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Press Release

August 21, 2008

[Bridges & Tunnels](#)

IMMEDIATE

MTA Bridges and Tunnels Special Archive: Treasure Trove of History

The Special Archive of the agency now known as MTA Bridges and Tunnels chronicles a rich history that parallels the growth of modern New York City itself. The collection, dating to the early 1930s when the agency's roots were forming as the Triborough Bridge Authority, contains 100,000 photos, 40,000 drawings, 50 scale models, and 40,000 feet of film footage. The artifacts make up one of the most extensive visual records of Depression-era public works in the country.

Among the unique items in the Archive are the cornerstone of the New York Coliseum, which was built by TBTA in 1956 and is now the site of the Time Warner Center; a circa-1940 meter to read light levels in tunnel interiors, housed in its own artfully designed wooden box; some of Robert Moses' office furniture; and a 5-foot long, 60-pound ratchet wrench that was used to bolt together the cast iron lining rings of the Queens Midtown Tunnel, which opened in 1940. Two men were needed to work the giant wrench (*see photo*). In addition, protected beneath Plexiglas are an assortment of working and planning models, including one from 1957 of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge and its proposed connecting highways (the bridge opened in November 1964).

The legacy of Robert Moses, who headed the agency for more than three decades beginning in 1934, looms large across the collection's historical timeline of bridge and tunnel building. Since 1968, the agency has been part of the MTA and serves a dual role of providing service to vehicles on its crossings, as well as financial assistance to the transit agencies of the MTA.

Laura Rosen is Administrator of the Special Archive and its only staff since it was established in 1989. "The Archive collection is an invaluable resource for the agency's engineers as they plan current rehabilitation and improvement projects. They can examine the original drawings and detailed photographs of pre-construction conditions to see exactly how the structures were built," said Rosen. Although electronic versions have been made of many of the drawings, the drawings for the older facilities were not made to standards that are ideally suited to digital scanning, so present-day engineers still rely on having access to older originals.

Pre-construction photos were taken to document areas to be replaced by a facility and properties that would surround the facility or its approaches. The highly detailed photographs provide intriguing glimpses into the city's past. One series of highly detailed photographs shows shop interiors along Astoria Boulevard in 1934, including barbershops, tailors, bars, soda fountains and grocery stores where almost every label and price sign can be read (*see photo*).

The success of the Triborough Bridge, which opened to motorists on July 11, 1936 in the midst of the Great Depression, led the way for the agency, through a series of mergers, to become the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority (TBTA) and, since 1994, MTA Bridges and Tunnels. Its seven bridges and two tunnels link New York City: the Henry Hudson, Marine Parkway-Gil Hodges Memorial, Bronx-Whitestone, Throgs Neck, Cross Bay Veterans Memorial and Triborough Bridges, and the Queens Midtown and Brooklyn-Battery Tunnels.

Ms. Rosen has a wealth of transportation history on all of the crossings at her fingertips and in her memory bank. So well does she know the contents of the Archive under her care, she can locate anything in short order, from a drawing of a particular stage of bridge construction to a model for a never-built project such as the Brooklyn Battery Bridge. "I am extremely proud of the collection and I feel privileged to be able to take care of it," she said.

Laura Rosen is currently working on a long-term project to re-master all of the Special Archive tapes and films into high definition in order to both preserve them and make them more accessible. The oldest motion picture film in the collection pre-dates the existence of the Triborough Bridge Authority; it was donated to the Authority by the New York City Department of Transportation and shows the earliest stages of construction of the Triborough Bridge, circa 1931-32. Originally a City project, ground was broken for the Triborough Bridge on October 25, 1929, one day after "Black Thursday," the day the Stock Market crashed. On April 7, 1933, Triborough Bridge Authority was created by the State to complete the bridge that the City could no longer afford to build.

Rosen also writes and designs the bi-annual *From the Archive* publication, which draws upon the collection to tell the story of the agency and its facilities. She co-produced the Triborough Bridge show currently on display at the New York Transit Museum, and has jointly worked on exhibits with the Municipal Art Society, the Museum of the City of New York, the Queens Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Historical Society and others. Ms. Rosen is a graduate of the Philadelphia College of Art, was a Loeb Fellow at Harvard Graduate School of Design, and is a published photographer.

She clearly remembers the first time she saw the historical treasures stored unceremoniously in an area beneath the Triborough Bridge, while doing research... "You had to walk back through the parked vehicles and tow trucks, behind the warehouse to find the door," she recalls, "and when you opened it there was a huge space filled with rows of old-fashioned filing cabinets and platforms with flat files of old construction drawings. It was fabulous and exciting," she said. "It was like stepping into the past."

While the Archive is not staffed for visits from the public, special viewing arrangements may be possible for research purposes or media requests. For research requests or to join the mailing list for *From the Archive*, contact Laura Rosen at: rosen@mtabt.org; for media requests, please contact Joyce

Mulvaney in Public Affairs at: jmulvane@mtabt.org.

MTA Bridges and Tunnels' facilities, which connect the five boroughs of New York City, are the Triborough, Throgs Neck, Bronx-Whitestone, Henry Hudson, Verrazano-Narrows, Cross Bay Veterans Memorial and Marine Parkway-Gil Hodges Bridges, and the Queens Midtown and Brooklyn-Battery Tunnels.

Photo captions: Credit line for all: **MTA Bridges and Tunnels Special Archive.**



Laura Rosen, Administrator of Special Archive, holds model of Throgs Neck Bridge; in foreground is one of six sections of a 24-foot long model of never-built Mid-Manhattan Crosstown Expressway.



"Sandhogs" wield 60 lb. ratchet wrench to bolt cast iron lining rings in the Queens Midtown Tunnel, February 26, 1939.



Grocery store interior at 104-27 Astoria Blvd., near the Grand Central Parkway approach to the Triborough Bridge, in 1934.