



Review of *The Horse in the City* by Clay McShane and Joel A. Tarr

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In the preface of this book, an editorial published in the *New York Times*, dated July 24, 1881, is cited. Entitled “The Horse in Cities,” the editorial notes how indispensable the horse had become to urban areas. This animal, which served as a “living machine,” was the power source for pulling wagons that distributed a variety of merchandise to homes and businesses, as well as for public transit vehicles that stimulated the expansion of the city outward from the central business district. Furthermore, its use as a leisure and recreational vehicle by the wealthy elite contributed to the creation of large city parks with internal roads limited to carriages.

As with any urban transport mode, there was a dark side, and the message contained in the editorial was that the horse came with a high price and presented many problems. The basic problem was that the horse created what today are known as “negative side-effects,” which often overshadow the benefits to a society of increased mobility, status, and access to urban amenities. Among the problems created by the horse in cities were: disease (such as the epizootic of 1872, which effectively brought the city to a standstill); traffic safety (brought about by the “misconduct” and “skittishness” of horses, thus placing riders and pedestrians at the “risk of death or maiming”); health and sanitation (caused by excrement, noise, air pollution, and dead animals); fire risks (caused by stables located in residential and commercial areas); and high maintenance costs (including items such as feed, housing, street cleaning, and disposal).

Given these high costs and many potential system failures, it is not surprising that the editorial concluded that the horse was “indispensable” but only until a better substitute would be found. Little did the editorial writer know that help was on the way and that a new “horseless carriage” would soon emerge that would appear at first to have all the positive attributes and few, if any, negative ones.

The introduction, titled “Thinking about Horses,” places the horse in a context spanning the history of mankind and the nineteenth-century view of horses as machines used for profit. In the eight chapters that follow the book expands on the themes laid out in the *New York Times* editorial. The topics include: Markets: “The Horse as a Commodity”; Regulation: “Controlling Horses and Humans”; Powering Urban Transit; The Horse and Leisure: “Serving the Needs of Different Urban Social Groups”; Stables and the Built Environment; Nutrition: “Feeding the Urban Horse”; Health: “Equine Disease and Mortality”; and The Decline and Persistence of the Urban Horse.

The authors have done a masterful job of providing the reader with an interesting, thorough, and well-illustrated synopsis of the many issues raised by the introduction of the horse as the primary transportation motive force in U.S. cities during the nineteenth century. Each chapter is self-contained with supportive examples, fascinating facts, and useful figures and tables.

The epilogue returns to the *New York Times* editorial that served as the framing piece for the book. As noted in the preface, without the help of this extraordinary “living machine,” none of the amenities of urban life in the nineteenth century, such as central business districts, streetcar suburbs, recreational sites, and urban parks would have been possible. In fact the species itself would probably be extinct were it not for human intervention. The *New York Times* editorial comments on the codependence between horses and men, stating that “deprived of their human servitors, horses would quickly perish and deprived of their equine servitors the human population in cities . . . would soon be in a state of distress.”

The Horse in the City concludes with the story of the demise of the horse: it was quickly replaced by electric trolleys and buses, and somewhat later (merchandise was still being transported by horse and wagon into the 1930s), by motor trucks. By the twenty-first century, the automobile is being characterized as was the horse over a century earlier—a boon to urban life but costly in similar ways (fuel prices, congestion, safety, vehicle storage, air pollution, and a threat to the planet itself). Thus, as the twentieth century was an era that witnessed horses replaced by the “horseless carriage” and the “iron horse,” it is not implausible to expect that the twenty-first century will be focused on finding alternatives to the automobile as we know it, and that society will adopt a substitute mode that will serve its needs for mobility while being less harsh on the economy and the environment.