal. But the accolades would go elsewhere to the great Beaux Arts building that for the next five years would rise on 42nd Street.

Boris Klapwald, Photographer: I loved just walking around with this huge camera and taking pictures. I would take the subway into Grand Central and then from Grand Central to Peekskill, where I lived with my parents. And I always promised myself that I would take pictures at Grand Central Terminal. It had a different feel to it than it does now. It had a much more, an almost Cathedral-like atmosphere.

There was one photograph almost showing isolation where there was a minister or a priest, I'm not sure, and a young girl, and they were sitting separated on this bench. The characteristics of these two people were just amazing to me. I made contact sheets and they were stowed away in boxes. And it was only until my daughter saw these particular photographs and said, what are these. I said well these are Grand Central Terminal. And she took them and went to the MTA and they're now at Grand Central Terminal, in the lower level. They make me remember an easier time. You know, everyone says it about the past, it was a simpler time. It probably wasn't. But it seemed to be.

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Narrator: The main concourse stood silent as an eager crowd waited for the doors to open. Finally, at precisely midnight, on February 2nd, 1913, three thousand people rushed into Grand Central Terminal for the first time. By days end, over 150,000 New Yorkers, from every corner of the city, had come to gaze at their newest monument.

Maxinne Leighton, Writer: People lined up. They wanted to get inside this building. And they wanted to see the first train leave and the first train arrive.

John Belle, Architect: You walked into Grand Central, and you didn't see the great shed. You didn't see the beast of steam. The train was hidden. This wonderful, graceful, proportioned, beautifully detailed building, which reflected human history, celebrated man.

Narrator: For five years, on the very spot where Cornelius Vanderbilt's Grand Central Depot once stood, a new Terminal building had slowly risen. To the casual passerby its construction seemed without conflict: no one died; there were no delays; everything built according to plan.

In truth, the building was a deeply contentious project. The completed Grand Central Terminal was very much the realization of William Wilgus' vision for mid-town Manhattan, but he got none of the credit. Instead, it all went to the Terminal's chief architect, Whitney Warren.

Whitney Warren was a classicist, an aesthete, someone who traveled within the highest rungs of New York society. He was also the kind of man that had no problem pushing aside the architects originally hired to design Grand Central.

John Belle, Architect: Reed and Stem were a very experienced firm of architects knowledgeable about the functioning and operating of railroads. They understood that one of the major problems of Grand Central's growth and expansion was how you dealt with the

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connection between the individual parts of the railroad system. They saw clearly that the success of the new terminal would be greatest if they could connect those individual parts in a seamless way.

Frank Priol, Architect: What they created was an architectural representation of an engineering idea. But, it was heavy handed in terms of its expression -- clearly that what you saw was really just a covering, an enclosure for a very sophisticated system of circulation and of movement from train to street.

Narrator: The New York architectural community was outraged. They felt Reed and Stem's design was insipid, crass -- one that stood in stark contrast to the majestic new Pennsylvania Station just seven blocks south. Whitney Warren took the complaints directly to the Vanderbilt family.

Jill Jonnes, Writer: One of the things that happens is that when the Pennsylvania Railroad announces what their train station is going to look like, there is this tremendous admiration: "look at the Pennsylvania Railroad, what good citizens they are. They're creating this temple to transportation." And the Vanderbilts want to equal the Pennsylvania Railroad in what they're going to deliver in terms of magnificence when they build Grand Central.

Kurt Schlichting, Historian: It had everything to do with the Vanderbilt sense of themselves. It was William K. Vanderbilt, the grandson of the Commodore, who looked at this and said, no this isn't what we had in mind. And while he had been withdrawing from the railroad business, he was still on the board of directors, and he began to criticize the selection of the Reed and Stem building. And the railroad forces Reed and Stem and Warren and his partner to form a combined architectural firm. But really, it's to bring Whitney Warren into the design process.

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Frank Priol, Architect: Warren is an aristocratic, rather arrogant and forthright gentleman who was trained at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. He saw this as the door opening for him to take over. But Reed and Stem did not have that same idea, so it was never a very happy marriage - extremely contentious from the very beginning. What resulted, however, we like to say, is far superior than either of the firms could have done on their own.

Narrator: Every detail of the new station's design was fought over, with the New York Central Railroad acting as final arbiter. Some of Reed and Stem's original design survived the process: ramps still moved suburban commuters from train to street; Park Avenue was elevated to allow traffic to flow around the Terminal building, but, in the end, it was Whitney Warren's vision that came to define Grand Central.

John Belle, Architect: It is imposing. But it's not imposing in a threatening way. It doesn't overwhelm you. It's not something abstract. If you examine the space people actually enter the Main Concourse on each of the four corners, as they walk under the low ceiling space suddenly the space opens up, and they realize they're in this great hall, which has a totally different character -- totally different from the passages, totally different from the sidewalks that they walked on, totally different from the railroad platforms. Suddenly there's this great space -- color, ornament, scale, detail -- all working together to make anyone there feel very comfortable, very safe, and wanting to experience it for its own sake.

Maxinne Leighton, Writer: It is a place that's perfect balance, a kind of dance of space, a dance of structure. Architecture reflects a level of intuition. It reflects a level of culture and grace and stamina and beauty and confidence. That's quite a remarkable thing to have a building accomplish.

Narrator: In 1899 *The New York Times* had called Grand Central "a cruel disgrace." Just a decade later, its image had changed dramatically. "The Grand Central Terminal is not only a station," *The Times* now declared, "it is a monument, a civic center, or, if one will, a city."

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Without exception, it is not only the greatest station in the United States, but the greatest station, of any type, in the world."

Though railroads no longer dominate the American landscape as they once did in Commodore Vanderbilt's time, Grand Central endures. Every day, hundreds of thousands of people ride the vast underground track laid out by William Wilgus. And within Whitney Warren's great Beaux Arts building, one can still hear the immense and distant sound of time.

Rita Gabis, Writer: There's something about Grand Central. There's such an echo of the past there of journey there. It's amazes me still every time I come into the station. There's the faces of people who are waiting, of people who are hurrying, who are looking forward to where they're going or maybe resigned or tired -- strangers to the city or so used to the city they're blind to what's around them. It's such a beautiful metaphor for all the arrivals and departures that really make up the moments of our lives.

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