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Press Release

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IMMEDIATE

Queens Midtown Tunnel Turns 75

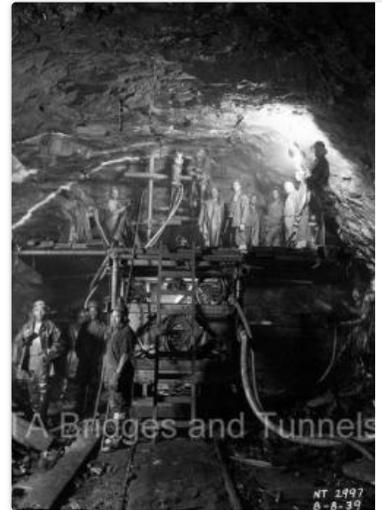
Under-River Tunnel Linking Manhattan and Queens Rebounds after Superstorm Sandy

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) is celebrating 75 years of the Queens Midtown Tunnel this weekend, three years after the only under-river link for Manhattan and Queens drivers closed for the first time due to extensive flooding in the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy.

To mark the milestone, a selection of rarely seen vintage photos from the construction of the tunnel and other MTA Bridges and Tunnels structures has been posted on the MTA Flickr page. These photos are typically available only by appointment with the agency's archivist.

Work to build the Queens Midtown Tunnel was delayed by the 1929 stock market crash, and it finally opened for public use just before the United States entered World War II. But it wasn't until October 2012 when it faced its biggest challenge, when Sandy's storm surge flooded the tunnel for the first time in its history. It took five days to drain approximately 12 million gallons of salt water from both tubes, and to this day, work remains to be done to fully repair the tunnel and to make it more resilient for future storms.

"The Queens Midtown Tunnel operated for more than 70 years without flooding," said MTA Bridges and Tunnels Deputy Chief Engineer Romolo DeSantis, who is overseeing Bridges and Tunnels' post-Sandy recovery restoration efforts. "The damage from Sandy was unprecedented, but our restoration and flood mitigation work will make the tunnel better and stronger than ever."



The Queens Midtown Tunnel opened to the public on Nov. 15, 1940, after 20 years of lobbying, design and planning, and four years of hard labor. Getting to the construction phase of the project had been difficult enough; plans were put on hold during the Great Depression, and politics necessitated the creation of a tunnel agency in order for the project to secure federal funding under President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs.

"You are starting from scratch with no appropriation and nothing but an idea and a law," then-New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia told the newly created Queens Midtown Tunnel Authority's three members.

President Roosevelt later became the first person to drive through the tunnel in November 1940, during opening ceremonies held on the Manhattan toll plaza.

"We thank our forebears at the Tunnel Authority for their foresight to pursue the Queens Midtown Tunnel project to its completion," said Donald Spero, Acting President, MTA Bridges and Tunnels. "The tunnel not only provided an alternate route to the East River bridges that were severely clogged by trolley, subway, and car traffic, but it also provided badly needed jobs for city residents deeply affected by the Depression. The Queens Midtown Tunnel came at the right time – and today it remains just as vital to New York City as it did when it opened in 1940."

President Roosevelt broke ground for the tunnel on Oct. 2, 1936, by pushing a ceremonial button. During the next three years, the tunnel's two vehicle-carrying tubes were carved 10 stories below the surface of the East River, through Manhattan schist, limestone, gneiss and dolomite. Workers used dynamite, drills and circular cutting shields that were hydraulically shoved through the riverbed at each end until they met in the middle. Construction workers known as sandhogs assembled cast-iron rings behind the shields as they inched forward, and jacks shoved the rings in place as the tubes' lining. Work proceeded at a rate of about 18 feet per week for each shield, much slower than the 45-foot daily excavation rate of the Lincoln Tunnel, which went through porous enough material that it could be pushed aside rather than immediately removed.

From its completion until Superstorm Sandy, the Queens Midtown Tunnel has not required major rehabilitation work other than upgrades to add E-ZPass technology; brighter lighting; new ceilings and tiles; and an updated traffic control system to incorporate electronic message signs and lights and signals. The tunnel's original brick roadway was replaced with more durable asphalt in 1995.

In late October 2012, when Sandy battered the metropolitan New York region, its record storm surge inundated under-river tunnels in the region. About 40 percent of the Queens Midtown Tunnel was submerged, and salt water damaged critical components such as the tunnel's lighting system, traffic lights and signals, the over-height vehicle detection system and other infrastructure. The tunnel partially reopened to buses within a week of the storm, and full vehicle access was restored 10 days later.

Work to repair lingering damage from Sandy is ongoing: this summer, MTA Bridges and Tunnels awarded a 4-year \$236.5 million contract for Sandy repairs and other capital improvement work at the Queens Midtown Tunnel. The project is funded partially with FEMA grant money, with the remainder through MTA Bridges and Tunnels' Capital Program.

Repairs are scheduled to begin on the Manhattan-bound tube first, as “this will lessen the impact to our customers and allow for maximum work efficiency,” said Facility Engineer John Pfisterer. “There will be nighttime and weekend tube and lane closures throughout this challenging project, although at least one tube at the tunnel will remain open at all times, with one lane operating in each direction to serve our customers,” said Raymond Webb, director of Tunnel Operations for MTA Bridges and Tunnels. “We also remain mindful of our close residential neighbors in midtown Manhattan and Long Island City.”

The repairs needed to fully restore the tunnel and to prepare it for future inclement weather, include replacing or rehabilitating the tunnel’s pumping, electrical, lighting, communications, security, monitoring and control systems; and replacing tunnel wall tiles and ceiling panels, catwalk, curbs and gutters.

“Restoring the tunnel from the Sandy’s devastation is a massive undertaking,” said Project Manager Andie Yee.

Queens Midtown Tunnel Numbers:

- When it first opened, the toll was 25 cents. A toll was implemented because federal loans to fund the tunnel required the crossing to relieve its own debt.
- Sandhogs were paid \$11.50 a day for their work excavating the tubes.
- The Queens-bound tube is 6,272 feet long. The Manhattan-bound tube is 6,414 feet long.
- In its first full year of service, 4.4 million vehicles used the tunnel. In 2014, nearly 29 million trips were made through the tunnel.
- Since 1940, more than 1.6 billion trips have been made through the Queens Midtown Tunnel.
- A total of 169 employees work at the tunnel, including 86 Bridges and Tunnels officers, 11 sergeants and lieutenants; 37 maintenance workers, eight engineers, six managers and two administrative workers.

The Queens Midtown Tunnel is part of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority, known as MTA Bridges and Tunnels. Other Bridges and Tunnels facilities include the Robert F. Kennedy Bridge, Throgs Neck Bridge, Bronx Whitestone Bridge, Henry Hudson Bridge, Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, Cross Bay Veterans Memorial Bridge, Marine Parkway-Gil Hodges Bridge, and the Hugh L. Carey Tunnel.