

Part II, Chapter 3, Thomas Goes to Work



Michael had never seen a horsecar, or even its predecessor, the omnibus, until he came to New York. Since being in the city, though, he had seen both. On Broadway there were the omnibuses--cramped carriages seating 12 to 15 passengers—some on top--pulled by two horses over rough cobbled streets.

On the Bowery and Fourth Avenue he had seen horsecars pulled by two horses over smooth even iron rails, embedded in the road, enabling the two horses to pull carriages with 40 to 70 passengers. Only the wealthy could ride, of course, as the fare was a shilling (12-1/2¢) for each ride. Thomas would make only 75¢ a day himself working on laying the rails for the extension of this line. He heard that the average laborer earned one dollar a day, but as he knew, the Irish were deemed below average. He was just glad to have work. Maybe someday he could afford to ride.



(pictures from the website: <http://www.transitmuseumeducation.org/trc/background>)

The Harlem and New York Railway had begun in 1831, and the section along the Bowery, from Prince Street north to 14th, had opened November of 1832, the year before Thomas arrived. The carriages there were horse-drawn—the one Thomas saw. The new tracks where Thomas and Michael would work would run along Fourth Avenue from 14th north to 32nd would use steam-driven carriages.



Thomas loved this new way of transportation—carriages that ran on rails, whether drawn by horse or steam, which he had not seen. New York was a wonderful place, to plan a means of public transportation that would cross the city from south to north. He had heard that as the tracks went further north, they would even involve a tunnel.

They had been told to report at sunrise, about 7 and to expect to stay until 7 p.m. if it was still light enough to work. He and Michael had to leave the Mulberry address of their rooming house about 6 a.m. to get to wherever they were working at the time along Fourth Avenue—anywhere from 14th all the way up to 42nd Street in Murray Hill—wherever they were told to report. If they were late, their pay would be docked. It promised steady work, so Thomas was happy.

They could see a demarcation of jobs among the skilled and the unskilled. The skilled jobs, ordering the jobs and overseeing the workers, were in the hands of men who Thomas knew thought of themselves as “natives,” men who spoke

English well, without any noticeable accent. Under them, working alongside Michael and Thomas, were men with accents-- Irish or Italian or Jamaican—all voices Thomas had heard, living in Five Points.

There was already a pile of cobblestones waiting, dug up from the streets by the pick and shovel men who had worked the day before. Thomas's job wasn't hard to figure out. In case he didn't speak English, one of the pick-and-shovel men, seeing his cart, pointed to the pile and then to a bigger dump waiting way down the street, where he was to take whatever he could pile onto his handcart. That way he could just keep pushing his cart between wherever there was a pile here and there, so that another group of workers could prepare the railway bed, and another could install the rails, then the cartman would bring back gravel, which another worker would put around the rails, making sure that the rails had a good clearance. It was a careful process, which went on all day, while pedestrians and carriages and pigs even passed by.

By noon Thomas was ready to go home to bed. He had never been so exhausted. They had a 15 minute break for lunch (Bridget had prepared some potatoes and corned beef) then it was back to work until sunset, about 6:30 p.m.. Sunup to sunset. It was October. Thank heavens the days were getting shorter! Thomas and Michael took a rest before they started home. Michael, who wasn't as worn out as Thomas, having done cart work before, said he was in the habit of stopping off for a pint on the way home, but since he didn't have any money with him—they wouldn't be paid till the end of the week—he headed back to Five Points. Thomas wondered that he hadn't any money at all from the time he had already worked, but didn't want to pry. They could leave their carts behind a barricade with other tools and equipment. It seemed like a long walk home, and they didn't arrive until 7:30 p.m. barely time to clean up for dinner.

The next day, he could barely get out of bed at 6 a.m. He had gone to bed right after eating and still felt exhausted when Bridget woke him. His back and arms and leg muscles all ached. He could barely move his hands. His fingers felt like wood. The thought of trudging back up to 18th Street, where the gang he was with were working, was numbing. How could he go on doing this for 6 days a week, with only Sunday to rest?

On a fine October day like this, back in Galway, he had loved the walk over to Bermingham House through the fields. He noticed all the tints of yellow and orange and red that had appeared overnight; he felt the coolness coming, but the fields still looked at their peak—purple and yellow and white flowers caught in the edges of rocks. Now he couldn't see any green anywhere,, only the cobblestones of the streets and the grey piles of stone and the brown dirt that got under his nails and the dust that settled in his hair and his eyes and mouth. He had looked forward with joy to going to work in those Galway mornings; he never knew what he would see or what new work he would be called on to do on the estate. Now he dreaded the walk, knowing what the day had in store for him. He

was like an animal—really, wasn't he like a cart horse, only he also had to pick up the stone and shovel up the dirt before he could push it over the cobblestones. Maybe this was a mistake, coming to Amerikay. He couldn't bear to think he had made a mistake; he certainly wouldn't mention his misgivings to Bridget. He would get over it.