

Mapping Time



Night and day in the nineteenth-century city

To peer into an old panoramic map is to glimpse the American city as it might have appeared to an angel of real-estate investment. From a thousand feet in the blue sky, far above the smell of horse manure on shoe leather and the crush of bodies in streetcars, you see a landscape alive with commerce. Oversized ships crowd the waterfront, white sails bellied out. Factory smokestacks spew black pennants of progress. Rail lines veer into an infinite hinterland. Sunlight picks out skyscrapers thrusting eight, ten, twelve stories into thin air.

These lithographed bird's-eye views, which still decorate the walls of restaurants, libraries, and lawyers' offices, give us a sense of how the city could have been understood a century ago. No matter that only a balloonist could have contemplated the city from so far above the filthy pavement or that coal smog would have obscured his view. Thanks to the mass-produced panoramic map, Americans in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries could see their city as a functioning unit, with its industries and transportation routes highlighted in intricate detail, its slums vanishing into a mass of street blocks. On the ground, urban space was a huge mess, frighteningly different from anything ever before experienced. From the bird's-eye view, it all made sense.

The same could not be said of another aspect of urban life: time. From whatever vantage, nineteenth-century urban time seemed to move in frighteningly unpredictable ways. This was especially so of those once-fixed temporal reference points: day and night. In the new chaos of urban life, these seemed to lose their reassuring permanence. A number of writers tried to make sense of this vexingly abstract force. From imaginary vantage points along major streets, they traced the life of the metropolis from its first vigorous stirrings before dawn through its murmurs and rustlings deep in the night. Like the panoramic maps, these descriptions are caricatures, but they help us to glimpse the emerging structure of urban day and urban night. We can see people inching toward what we would now call the twenty-four-hour city.



A dog fight with cheering gamblers, from *The Sporting Times*, September 19, 1868. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

Writers with Pocket Watches

Walt Whitman suggested as much in an 1856 article about activity on lower Broadway in New York. "Within this straight and confined stretch of narrow street surges to and fro, all day, all night, year in and year out, absolutely without intermission, an endless procession, which might furnish no bad representative of the vast procession of humanity." From an imaginary perch along the street, Whitman diagrammed the passage of different classes of people hour by hour, from the predawn rumbling of butchers' delivery carts to the midnight journeys of late hacks (the equivalent of cabs). The morning commute of pedestrians began around five o'clock, in Whitman's telling, with "twos and threes, and soon full platoons, of the 'industrial regiments' . . . uniformed in brick-dusty shirts and overalls, battered hats, and shoes white or burnt with lime, armed with pick, spade, trowel or hod . . ." As these men scattered to construction sites, shopgirls walked down Broadway toward the bookbinderies

and tailor shops. "Mingling with them, and flocking closer, for it is now eight or nine in the morning, come the jaunty crew of the downtown clerks," whose fashionable clothes covered physiques weakened by fast living. "Now their employers begin to crowd the sidewalks, and for an hour or two the way is full of merchants and money-traders—the 'solid business community.' A grim and griping generation are they; some fat and sturdy; most lean and dried up; all with close, hard faces . . . Among them you may distinguish here and there a lawyer, by something of an intellectual expression."

From eleven o'clock to three o'clock, Whitman continued, "the full sea of the city, eddying and roaring, with no distinct current, boils and surges this way and that, in an undistinguishable and hopeless confusion." Brightly-dressed women shoppers can be seen amid the flood, particularly in the later afternoon, when many are promenading. Among them, "the experienced city observer may everywhere recognize, in full costume and with assured faces, even at this broad daylight time, one and another notorious courtesan." After four o'clock, "the feminine promenaders gradually disappear, and the successive waves of the morning tide now begin to roll backward in an inverse order—merchants, brokers, lawyers, first; clerks next; shop-girls and laborers last."

Whitman was describing a time when New York was still what has been called a "walking city," where even the affluent traveled by foot. By the end of the nineteenth century, daily journeys had been altered by the physical expansion of cities and by their starker division into zones of production and residence, affluence and poverty. Often traveling greater distances than their predecessors, the daily procession of workers was now linked to the timetables of commuter railroads and streetcars. Commuters flowed down Broadway in discrete pulses carried by cable car, as Stephen Crane observed around the turn of the century. "In the grey of the morning they [the cable cars] come out of the up-town, bearing janitors, porters, all that class which carries the keys to set alive the great downtown. Later, they shower clerks. Later still, they shower more clerks." Crane hurries through the chaotic morning rush and the brief ten o'clock lull, to reach the onslaught of "feminine shoppers" who try the patience of cable-car operators.



An amorous couple in a streetcar at night, from *The Sporting Times*, January 9, 1869. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

Similarly, the humorist H.C. Bunner wrote in *The Suburban Sage* (1896) of a "time-table test" that supposedly revealed the status of each white-collar suburban breadwinner. From "an upper window in my house that commands an uninterrupted view of the little railway station," he watched the daily procession of poor and rich commuters to New York. Men who rose to catch the six o'clock trains took little care in their appearance and evidently lived grim, meager lives. They were followed by the happily ambitious office boys who arrived to catch the 7:03 train. "But the 7:27 train is quite another affair. The errand-boy has got his promotion. He is really a junior clerk of some sort; and he has the glorious privilege of getting to his office exactly twenty-four minutes later. But, with his first step upward, he leaves light-hearted boyishness behind him and becomes prey to cankering ambition. His companions are men now, but mostly men who have barely escaped the bondage of the 6:38, and in whose breast the hope of ever rising even to the 8:01 is slowly dying out." The status of the commuters rose with each subsequent train, Bunner continued, and so did their concern for reputation. "A commuter's clothes improve from train to train until he gets to taking the 10:17, when he is reputed so rich that he may safely dress shabbily."

Whitman and Bunner present the economic life of the city in a spirit quite different from what appears in the panoramic maps. While the maps celebrate order, progress, and unity, Whitman and Bunner point out the inequities between struggling early birds and wealthy sluggards. Many of the other attempts to map urban time also have a subtly (or not so subtly) subversive tone.

Harrison Gray Buchanan adopted for his 1848 narrative the literally devilish persona of "Asmodeus," a demon who floated over cities, lifting the roofs of houses and laughing at the human foolery that he exposed. Buchanan's purpose is spelled out in his flamboyant title, *Asmodeus: Or, Legends of New York. Being a Complete Exposé of the Mysteries, Vices and Doings, as Exhibited by the Fashionable Circles of New York* . . . Though he claims to be motivated by a desire to reform the city, he is obviously rubbing his hands in Asmodeus-like glee as he reveals the shocking truth. Buchanan starts his narrative with a walk down Broadway at dusk. Vehicles and pedestrians throng the street. Urchins and servant girls cluster near Barnum's museum to hear the music. Brightly dressed prostitutes troll for pickups. Young men lounge outside the Astor House, staring at passing women. "The merchant and his clerk, lawyers and divines, poets and saucy editors, high and low—all ranks and classes, passed on in ceaseless currents." Morality, not class, defines the structure of urban time. As the City Hall bell rings the hour of seven o'clock, the crowds thicken with theatergoers. A few furtive young men are on their way to visit brothels. Buchanan describes such a visit in loving detail, following two dissipated clerks through their evening at a house on Leonard Street. By midnight, the clerks have gone through ninety dollars of their employer's money. Here and in other chapters, the action begins with the fall of darkness and the characters

plunge deeper into sin with each passing hour.

A more elaborate chronology appears in an 1872 essay by the Brooklyn minister T. Dewitt Talmage, entitled "After Midnight." Talmage described night as divided into four "watches," each with its distinct activities and moral character. The first of these three-hour periods begins with the completion of the day's work. Storekeepers and their clerks shutter their windows and bolt the doors. Tired workingmen trudge home to their families, and "the streets are thronged with young men . . . A few hours later, and all the places of amusement, good and bad, are in full tide. Lovers of art, catalogue in hand, stroll through the galleries and discuss the pictures. The ball-room is resplendent with the rich apparel of those who, on either side of the white, glistening boards, await the signal from the orchestra. The footlights of the theatre flash up; the bell rings and the curtain rises."

The character of the night changes at the beginning of the third watch. The city grows quieter after midnight. A few working men walk home from night jobs, doctors and ministers are out caring for the sick and dying, but most of those who stay awake are up to no good. Robbers, burglars, and arsonists do their work at this time. Seemingly decent people indulge in vicious pleasures. Men throw away their fortunes on cards; drunks stagger through the streets or pass out on the saloon floor; ballroom dancers are in the throes of a "wild, intoxicating, heated midnight dance [that] jars all the moral hearthstones of the city." In the final watch of the night, as the revelry subsides with the approach of dawn, working people emerge from their homes to begin the daily cycle of toil.

The Watches of the Night

Even a brief glance at a panoramic map dispels any illusion of accuracy. Likewise, the writers who tried to map urban time aimed for effects that had only a casual connection to reality. Whitman was cataloguing the occupational diversity of New York, Bunner was mocking status pretensions, and Talmage was warning young men against temptations. Their crude depictions of urban time, in some sense, replicated the pre-modern habit of dividing time into night and day, paying little attention to the invisible laborers and highwaymen, the midwives and nursing mothers or the toiling seamen for whom night was anything but a time of sleep. Nonetheless, their chronologies highlight real patterns: the precise opening and closing times in the industrial city, the long hours demanded of laborers, the tides of commuting along rail lines, the expansion of commercial entertainment, and above all the growth of nighttime activity. As night became more heavily used, it was developing its own distinct schedule.



"Before the Holiday-Marketing by Torchlight-A Night Scene in Eighth Avenue, New York City," from Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, December 12, 1868. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

What Talmage called the first watch of the night, from six to nine in the evening, had been the one least dissociated from the day. From colonial times through the early nineteenth century, when the workday followed the sun, both rural and urban Americans worked through early evening in the long summer months. After work on pleasant evenings, city dwellers would stroll the streets until darkness fell or the curfew bell rang. Then, at the setting of the night watch, presence in the streets became subject to official scrutiny, particularly the presence of racial minorities, women, and children. Thanks in part to the introduction of gas lighting between 1820 and 1860, evening work and evening entertainment both expanded. Evening work was already common in early nineteenth-century spinning and weaving mills, which were "lit up" with oil lamps in fall and winter. The expansion of these mills and the superiority of gas lighting at midcentury meant that more people found themselves working to eight or nine at night. Later hours also became common among dry-goods merchants, some of whom stayed open until ten or eleven at night. A writer for the *Brooklyn Eagle* explained in 1863 that "many people prefer to do their shopping by gas light, and not a few have no other time to do it, being engaged in their occupations during the day. It is certainly pleasant . . . to walk out and see the stores brilliantly lighted, and some kinds of goods look so much better by gas-light that purchases are more apt to be made at night than in daytime." Evening shoppers appreciated the late hours, but clerks responded by forming an "early closing movement" that sporadically resisted the trend. One activist clerk in Brooklyn complained in 1850 that "all other classes in the community are furnished, both with the means and TIME for mental culture. We stand alone, as though our class had forfeited all claims upon libraries and lectures." Merchants who opposed the early closing movement countered that the clerks were likely to waste any free evenings in saloons.

Regardless of whether clerks would have really preferred the library to the saloon, they were correct in noting that respectable entertainment options were limited by the time they got off work. Mid-nineteenth-century concerts and lectures typically began at seven, seven thirty, or eight; late arrivals were discouraged. These events, along with church services and meetings of voluntary associations, ended fairly early as well. Late arrivals to the theatre, though,

could still find hours of entertainment ahead of them. Midcentury theatrical performances often included three, four or five plays and extended to the morally dubious end of the second watch, even into the third. As a mixing place for people of different classes, sexes, and moral characters, the theatre was noted as a bridge between respectable and disreputable leisure, a bridge frequently crossed by young men. Prostitutes sat in the third tier of seats, ready to arrange liaisons for after the performances ended. An evening at the theater thus crossed two important divides: one temporal and one moral. Men emerged into the streets around midnight only to continue the evening in places with shadier reputations.

As midnight approached in midcentury cities, young men and women enjoyed a lively sexual street culture. Apprentices, clerks, laborers, sewing girls, and servants cruised certain streets in the hours after ten o'clock to flirt or to find partners for recreational sex. Often indistinguishable from ordinary streetwalkers, and frequently charging for their services, the young women would take their companions into nearby parks and graveyards. In New York, such cruising grounds included the Battery, the Park at City Hall, and the sidewalks around the public hospital. Similar late-evening sexual activity could be seen at public parks and graveyards in Boston, Albany, Newark, Worcester, and other cities.

For young men with more money to spend, an evening that began at the theater often continued in the saloon or oyster cellar and concluded at the brothel or gambling hall. Already in violation of the weak ordinances that demanded midnight closings for drinking establishments, after-hours saloons had little incentive to honor laws forbidding gambling, prostitution, and public indecency. At the more elegant midcentury gambling halls, card play began around midnight and lasted until dawn.

Moralists claimed that men on the town shed their moral scruples as the night wore on. In a penitent account of his life written in 1850, the murderer Henry Leander Foote described his descent into vice twenty years earlier. Foote fell in with a group of wild young men while on the boat to New York from his native Connecticut.

The first night I was led to the Theater, from there to the brothel, and from there to the gambling house . . . Here we must be fashionable and have a game of cards and a bottle or two of champagne [sic]. The cards I objected to, but one said we would be laughed at if we did not follow the fashion of the house . . . [The] champagne [sic] beginning to work, I soon surrendered to their wishes. We played and drank till sometime past midnight, when we concluded it was time to retire. Some one or two proposed to return to the brothel, but that I absolutely refused to do.



"The Pewter Mug on a Saturday Night." Front Page of *The Weekly Rake*, October 22, 1842. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

On subsequent nights, Foote became an enthusiastic theatergoer, brothel visitor, gambler, and viewer of the "model artist" exhibitions of nude women.

Nightlife for most young men was just a temporary break from their cycle of work and rest. Their final descent into sin was prevented by rooming-house operators who locked the doors late at night and by the cruel reality of transportation schedules. Mid-nineteenth-century omnibuses and horse railroads tended to stop for the night within the second watch, forcing theatergoers to rush for the last car or pay heavy fares for nighthawk cabs. The hours varied from city to city. The Sixth-Avenue Railroad Company ran cars every thirty minutes all night, while in Hartford the evening's last streetcar to Wethersfield left downtown at ten. Though traction companies resisted providing unprofitable late-night "owl car" service, municipal pressure and public demand slowly extended the hours. *The Street Railway Journal* reported in 1886 that street railways in cities of under fifty thousand people generally ran until eleven thirty or twelve. Night cars ran all night at intervals of fifteen or twenty minutes on some lines in Chicago and New York, though headways of thirty minutes to an hour were typical in other large cities. Twenty-four-hour service spread to more lines and smaller cities in the early twentieth century.

The atmosphere on owl cars also deterred some would-be night travelers, particularly women. Owl cars collected many of their fares from late-night drinkers. If conductors were too meek to impose order or expel the profoundly inebriated, rowdies annoyed other passengers with loud talk, foul language, cigar smoke, and occasional brawls. *The New York Times* editors complained in 1872 that "it is becoming almost impossible to enter a late-night car on some of the chief lines, without enduring insults, and taking the risk of deadly assaults from the drunken brutes that are generally found in them." The Massachusetts Board of Railroad Commissioners reported in 1909 that the presence of drunks on the late-night cars in Worcester and Fall River "creates conditions which at times outrage all sense of delicacy and decency."

Women who rode the owl cars encountered unwanted seatmates, sexual propositions, and frightening stares. Those who safely navigated the streetcar

system still had to walk through streets at each end of the journey. Even as dance halls, vaudeville theaters, and nickelodeons brought large crowds downtown, unescorted women could expect to be approached by strangers as the evening wore on. In center-city Philadelphia, according to the *Public Ledger*, women walking along Chestnut Street in the late evening were “ogled and insulted by crowds of men.”

Contributing to the rough atmosphere of the nocturnal city was the gender imbalance in the growing late-night workforce. More men than women had an economic reason to be out at night. In early nineteenth-century cities, two types of workers had been named and legally defined in relation to night: night watchmen (who later became the police) and night scavengers, or “nightmen,” who emptied privies. Night scavengers were typically forbidden to start work before ten or eleven, to shield the genteel public from distasteful sights and smells. Both of these types of work expanded in the latter half of the century.

Maritime shipping had always operated around the clock; the nautical tradition of constant “watches,” after all, provided Talmage with his schema for understanding night. Now newly illuminated waterfronts could also adhere to these round-the-clock work patterns. Ship owners wanted to minimize unproductive time in port and were willing to pay high wages for night work in order to ensure that ships would be unloaded and loaded without interruption. Railroads—with their sprawling urban systems of rail lines, marshalling yards, and depots—were even more visible sites of nocturnal work, employing huge workforces of mechanics, yardmen, and stationmen.

Round-the-clock manufacturing was rare before the late nineteenth century. Owners of early textile mills had not attempted all-night production, despite their common practice of extending the working day by “lighting up.” Gasworks and blast furnaces were among the few early industrial plants that ran continuously. The major growth in shift work began in the decades after the Civil War in large-scale, capital-intensive factories where a constant flow of production replaced the older practice of “batch” work. Manufacturers of steel, paper, refined oil, chemicals, and glass all developed production processes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in which any interruption was needless and costly. The electrification of factories in the 1880s further encouraged nonstop production. By 1927, night workers accounted for more than forty percent of the employees making rubber, sugar, iron, and steel and more than twenty-five percent of those making paper. Among the most brutal working conditions were those in the steel mills, which ran on a two-shift system from the mid-1880s until 1923; periodically, one shift would continue for an unbroken twenty-four hours, so that the night shift could become the day shift.

Other sorts of jobs, less drastically out of phase with the dominant cycle, began in the fourth watch of the night, as the city gradually awoke from its three-a.m. stillness. Bakers kneaded the dough a final time and placed it in the oven to produce warm loaves for morning customers. Fresh milk, having arrived by train or ferry between midnight and four, was loaded into wagons for

distribution to homes and groceries. Sales of country produce in public markets began as early as three or four in the morning in some cities in 1880. With the slow decline of public markets, night work only grew. Night was the time for transporting fresh food. Produce was less likely to spoil in the cool predawn hours, and traffic jams were unlikely to cause delays.

By the early twentieth century, more women were beginning to do night work as department store clerks, telephone operators, and bakery hands. Many boys also worked as night messengers and as assistants in all-night glassworks. Yet the appearance of women and children on the night streets was considered inappropriate by social reformers. For many women workers, testified an Ohio doctor at a 1919 legislative hearing, "fear on going to work late at night and on coming back early in the morning, especially between the home and the street car line, is a feature inimical to health." By the time he spoke, fourteen other states had already banned some form of women's work after nine or ten at night. By 1924, thirty-eight states prohibited night labor by children under sixteen years old. Concerned that children were the most likely to be exposed to immorality or abuse on the night streets, legislatures in fourteen states singled out the street trades for especially strict regulation. Adult men, therefore, continued to dominate the night.

Modern lighting and transportation had opened the night city to adult men, but had not reproduced the relatively safe atmosphere of daytime. The persistence of immoral forms of nightlife, the skewed gender profile of night work, and, finally, legislation combined to keep night distinct from day. Instead, a new schedule of nocturnal life was visible in the streets. Different sorts of people could be seen at distinct, predictable hours, from the parade of late-evening commuters, through the shift workers and revelers at midnight, to the marketmen and street sweepers before dawn. "Before these ghostly cleaners have done their task," Whitman observed, "the circuit of the hours is over, and the endless procession . . . begins again."

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