

The President's Secret New York City Train Station



IMAGE CREDIT:

*Dan Lewis runs the popular daily newsletter Now I Know
“Learn Something New Every Day, By Email*

Grand Central Terminal, located in the heart of Midtown Manhattan, has more than 40 platforms, but one of those platforms is almost never used.

In 1871, Grand Central opened its doors. While the building itself stretches from 42nd Street to 45th Street, the terminal as a whole extends — underground — as far uptown as 50th Street.

One of the buildings above these tracks, somewhere between 49th and 50th Streets, was a powerhouse for the Terminal. The powerhouse had its own loading platform beneath it, used for discharging workmen and transporting machinery to the site as needed. But when Con Edison, the local utility company, began to provide power to the Terminal, the powerhouse became redundant.

By the late 1920s, the world famous Waldorf-Astoria Hotel took over the entire block between 49th and 50th, bulldozing the powerhouse. By historical accident, the Waldorf-Astoria has its own, rarely used, train station.

Rarely used. But not never used. When the President of the United States is in town, the platform is a backdoor to safety.

For decades, the Waldorf-Astoria has played host to presidents visiting the city. In the mid-1940s, Franklin Delano Roosevelt visited the hotel, and a potentially apocryphal story suggests that he, for reasons of both vanity (he wanted to hide the fact that he was wheelchair-bound) and security, employed a custom-made train car that brought him right to the Waldorf-Astoria's "secret" train station.

The custom-made car—replete with bulletproof glass, gun ports, and plate armor—still sits on the tracks, somewhere beneath Grand Central, as it is too large to move without taking it apart. It also remains on site because it may be useful.

When the President is in town, all the entrances to the platform are guarded by police officers and military personnel, ensuring safe access to this underground escape route by the President in case of emergency.

BONUS FACT: The Waldorf is not the only New York landmark with an unused subterranean train platform. City Hall, in downtown Manhattan, is home to an unused, frozen-in-time subway station. There was also a whole hidden subway system in New York City, as well as ones in Chicago, Cincinnati, and Washington, DC.

The original source for this post is a great CNET News article about the secrets of Grand Central, but a comment therein suggested there was more to the story. A bit of Googling led to the details above. --Dan