

Newsweek

The Fight to Find John Wilkes Booth's Diary in a Forgotten Subway Tunnel

By Joe Kloc / June 10, 2014 10:12 AM EDT

On a quiet evening in December 2010, Robert Diamond was watching television in his apartment, tucking into a bowl of franks and beans, when the telephone rang. There was an angry voice on the other end of the line: "You're trying to dig up that damn locomotive again!" It was an official at New York City's Department of Transportation. Diamond had worked closely with the DOT for much of the three decades since he had made his extraordinary discovery: the oldest subway tunnel in the world, which runs for a half-mile in Brooklyn. For years he had explored the tunnel unbothered, cataloging its ancient rail spikes, researching its alleged use as a hideout for thieves and pirates, and offering tours to curious locals on Sunday afternoons. But now, the official told him, the city wanted him out.

The DOT's latest gripe, and the reason for the angry phone call, stemmed from Diamond's long-held belief that behind a wall of rocky sediment sealing off the westernmost 400 feet of the Atlantic Avenue Tunnel are two Civil War treasures: an 1830s wood-burning steam locomotive and the lost pages of John Wilkes Booth's diary, which together, he believes, would prove the mayor and other top ranking New York City officials conspired to assassinate Abraham Lincoln. Since the early 1990s, Diamond had been lobbying to excavate the tunnel, and while the DOT had always been irked by his historical detective work, it had for many years supported Diamond's efforts to show the tunnel to the public.

For a time, Diamond's nonprofit, the Brooklyn Historic Railway Association (BHRA), even had approval from the city to run a trolley line through the tunnel, connecting downtown Brooklyn to the isolated neighborhood of Red Hook. The project was a testament to Diamond's self-proclaimed "pennies-on-the-dollar" efficiency: With federal funding obtained through the DOT, he corralled 15 used trolley cars from Boston and Buffalo, miles of rail from Pennsylvania, thousands of century-old paving stones from an Amtrak station in Baltimore, and track signals and trolley wire from New Jersey.

Try Newsweek Print + Digital for only \$1.25 per week

But in the summer of 2002, Diamond says, “stuff started to go crazy.” The DOT abruptly stopped sponsoring his trolley project, and a year later, the city ripped up the half-mile of tracks he had laid. In 2010, after *National Geographic* had finally agreed to conduct a magnetometer test to find out what, if anything, was inside the sealed-off section of the tunnel, Diamond received a letter from the city informing him his tours were now deemed “unlawful.” Now, the DOT official on the phone was accusing him of filing an application behind the agency’s back to excavate the tunnel. Diamond hotly denied—and still denies—having ever even seen, let alone signed, such a form. “It was like going into *Alice in Wonderland*,” he says now.

He and the angry DOT official argued for a minute, debating the provenance of Diamond’s signature, and they hung up. A moment later, his fax machine buzzed to life. Out came a letter from the DOT, officially evicting him from the tunnel. “I nearly choked to death on my beans,” he recalls.

Days later, the city welded the manhole entrance shut. Diamond hasn’t been back inside his tunnel since. “It was kind of like having my soul taken away,” he says.

“You’re a Young Man, Go Find It”

Diamond is a plump, 54-year-old New Yorker with kind, sunken eyes and frazzled hair—what’s left of it. Known in the local papers as “the Tunnel King,” he is an indisputably odd and paradoxical fellow. His acquaintances describe him as “brilliant”—he is an obsessive researcher and prodigious Googler whose living room is filled with piles of books, engineering diagrams and newspaper clippings about the tunnel. But they also say he can be “paranoid” and “hyperbolic” regarding his belief that the city has conspired to keep him out of the tunnel; and that if he gets back inside, he might find the missing pages of Booth’s diary that will prove a cabal of high-ranking, pro-Confederate New York officials plotted to kill Lincoln. When asked about this latter, seemingly preposterous claim, Diamond simply replies, “They used to say the tunnel didn’t exist.”

Since being exiled from the tunnel, Diamond passes his time at a Connecticut Muffin near his apartment in Brooklyn. There, over large coffees and a mountain of sugar packets, he and two fellow BHRA members meet monthly to discuss all manner of New York City transit concerns: the Second Avenue subway line, known as “The Line that Time Forgot,” originally proposed in 1929; a 19th century pneumatic subway tube Diamond believes is buried under City Hall Park; and the BHRA’s \$160 million lawsuit against the DOT, which Diamond hopes will restore his access to the Atlantic Avenue Tunnel. This topic is his least favorite. When he sits too long

beneath his towering stacks of century-old civic studies, maps and legal documents, trying to figure out how to get inside the sealed-off chamber at the western end of that tunnel, he can feel his “mind slipping,” he says. “I never knew when I was 19 that this tunnel would be my entire life.”

Diamond still lives in the apartment where he was raised, in Brooklyn's Kensington neighborhood. His father disappeared when he was 8, and he was raised by his mother. He was a shy, exceptionally smart student. In high school, he won a scholarship to the Pratt Institute for designing a solar-cell satellite that could theoretically supply power to all of Manhattan. But after learning the scholarship was contingent upon him working for years at a Kodak facility in upstate New York—which Diamond speaks of as if it were a foreign country—he left school. One of his professors wrote a letter recommending him to Columbia University, telling the dean of admissions, “He should be allowed to learn as much as possible,” but nothing came of it. “I never had much luck with school,” Diamond says with a slight shrug.

He first heard of the tunnel on what he calls that “shitty 1970s day” he dropped out of Pratt. He was “trying to figure out what to do next” when he turned on his radio and heard a program discussing a new novel, *The Cosgrove Report*. The book's plot hinged on the idea that, after killing Lincoln, Booth was never caught. Instead, he fled to New York, where he stashed the bundle of missing pages from his diary—which are a historical fact—in a metal box near a wood-burning locomotive buried inside a railway tunnel in Brooklyn. Diamond had little interest in Booth, but was curious about that tunnel. He telephoned the book's author, G.J.A. O'Toole, who he says told him, “I don't know much about it. I read as a kid that Murder Incorporated was dumping dead bodies down there. You're a young man, go find it.”

Diamond spent the next year in the microfilm archives of the public library, looking for any mention of a tunnel. He discovered that the Long Island Railroad had built a tunnel beneath Atlantic Avenue back in 1844—part of a line connecting New York to Boston—that was closed in 1861 when the state banned railroads from operating in Brooklyn. Diamond's search led him to the Topographical Maps Department in the top-floor attic of Borough Hall in Brooklyn. The room contained towers of cubbies stuffed with rolled-up maps and lot books, an entire, dusty history of the borough. There, Diamond found a civil engineer seated at a desk, reading a racing form. When he asked the white-haired man if he had any maps of Atlantic Avenue, the man lowered his paper. “You're not one of those kids looking for the tunnel?” he asked. “Because it's not there.”

When Diamond asked why he was so certain, the man replied, “When I was a kid, I went looking for it too.”

The tunnel had been sought by curious New Yorkers for more than a century. Though the city paid to have it filled in 1861, the year it closed, rumors had always persisted that the work was never done. In 1896, the *Brooklyn Eagle* investigated stories of “rendezvous for bandits, murders, escaped moonshiners, or crooks” beneath Atlantic Avenue and found that the “city works department knows absolutely nothing about the tunnel.” In 1936, police received an anonymous letter from Massachusetts that read “if you inspect the old tunnel you might find something interesting,” but were unable to locate an entry point.

The old civil engineer nevertheless welcomed Diamond’s efforts. After a fruitless search of the city’s records, Diamond came across a forgotten wooden box on a high shelf that probably hadn’t been open for almost a century. The two men broke off its rusty padlock. Inside was a map of the Atlantic Avenue Tunnel.

When the two men unfolded the 4-by-2-foot diagram, Diamond noticed a little blue dot where the tunnel’s roof met the street. “I figured it was a manhole.”

A year later, in August 1981, Diamond gathered a group of city employees on a corner of Court Street and busy Atlantic Avenue. Together, they pried open the manhole cover in the middle of the street. Diamond climbed inside but found there was only about three feet of clearance before he hit a dirt floor. His body halfway popping into the street, with cars passing on either side, Diamond remembers “starting to feel like a real moron. How did I get myself into this?” He ducked inside the narrow cavern and, clutching a radio and flashlight, he belly-crawled along the dirt floor, making his way into the darkness.

After crawling just 70 feet, however, Diamond hit a dirt wall. Having just seen *Raiders of the Lost Ark* the night before, he remembers thinking, What would Indiana Jones do? In quixotic desperation, he shoveled away handful after handful of dirt, and in a few minutes, he unearthed the top of a stone archway. It was, he realized, the entrance to the tunnel. Diamond tried to radio to the crew above him on the street. “But all I could do was laugh,” he recalls. But that was enough. “They knew I found it.”

One of the city officials climbed into the manhole with crowbars, and the two of them began prying away the bricks and cobblestones obstructing the entrance. For hours, they hacked away at the century-old rock, and when they finally broke through, a rush of cold air came out of the opening. After a little more digging, they discovered that there was a 15-foot drop to the floor of the tunnel. The official accompanying Diamond informed him this was as far as they could go because no ladder would fit through the manhole. “Just give me \$20,” Diamond pleaded. Much to his surprise—“that was a lot of money back then”—the man complied. Diamond climbed out into the street, walked to Bruno’s Hardware on Atlantic and bought a chain ladder.

“Here,” he said to the official inside the tunnel. “Set it up.” They then lowered the ladder into the opening and Diamond descended into the dark cavern that had been untouched for about a century. He shined his light around the 137-year-old passage. It was huge, with an arched ceiling made of cobblestone. Larger, irregularly shaped stones formed the side walls. There were stray rocks, rail spikes and shards of a bootleg liquor bottle scattered on the dirt floor where the railroad tracks once ran. He wandered into the dark cavern. After walking about 1,600 feet, he hit the four-story wall of rocky debris that he now believes conceals Booth’s diaries and the lost locomotive. “It was like not being in New York anymore,” he says. “No sounds in the streets, no people—like another planet.”

Tunnel Dementia

The Atlantic Avenue Tunnel is only a small finger of New York’s hidden underground world. There are hundreds of miles of subway caverns, commuter rail lines, subterranean streams, aqueducts, canals, utility tunnels and pedestrian passageways beneath the city, concealing colonial artifacts, homeless encampments, and decades of graffiti and folk art. It’s a world few people know about and even fewer want to know about. Back when Diamond began offering his tunnel tour, urban explorer Joe Anastasio says, there were only about 20 or so serious subterranean explorers in the city, as few possess the proper disposition for life underground. Anastasio recalls one trek with a young explorer inside a derelict, 41-mile aqueduct. As they wandered farther down the dark passageway, listening to the rumbling of nearby subways, his companion grew increasingly depressed, preoccupied by the notion that no one knew they were down there and that if they were to vanish, the city would happily churn along without them. “I call it tunnel dementia,” he says. As a result, most people treat tunnels as a passing hobby. “But for some people, like Bob,” he says, “it was their life.”

Diamond describes his first journey in New York’s underground as “euphoric,” and has been chasing that feeling since. But, with no college degree, he has always struggled to be taken seriously. When he discovered the tunnel in 1981, he invited a group of archaeologists to join him down below at the city’s behest. Those expedition members were part of a newly formed group called the Professional Archaeologists of New York City. They are known colloquially as PANYC, pronounced “panic.” Once they were inside, however, it was clear they weren’t there to help, Diamond says. “They huddled into a corner whispering to each other,” Diamond recalls. “I thought, ‘This is not good.’”

Four days later, his mother, the BHRA’s treasurer at the time, received a letter from a lawyer with whom Diamond had worked: “Dear Elsa, I have received information that legal steps are possibly being taken by at least two members of the expedition to cause the tunnel to be sealed and to freeze Robert completely out of the picture.”

Despite PANYC's efforts to thwart Diamond, which went on for at least a decade, he was granted a permit to maintain the tunnel in 1986. When not inside—giving tours, making repairs, collecting railroad spikes—he scoured historical city records, photographs, Railroad Commission reports and newspaper archives for any mention of it.

Diamond takes an engineer's pleasure in connecting the stray historical facts he uncovers about the tunnel. When he began his research, he gave little credence to the idea that the missing pages of John Wilkes Booth's diary were behind its walls. Over the years, however, connections between O'Toole's book and his tunnel research began to materialize. He found *Brooklyn Eagle* articles saying Booth traveled to New York frequently during the Civil War, and stayed in hotels, Diamond says, "that were well known for housing Confederate agents." He points out that New York's mayor at the time, Fernando Wood, wanted the city to secede from the Union, because much of New York's Wall Street elite made their money in the cotton trade. Diamond has also found a report that two weeks before the assassination, the city paid a contractor \$25 to repair a manhole on Atlantic Avenue. "I submit," Diamond wrote in an essay on Booth, "this manhole was in fact located on Atlantic Avenue between Hicks Street and Columbia Street—in the section of tunnel now behind the wall."

Take a HIQA

Diamond's first attempt to find out what was behind the wall inside the tunnel came in October 1991, when he met with a contractor named Frank Ferrante. The pair got together at the Bel-Aire diner in Astoria, Queens, where Ferrante told Diamond he'd happily volunteer his crew and equipment for the job. They decided to dig four holes along Atlantic Avenue, each strategically located to break into a section of tunnel currently concealed behind the wall, in the hope that one of them would unearth the locomotive, and maybe even Booth's diary pages.

Armed with jackhammers, backhoes and a permit from the DOT, the crew broke ground the next week. Tariq Aga, a contractor who now runs a sister company of Ferrante's, remembers working on the site. "Bob was running around everywhere. My god he was a determined guy. It was mesmerizing." They worked for several weekends, and by October 26 had dug two 10-foot-deep holes into Atlantic Avenue, each about 3-feet-by-4-feet wide. Though neither excavation revealed a Civil War treasure, the local newscasters aired interviews with a confident Diamond, standing in the tunnel declaring that the next hole would reveal a locomotive.

He never got the chance to deliver on that perhaps rash vow. The following day, the DOT's Highway Inspection and Quality Assurance (HIQA) unit—which inspects work sites—showed up and, Diamond claims, threatened the crew with arrest and a \$50,000 fine if they didn't stop

looking for the locomotive and fill in the holes. After that, the project was shuttered.

The DOT didn't respond to *Newsweek's* interview requests, so its reasons for taking this action remain a mystery.

More than a decade later, a similar scene would play out again. In August 2003, Diamond was giving a tour of the tunnel to a group of high schoolers when two police officers shouted down the manhole to tell him he was under arrest. He ushered the students out of the tunnel and was promptly handcuffed. According to the ticket he received, Diamond was detained because he lacked the proper paperwork to go into the tunnel, although documents indicate that in 1986, the city granted him a 50-year contract to give tours inside the tunnel.

Diamond claims HIQA told him the arrest was a "present from the DOT" for complaining in local papers that the city had torn up his trolley project months earlier. He had also pointed out that after ripping up his trolley line, the city requested and received \$295,000 in federal money—four times what it had already invested in Diamond's project—to conduct a feasibility study for building essentially the same trolley line again. However, the study wasn't done for almost a decade, after the state applied pressure on the city to use the grant money in 2012. It then spent only \$25,000 before concluding the trolley project would be too expensive.

HIQA released Diamond with a \$1,000 ticket. That fine was later dropped when a Brooklyn City Council member complained, and the department never showed up to defend itself at the summons hearing. But the incident shook Diamond. Around the same time, his longtime girlfriend disappeared. He ended the tunnel tours and left town. "I was done with New York," he says. Diamond's sudden disappearance perplexed other urban explorers. "He vaporized," says Anastasio, who "came across Bob's abandoned van in Red Hook, doors open, outside of an old sugar factory."

Diamond moved to New Jersey, where he started drinking and using drugs. Two years later, he wound up in a psychiatrist's office, complaining that he was unable to focus and was experiencing seizures along with flashbacks of his battles with the DOT. "The stress and anxiety from these events have overwhelmed him, impairing his ability to cope effectively," his doctor wrote in a 2005 assessment. Diamond was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, which, he says, still manifests itself as nightmares followed by long stretches of melancholy. He passes these blue periods by eating junk food and watching movies on television. "I'm not the same person anymore," he says.

A Buried Catch-22

After four years in Long Branch, New Jersey, Diamond kicked his drug addiction and reunited with his girlfriend. But across the Hudson, his new, sober life proved a bore. In 2006, the two moved back to Brooklyn. Diamond, now living at his mother's apartment in Kensington, had no intention of going back into the tunnel. But some 10 months later, in 2007, he received a call from the DOT asking him to resume his tunnel tours. Surprised but grateful, he agreed. The city issued him a new permit, and he reunited with an old BHRA partner and high school friend. They popped open the manhole. "I thought things were going to be different," he says.

Initially, they were. The History Channel filmed a special on the tunnel. *The New York Times* ran an article promoting his tours. And *National Geographic* decided it would conduct a magnetometer test of what—if anything—was behind that wall.

As the project progressed, however, *National Geographic* seemed to want as little to do with Diamond as possible. "My role was being diminished," he recalls. "They were the scientists, and I was just this crank who hung around the neighborhood talking about the tunnel for years." *National Geographic* declined to be interviewed by *Newsweek*, but a 2010 email from the company to the DOT supports Diamond's claim: "Regarding Bob...please understand that we are not endorsing, nor highlighting the tours that he has been leading." The archaeologist they hired to consult on the project, Diamond notes, was the president of PANYC.

By the time the *National Geographic* project had gone awry, the BHRA's relationship with the DOT had deteriorated as well. The BHRA had begun building a second entrance to the tunnel, something it had agreed to do back in 1986. In 2009, however, the department pointed out (rightly) that his new agreement with the city no longer allowed him to perform any construction, and so work was halted. In late 2010, Diamond received that angry phone call and fax from the DOT telling him that his permission to enter the tunnel had been revoked. The letter offered no explanation, but enclosed with it was an assessment of the tunnel by the fire department, apparently based on photos from the BHRA's website, claiming that the tunnel was a safety hazard, as it had only a single entrance.

"It was a catch-22," says Diamond's lawyer, Gabe Salem, who in 2011 filed suit against the city for wrongfully revoking Diamond's access to the tunnel. "We never could figure out what really happened," says Diamond. "It's one of the reasons we sued."

Page 662

One night in December 2012, Diamond was up late. His case was going nowhere, and his spirits were low. He was watching a movie, leafing through an eight-inch stack of more than 2,000 legal documents Salem had obtained by subpoenaing a consultant on the *National Geographic*

project. He hoped to find some explanation for why *National Geographic* didn't want him involved in its special about the tunnel. But after he scanned hundreds of pages, the search looked grim.

Around midnight, however, he reached Page 662, which had the results of a magnetometer study of the area behind the tunnel's wall. "I didn't know they did a study," Diamond says, as he began to read the results: "One large subsurface metallic anomaly was identified extending across Atlantic Avenue and encompassing both the westbound and eastbound roadway...."

"I was floored," Diamond says. "I read it about 10 times to make sure." He then found an email, from the company that performed the magnetometer test to the PANYC consultant on the project, confirming what at this point he already knew: "There is no question that something(s) metallic is buried under Atlantic Ave."

"I was in a state of ecstasy," he remembers. The next morning he telephoned Salem. "You know what, Gabe?" he said, laughing. "They found the locomotive down there!"

"That's a Little Paranoid, Bob"

In April, I visited Diamond at a monthly BHRA meeting. He and two colleagues were gathered around their regular table at Connecticut Muffin, discussing a new trolley line, for which the group has produced a 300-page report detailing how recent streetcar projects in the U.S. have yielded as much as a 2,000 percent return on investment and cost half as much as the average city bus to operate. If the proposal is accepted, the trolley would run under Atlantic Avenue, requiring the city to at last break through the wall at the end of Diamond's tunnel.

Diamond is confident he will get back inside the tunnel, either through his lawsuit or the new trolley proposal. When I ask if he still thinks the lost diary pages of John Wilkes Booth are down there, he laughs and takes a sip of his coffee. "They used to say the locomotive didn't exist," he says.

While he waits, Diamond is searching for another forgotten tunnel. This one, a pneumatic tube beneath City Hall Park in Manhattan, was constructed in 1870 by *Scientific American* editor Alfred Ely Beach. Only three years after it opened, however, Boss Tweed, then arguably the most powerful and corrupt political operator in New York City, had it shut down, fearing it would compete with his horse-drawn carriage business. The general belief is that Beach's tunnel was destroyed when New York dug the current subway system years later. But Diamond thinks otherwise. Using the online historical database of the New York Public Library, he's assembled yellowed magazine clips, schematics and century-old maps of the handrails in City

Hall Park. Diamond asserts that these documents prove Beach's tube was not in the path of the current subway system but is, instead, still buried safely beneath the park. If he's right, it would be the oldest subway tunnel in Manhattan, and second in the five boroughs only to Atlantic Avenue.

Turning to BHRA member Ray Howell across the table, Diamond says, "If we find it, how much you want to bet they won't let me inside?"

"That's a little paranoid, Bob," says Howell.

"I'll bet you a cheeseburger—a double cheeseburger."

A few weeks later, Diamond and I went to City Hall Park to search for evidence of the tunnel. He located the spot where it once vented into the open air, but grass has long grown over the area. "We're standing *right* on top of it," he tells me. But without help from the city, there was no way to know for certain whether he is right.

The Tunnel King sighs. Since discovering the Atlantic Avenue Tunnel, he has gained more than 150 pounds and lost most of his teeth and some of his hair. He is exhausted. "Oh well," he says. "Let somebody else find it and be chased by PANYC for 30 years."

 *Community Guidelines*