

Then & Now

Tom Aherne



Newcastle West native who helped shaped the Big Apple

John Wolfe Ambrose led the construction company behind many of the projects that made New York a centre of commerce

IN THE late 1800's, John Wolfe Ambrose, a poor Irish immigrant, devoted the last eighteen years of his life in developing New York City and its harbour, enabling the access of large commercial ships consequently making a significant contribution to the city's economic boom.

He was born in Newcastle West on January 10, 1838 and he travelled as a child with his family to America in 1852 where they settled in New York. Although he was compelled to earn a living from a young age, he was determined to pursue his education, and gain a place at college. After a hard day's labour he would study in the evenings and well into the night. His determination was rewarded when he eventually attained places at New York University and Princeton University.

John came from a background of a long line of clergymen, and initially he intended to become a Presbyterian minister, but after completing his studies in 1860, he changed his mind and secured a position as newspaper reporter with the Citizen's Reform Association. It was his friendship with John Brown, a contractor from the city's Street Cleaning Department that led to his interest and involvement in the restructuring of the department.

His proposal that the street cleaners wear uniforms and that the refuse be removed in hand carts, was implemented and the city was divided into blocks. His interest in developing the city progressed to him establishing his own contracting business, undertaking major improvement construction works within the city. Although he was an imposing build of over six feet tall, his fair-minded, kind and gentle nature, ensured that much to his satisfaction, there never was a strike held amongst his workers. He had managed to avert any such threats with his honest and impartial approach.

His company built the Second Avenue Elevated Road, the Sixth Avenue Elevated Road from

Seventy-Second Street to 158 Street, during which he employed 7,000 men. He laid the first eight miles of pneumatic tubes in the United States, under the streets in New York for the Western Union Telegraph Company. He also constructed the gas works and laid ninety miles of gas mains for the Knickerbocker Gas Company.

Many of New York's uptown streets were built by John Ambrose, particularly the area around Harlem. John rapidly gained a reputation of accomplishing the most difficult developments, and his ambition was to develop New York on a grand scale. Around 1880 he became interested in the development of the Brooklyn waterfront properties. He founded the Brooklyn Wharf and Dry Dock Company, the South Brooklyn Railroad and Terminal Company and the 39th Street South Brooklyn Ferry all of which he was president. Shortly after he formed his companies, John's attention turned to the channels of the port of New York.

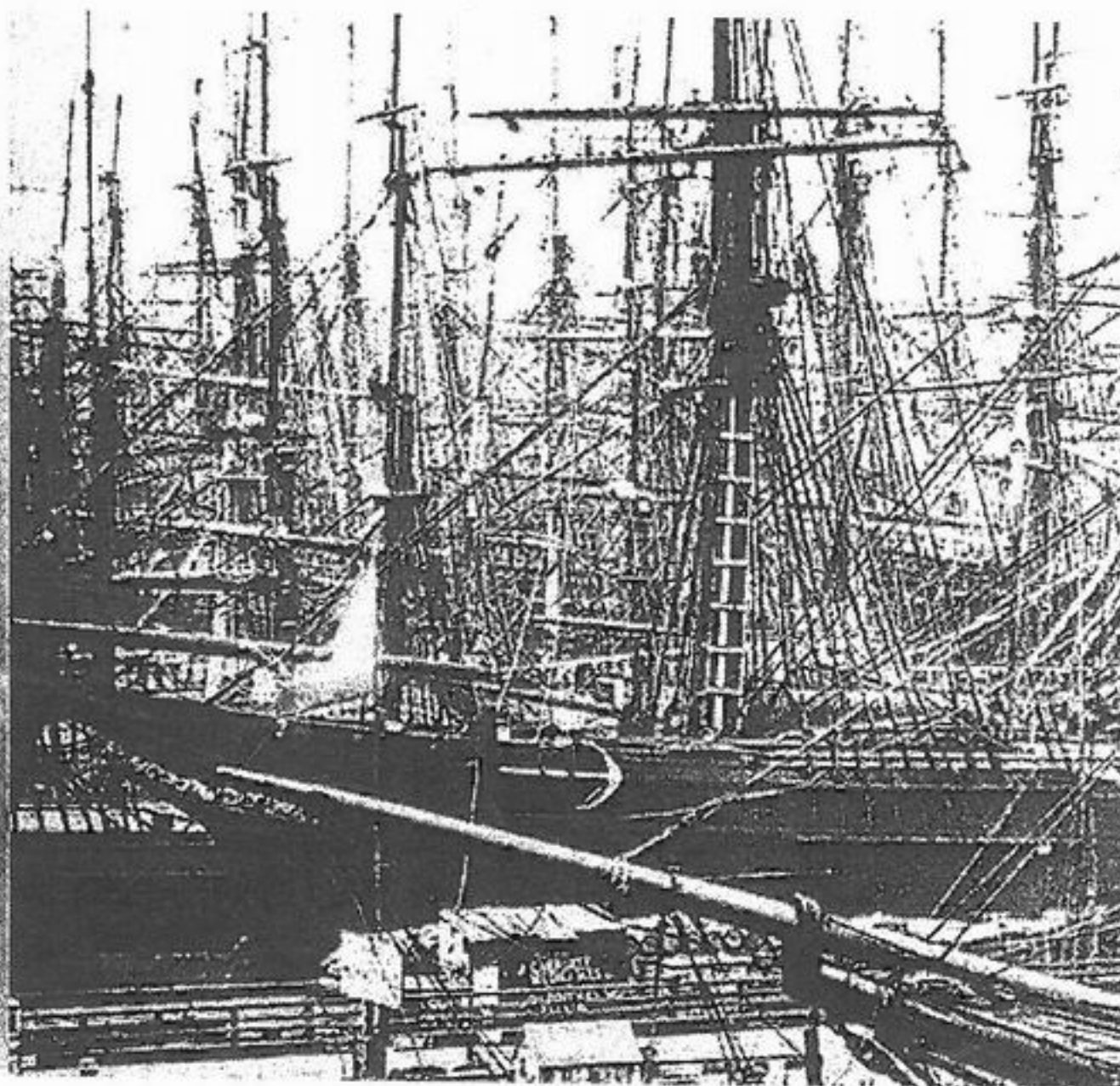
Brooklyn shore in particular was an undeveloped series of mud flats, with a depth of eight feet of water at high tide. John saw the need for an adequate shipping channel at the entrance to New York harbour and in 1881 he went to Washington D.C. and approached Congress for money to deepen Sandy Hook Bar and the inner channels of New York harbour. At first his scheme was opposed but John persevered and eventually a grand sum of 1,478,000 dollars was granted by the Congress and the Bay Ridge and Red Hook channels were widened to 1,000 feet and 40 feet deep.

After improving the inner channels, Ambrose concentrated on the approach to the harbour. He knew through his previous battle with the congress, that he would need influential backing if he was going to succeed in gaining permission for a deep-sea channel. He gathered leading delegates from the Chamber of Commerce, the Board of Marine Under-writers, the Produce and Maritime Exchanges and the Merchants Association of which he was a director.

In December 1898 they



Newcastle West native John Wolfe Ambrose. As a result of his efforts, New York Harbour was deepened to handle the largest transatlantic ships, allowing New York's commercial economy to boom. A view of the New York City docks, c. 1880



approached the River and Harbour Committee of the House of Representatives, proposing a channel 2,000 feet wide and 40 feet deep. His plan was rejected, but John was determined and strongly believed in the success of his project. He went to the Senate's Commerce Committee and gained their approval, granting 6,000,000 dollars for the project in the spring of 1899.

The new deep-sea channel enabled large transatlantic ships to safely enter the port, which greatly improved its commercial viability and economic success. Sadly, John did not see the channel completed, as he died from typhoid malaria on May 15 1899 shortly after the start of the construction.

In 1901 in recognition of his work, the New York State Legislature named the channel and its lightship after him. The Ambrose channel is still today the main shipping channel for ships entering New York harbour. The Lightship Ambrose is now a registered a National Historic Landmark and a museum open to visitors at the South Street Seaport on the East River.

A monument in memory of John Ambrose was erected in Battery Park in 1936 and was unveiled by Mayor Florello La Guardia, who was reported by the New York Times to have regarded John as "the pioneer of an idea. Mr. Ambrose was a man ahead of his time. He had a vision and persistence to continually press

his idea." New York owes much gratitude to a man whose determination to persist in his futuristic vision of improving the infrastructure of New York City and its harbour, led to the lucrative commerce it has today. He was a pioneering engineer from Limerick who left his mark in New York and he deserves to be remembered.

QUEEN OF THE MAY

EVERY YEAR in Ireland the month of May is marked on various radio stations with the beautiful and popular hymn Bring Flowers of the Rarest also known as Queen of the May sung by Canon Sydney Mac Ewan. The hymn was composed by Mary E Walsh who was a pupil of the Sisters of Notre Dame, and it was published in 1871. Sydney Alfred Mac Ewan the Scottish tenor was born on October 19 1908 in the Springburn area of Glasgow. His Irish mother was from Portadown, County Armagh, and his father was from Patrick in Scotland.

His mother managed to pay for music lessons for Sydney and his brother despite their poor circumstances, and both won scholarships to good schools. He commenced his studies to become a Jesuit priest in London aged 18, and later at Glasgow University. On the advice of Sir Compton Mc Kenzie, and Count John Mc Cormack he commenced his singing career in 1934. He recorded for Parlophone

and in 1936 he toured America, Canada and Australia with great success.

He was ordained a priest in Saint Andrew's Cathedral, Glasgow in 1944 and he continued to record and tours to North America and Australia continued up to 1956. Funding from these tours was used to build a Cathedral in Oban and for renovations to the Church of Saint Margaret in Lockgilphead. He visited Ireland many times and sang in the Savoy Theatre in Limerick on a number of occasions.

He returned to holiday in Limerick during his retirement years. He had a beautiful pure voice and was one of the most popular tenors of his time.

At fifty years of age he retired from singing because in his own words, his voice had lost its bloom. He died on September 25 1991 aged 82 years. Canon Sydney Mac Ewan successfully combined his career as a priest and a singer, and his beautiful and spiritual rendition of Queen of the May is both uplifting and nostalgic for so many people.

*Bring flowers of the Rarest
Bring Blossoms the Fairest
From Garden and Woodland
And Hillside and Dale*

Chorus

*O Mary we crown thee with
blossoms today
Queen of the Angels and Queen of
the May*