



The intersection of Atlantic Avenue and Court Street was used as the main entrance point to the underground tunnel.

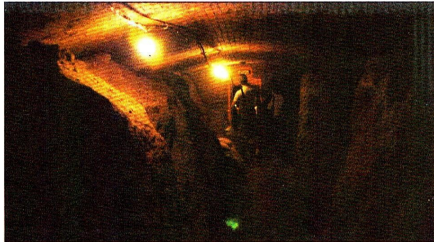
Inside Brooklyn's lost railway tunnel

Subterranean thrills await the adventurous

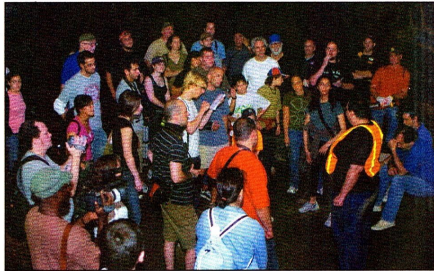
By **Matthew Wolfe**
The oldest subway tunnel in the world lies below Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn, and you may visit it. Originally built in 1844, the tunnel, an enormous cavern of brick and stone, closed in 1861 and was all but lost to time until 1980, when Bob Diamond, an electrical engineer, rediscovered it. Hearing the tunnel mentioned in passing on National Public Radio, Diamond, a man of hard-headed disposition, set out to rediscover this relic of New York's industrial past. Told repeatedly that the

tunnel either did not exist or, if it did, it was unfindable, Diamond, through careful research and painstaking research, struck gold in 1980. Diamond still gives the tours himself, leading large groups of the curious through the great space, and it well worth the journey. One begins the tour with traffic whipping past as one climbs into a manhole at the intersection of Atlantic Avenue and Court Street. After creeping through a low earthen passage, one emerges into the main chamber, which is enormous, grand, and almost pitch black.

The tunnel, which extends for nearly a half-mile down Atlantic Avenue from Court to Hicks Street, is a 25-foot high barrel vault of white brick and glittering bedrock. Draftless and untouched by outside light, the tunnel is faintly lit by strings of bare bulbs and fluorescent tubes that hang along only the first half of the tunnel, the rest having been stripped by another tour group some years back. At the halfway mark, the only illumination is from handheld flashlight and headlamps. Those who fall behind form a long chain of tiny lights in the great black maw.



Tunnel tourists had to descend through a manhole, dirt and sandbags to see the inside.



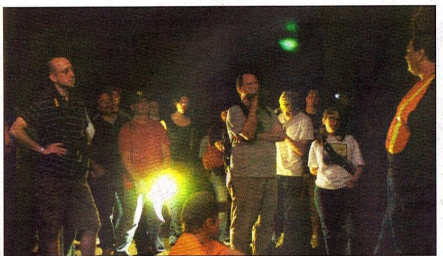
Photos by Kendall Rodriguez

Bob Diamond, who guides the tour, gives a brief introduction to the tunnel.

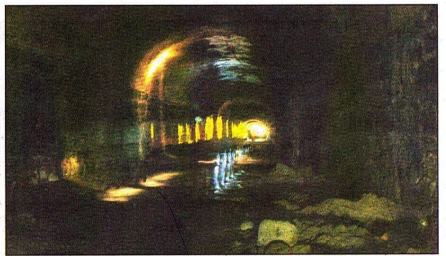
The floors, furrowed into mounds of earth where the two sets of train tracks used to rest, are periodically by great heaps of red brick which were knocked in from the air shafts above when they were sealed at the time of the tunnel's closure. At its deepest, the tunnel reaches

forty feet below Clinton Street. Diamond, a short, stout man, pauses every few hundred feet for a brief disquisition on the tunnel's history. He explains that while the London underground is often called the world's oldest subway, this stretch along

Atlantic in fact provided the model for the London system. Built with a "cut-and-cover" method dating back to the Roman aqueducts, in which earth was dug up, a vault was built up, and the roadway placed back over it. *Continued on page 11*



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Inside the oldest subway tunnel in the world.

Photos by Kendall Rodriguez

Tour of the 'lost tunnel'

Continued from page 4.
the Atlantic Avenue tunnel was built in all of seven months by hundreds of burly Irishmen, using nothing but pickaxes and shovels, for a mere 13 cents an hour, six days a week. Legend holds that a representative of Mr. Vanderbilt, upon informing the Irishmen that they would be obliged to work a seventh day, at no extra pay, was promptly murdered, chopped into pieces, and interred behind the tunnel walls.

The railroad was built with the intention of extending the Erie Canal to Boston. At the time ships were unable to stock sufficient fuel to make it the extra distance to New York from across the Atlantic (Boston is a few hundred miles closer) and still leave room for cargo, so all raw materials needed to be transported by rail. The tunnel fell into decline when its owner abandoned the railroad to make another fortune on the California Gold Rush. Those left behind to run the railroad were unprepared for its upkeep and the line was soon made obsolete by the New Haven railroad. Unwillingly to expend the funds to properly demolish the tunnel, the owner had the cavern sealed and declared it destroyed.

Save for a brief inspection during World War II when the police were hunting for Nazi saboteurs (a visit marked by a large hole in the ceiling about a quarter of the way down), the tunnel has remained unseen by human eyes since its closure in 1861. So far from public view was the subway that soon after its closure the tunnel became outright apocryphal,

a setting of urban myth and legend. A turn-of-the-century *New York Times* article reported the tunnel was being put to use as a lair for river- pirates, with the only entrance a secret door in the back of a dockside bar which was guarded by two hulking Turks bearing enormous scimitar swords. The tunnel did not require electrical illumination, as the shine of the pirate's gold was a sufficient source of light.

These days, Diamond seeks to return the tunnel to some of its previous glory. Upon rediscovering the tunnel, Diamond formed the Brooklyn Historic Railway Association, an organization dedicated to restoring the tunnel.

Diamond, who hopes to restart trolley car service along the moribund line, gives the tours to raise public awareness about the tunnel. Until recently beset by uncooperative and feckless public officials, Diamond suggests that those in favor of the tunnel's conversion a trolley petition Mayor Bloomberg and Borough President Marty Markovitz.

Upon exiting the subway, a woman at a recent tour, where more than 80 curious New Yorkers participated, was heard to remark, "Isn't New York a wonderful city in which you can lose an enormous tunnel for, like, a hundred years, and then find it later?" Her companion heartily agreed.

Another tour is scheduled for Sunday, October 7 at 1 p.m. For reservations or more information, call (718) 941-3160. For more information about the BHRA, go to www.brooklynrail.net.