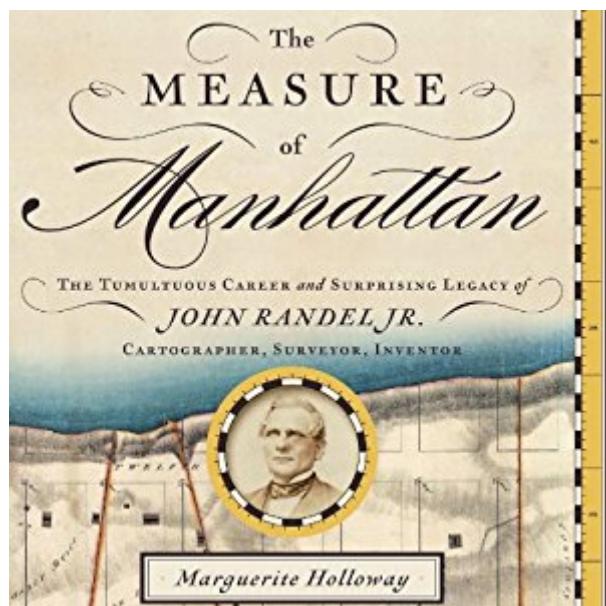


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The Measure Of Manhattan



Synopsis

The first biography of a 19th-century genius, the man who plotted Manhattan's famous city grid. John Randel Jr. (1787-1865) was an eccentric and flamboyant surveyor. Renowned for his inventiveness as well as for his bombast and irascibility, Randel was central to Manhattan's development but died in financial ruin. Telling Randel's engrossing and dramatic life story for the first time, this eye-opening biography introduces an unheralded pioneer of American engineering and mapmaking. Charged with "gridding" what was then an undeveloped, hilly island, Randel recorded the contours of Manhattan down to the rocks on its shores. He was obsessed with accuracy and steeped in the values of the Enlightenment, in which math and science promised dominion over nature. The result was a series of maps, astonishing in their detail and precision, which undergird our knowledge about the island today. During his varied career Randel created surveying devices, designed an early elevated subway, and proposed a controversial alternative route for the Erie Canal - winning him admirers and enemies. The Measure of Manhattan is more than just the life of an unrecognized engineer. It is about the ways in which surveying and cartography changed the ground beneath our feet. Bringing Randel's story into the present, Holloway travels with contemporary surveyors and scientists trying to envision Manhattan as a wild island once again. Illustrated with dozens of historical images and antique maps, The Measure of Manhattan is an absorbing story of a fascinating man that captures the era when Manhattan - indeed, the entire country - still seemed new, the moment before canals and railroads helped draw a grid across the American landscape.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"The Measure of Manhattan," Marguerite Holloway's first book, won praise from The New York Times's reviewer. His description of it led me to expect a straight-ahead political history of the imposition of the street grid plan on Manhattan comparable to, say, Robert Caro's political history of Robert Moses's imposition on the city of infrastructure development a century and a half later. Such a book it is not. Ms. Holloway is a teacher, journalist, and longtime contributor to the Discovery channel and Scientific American magazine, and perhaps therefore her book is part personal profile, part science lesson, and part flash forward to the search in the present for long lost surveyor's markers from 1811. It reads in the scattershot fashion practiced by television journalists and long-form science writers like John McPhee and is only incidentally a history and, then, despite the title, only partly about the history of New York City. At least half of the book details -- and I do mean "details" -- the history of surveyor John Randel, Jr.'s extended family, of his career working for canal companies in upstate New York and the mid-Atlantic, of his personal landholdings and investments near Albany, and of his final illness and burial in an unmarked grave in an Albany churchyard. For my taste the author presents far, far too much detail on the development of surveying instruments, the contents of Randel's notebooks, his late-life lawsuits, the sermons given in the Albany church he attended, and his many searches for stolen horses. In fairness, Ms. Holloway had little in the way of primary sources to draw on. According to the official records of the city's governing council, the grid system, with its consequent displacement of landholders owing irregular lots, was little debated.

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