

Uptown Headwaters Confessions of a Manhole Detective

An orange vest and manhole hook are my badge and gun, but they don't go a long way toward actually solving any mysteries. While there are no blood-stained carpets, screams in the night, or broken clocks in my line of work, New York's underground provides other sorts of physical clues by way of manholes, pull boxes, and pavement cracks that form the border pieces of the puzzle I need to complete. I've got a ground full of utilities to untangle, abandoned trolley columns or maybe a lost tunnel to find. And the only witnesses around to paint the picture of what happened are maps.

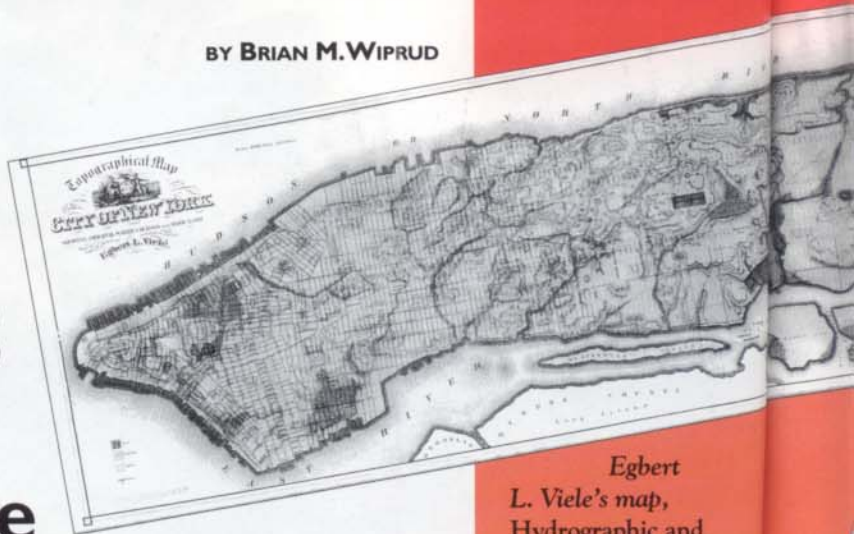
Monday morning a traffic circle lands on my desk — one of those big, leafy, cobblestoned roundabouts sitting at the corner of a park. Our client needs us to tell them if they'd cave in the subway, cause a blackout, or rupture any water mains should they have a mind to push some of the curbs around and erect a statue in the middle of the circle. My boss tells me it's urgent and that I'll have a twenty-scale base plan by the end of the week from our surveyors. He adds, "They also need us to look into the possibility of an underground stream."

I make a face, but don't have to say what I'm thinking. In almost every other case I've come across, folks are on about underground streams. "We'll see," I say, picking up the phone.

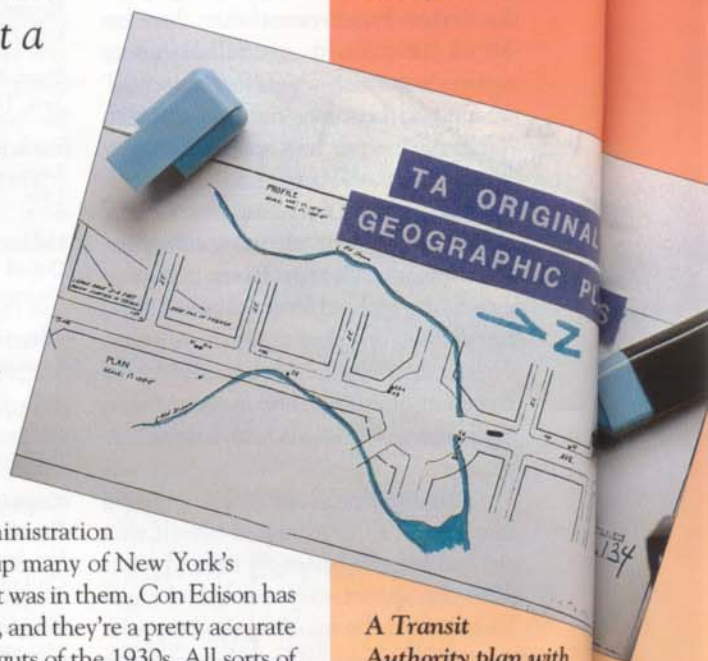
Time to round up the witnesses. I call Syd over at Con Edison and make a routine request for their electric, gas, and steam maps (they call them "plates") for the traffic circle. I also ask if he can see his way clear to snag me a WPA map, an invaluable

source of utility infrastructure information. During the depression, gangs of workers hired by the former Work Projects Administration were sent out to dig up many of New York's streets just to map what was in them. Con Edison has a full set of these plans, and they're a pretty accurate snapshot of the street guts of the 1930s. All sorts of abandoned utilities are shown — trolley tracks, cable car gearboxes, refrigeration lines, column foundations, elevated subway stairs and columns, etc. Then I call Jack at NYNEX (our local phone company) for their maps, send our technician Al out to Lefrak City for water and sewer plans, and head out the door. Next stop, the Transit Authority.

In a midtown skyscraper, Mr. Davis sets me up at a machine with the appropriate roll of TA microfilm, and I start scoping out the original plans for the



Egbert L. Viele's map, Hydrographic and Topographical Map of Manhattan (1865), shows a mysterious subterranean aquifer beneath the traffic circle. (New York Historical Society.)



A Transit Authority plan with the original geography of New York City, in the vicinity of the traffic circle, has the phantom stream highlighted in blue. (Courtesy of New York City Transit Authority.)