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Press Release

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LIRR

IMMEDIATE

MTA LIRR Marks Centennial of East River Tunnels & Penn Station

Special photo exhibit unveiled in LIRR 34th Street corridor

One-hundred years ago today, September 8, 1910, the first Long Island Rail Road trains departed from a grand structure dedicated to transportation—Pennsylvania Station—and traveled under the East River using four tunnels. Long Island celebrated. Today we celebrate that century-old achievement with the opening of a special photo display in our 34th Street Entrance Corridor, one of the LIRR's newest Penn Station areas.

The exhibit includes photographs of the construction of Penn Station and the East River Tunnels along with depictions of various related documents. The exhibit is meant to remind the public about the vital role the LIRR plays in the region.

LIRR President Helena Williams said, "More than 100,000 of our customers use the East River Tunnels and Penn Station each work day to go to their jobs and visit New York City making it a major part of the busiest commuter network in North America. It's only right that we recognize the great achievement of those engineers, transportation experts and sandhogs that made today's Long Island Rail Road system possible. This anniversary and this photo exhibit reminds us of our responsibility as a region to continue to invest in transportation infrastructure to protect what we have in our transit system and to pave the way for future improvements."

The East River Tunnels and Penn Station were part of a plan by Pennsylvania Railroad President Alexander Casatt to have the giant railroad enter the New York City market in grand style to compete with the Vanderbilt-owned New York Central Railroad. The plan included purchase of the Long Island Rail Road since the LIRR owned land in Sunnyside, Queens that the Pennsylvania needed to acquire for a giant rail yard. They were also attracted by the potential of the Long Island market.

The cost for what was officially called "The New York Tunnel Extension of the Pennsylvania Railroad" was approximately \$114-million. This included Pennsylvania Station, the East River and North River (Hudson) Tunnels, and the Sunnyside Yard. The cost in 2010 dollars would be approximately \$2.5 to \$3-billion.

East River Tunnels

The four East River Tunnels along with the two North River (Hudson) Tunnels replaced the ferry boats used by the LIRR to transport their passengers between Manhattan and Queens. With the tunnels rail travelers would now have a one-seat, no ferry transfer ride. The LIRR tunnels began at 7th Avenue in Manhattan and ended at Hunter's Point Avenue in Queens, almost three miles long. Tunneling took six long years of dangerous work some 50-feet under the bottom of the East River using 23-foot high steel shields to push through layers of quicksand, sand, gravel, stone and mud. In addition to the bends, sandhogs (construction workers building the tunnels) had to deal with occasional misfired dynamite charges blasting through bedrock. When completed in early 1910, the tunnels were an engineering marvel built to last.

Still a testament to construction ingenuity and longevity, the East River Tunnels have undergone capital improvements in recent years. The modifications, totaling more than \$147-million in MTA LIRR Capital Improvement Program funds, include upgraded ventilation and electrical systems, improved tunnel lighting, handrails and communication systems—all designed to improve safety.

Pennsylvania Station

Pennsylvania Railroad officials envisioned their New York City station as a building that would be a dramatic symbol of their company's greatness and that of the City. When completed in 1910, Pennsylvania Station was all that and more. Designed by the prestigious New York architectural firm of McKim, Mead and White, the station reminded many of the Greek and Roman structures of old. The main concourse had 150-foot ceilings and huge stone columns supported the exterior. Granite, limestone, and steel were the construction materials of choice with specially crafted statuary, including 22 two-ton carved granite eagles, inside and out.

As the years went by and more travelers turned to automobiles and airplanes, abandoning trains, the Pennsylvania Railroad ran into difficult financial times. The once grand Pennsylvania Station became a huge fiscal liability to the debt-ridden Pennsy, maintenance suffered, the famous interior became shabby. Commercial developers wanted the valuable land the once great station stood upon and in 1961 a deal was struck. The great building would come down starting in 1963 and Madison Square Garden would take its place by 1966, with a below ground train station replacing the familiar Beaux-Arts style structure. The destruction of the old Penn Station was considered a great loss and its demise kicked off the modern day landmarks preservation movement.