

## NYC Taxis: The Known History

By Abe Mittleman

### Part 1: The Era of the Hansom (1800s – 1907)



Before the roar of the internal combustion engine and the glow of the "Available" light, the streets of New York City belonged to the horse. But not just any carriage would do for the bustling, status-conscious New Yorker. To understand how the modern taxi began, we have to look at the vehicle that defined 19th-century transit: The Hansom Cab.

#### The Arrival of the "Safety Cab"

The Hansom cab wasn't a New York invention; it was a British import that solved a very specific New York problem: Congestion.

**The Inventor:** Named after Joseph Hansom, a British architect who patented the "Hansom Safety Cab" in 1834.

**The Design:** It was a two-wheeled, one-horse carriage. Unlike the bulky four-wheeled "Hackney coaches" that preceded it, the Hansom was light, fast, and incredibly agile. It could weave through the gridlock of Lower Manhattan like a bicycle.

**The Driver's Seat:** The most iconic feature was the driver's position—perched on a high seat at the rear of the vehicle. This gave the driver a clear view over the

roof to navigate traffic, while the passengers sat low and enclosed in the front.

### The NYC Launch

While horse-drawn "hacks" existed in the city since the 1600s, the Hansom Cab Company was formally established in New York in May 1869. Operating out of Brooklyn and Manhattan, they introduced a level of professionalism the city hadn't seen.

### The Original "App"

If you wanted a cab, you didn't check your phone; you looked for a "Stand." The city designated specific areas (like outside the major hotels or Madison Square) where these cabs would line up.

Communication: To tell the driver where to go, passengers would open a tiny trapdoor in the roof and shout up to the driver. This was the first "intercom" system in NYC transit.

### Life on the Cobblestones

Driving a Hansom was a gritty, dangerous profession.

The "Messy" Reality: In the late 1800s, there were over 100,000 horses in NYC. They produced roughly 2.5 million pounds of manure every single day. The streets were a sludge of mud and waste, which is why the Hansom had "folding doors" to protect the passengers' legs and fine clothing.

The First "Bilk": Before meters, passengers frequently "bilked" (ran away without paying). Because the driver was perched so high up at the back, it was difficult for him to jump down and chase a fare through the crowded alleys of Five Points or the Bowery.

### The Transition: The "Horseless" Hansom

By the late 1890s, the "baby" was starting to crawl toward technology.

The Electric Experiment (1897): The first "motorized" taxis in NYC were actually Electric Hansoms. The Electric Carriage and Wagon Company ran 12 of them in 1897.

### Speeding Tickets:

In 1899, a driver named Jacob German was arrested for driving one of these electric cabs at the "breakneck" speed of 12 mph on Lexington Avenue. It was the first speeding ticket in American history.

### Takeaway:

The Hansom Cab set the blueprint for the taxi industry: a hired vehicle for two, a



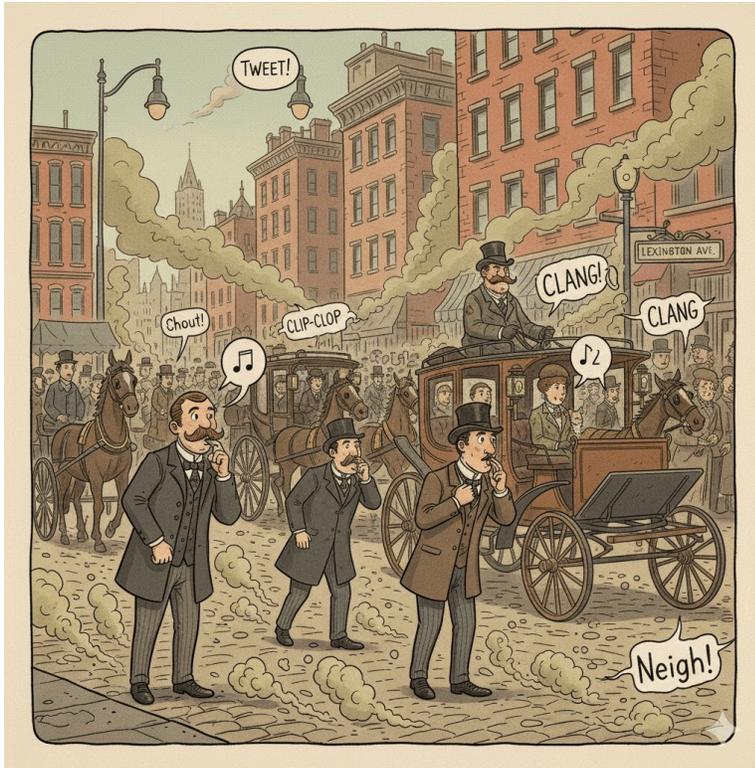
professional driver, and a focus on speed and maneuverability. But as the 1900s dawned, the horse was becoming a liability—it was slow, it was dirty, and it was about to be replaced by a man who was angry about a \$5 bill.

What was it like for the Drivers and Customers

### The Whistle System

Before Taxi Stands were standardized, New Yorkers used a specific system of whistles to hail different types of carriages.

The Detail: One whistle might summon a one-horse Hansom, while two whistles



signaled a heavier two-horse carriage. Adding this would show just how noisy and chaotic the streets were before the quiet "hail" of a hand in the air.

### The Driver's Uniform and Professionalism



When the Hansom Cab Company launched in 1869, they didn't just bring better carriages; they brought a "uniform".

The Detail: Drivers were often required to wear top hats and livery coats. This was the first attempt to separate professional "cabmen" from the "night hawks"—unregulated drivers who often overcharged or were even known to rob unsuspecting passengers in the darker corners of the city.

## Passenger Privacy and "The Hatch"

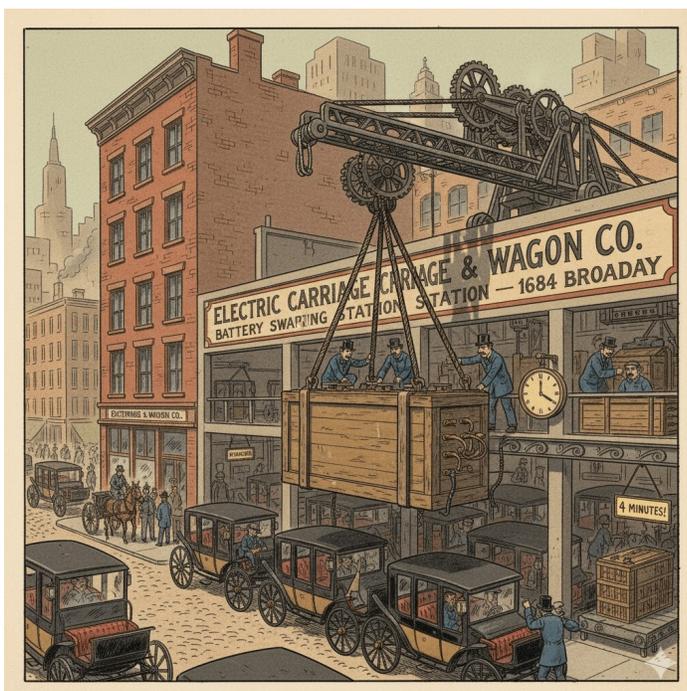
You noted the trapdoor for communication, but it served another purpose.



The Detail: The Hansom was often called "The Gondola of Manhattan" because it was considered quite romantic and private. Because the driver sat behind and above the passengers, a couple inside could have a private conversation without being watched by the driver—unless he peeped through the communication hatch.

## Electric Experiment"

While the Electric Carriage and Wagon Company started with 12 cabs, their ambitions were huge.



The Detail: By 1899, they had nearly 100 electric cabs and had built a massive "battery-swapping" station at 1684 Broadway. Instead of waiting hours to recharge, they used a giant crane to swap out a two-ton battery in minutes—making it the world's first "fast-charging" station.

## Harry N. Allen's Bad Ride The Metered Taxi is born!

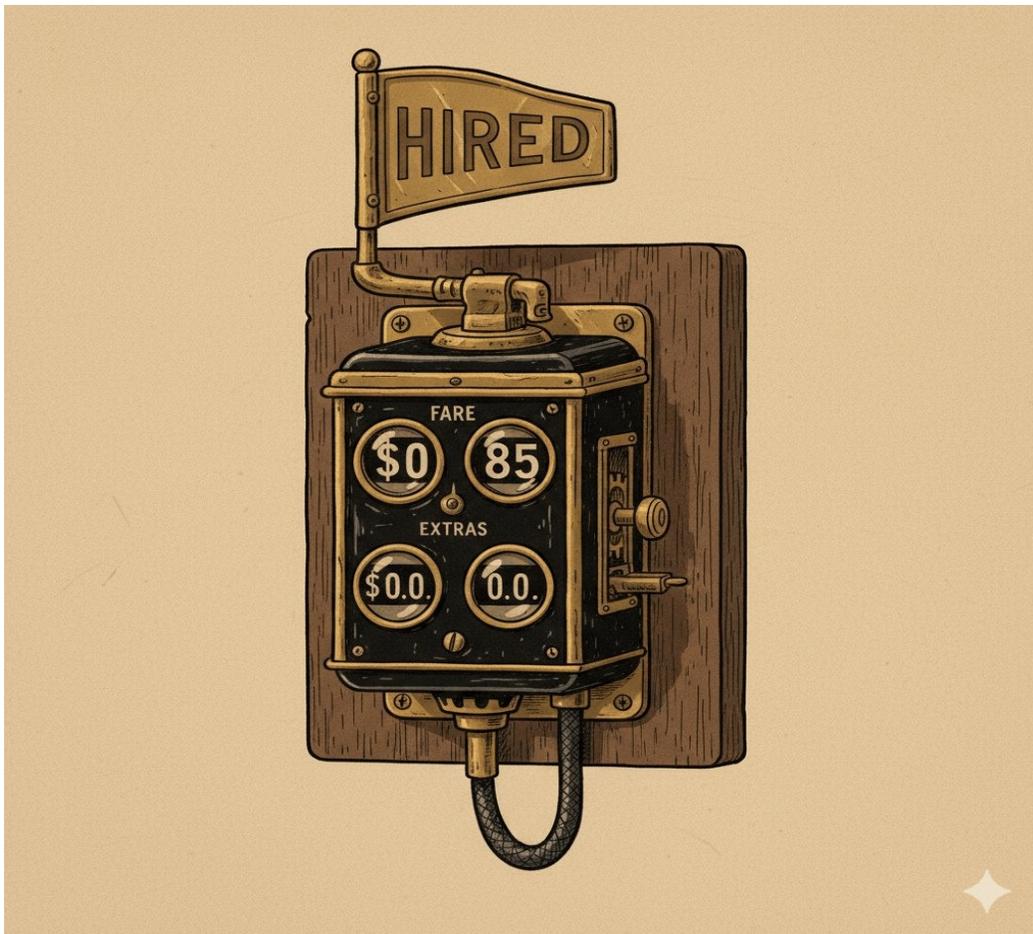


In early 1907, a businessman named Harry N. Allen took a horse-drawn hansom cab for a very short trip in Manhattan—only about three-quarters of a mile. When they arrived, the driver demanded \$5.00.

To put that in perspective: in 1907, \$5.00 could buy you a high-end tailored suit or weeks' worth of groceries. In today's money, that's like being charged \$160 for a 10-minute ride!

Allen was so furious that he decided to put every "price-gouging" horse-cab out of business. He swore he would start a company with fixed, honest rates measured by a machine.

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Allen didn't look to American car makers; he went to France. He imported 65 red-and-green gas-powered Darracq cars. Most importantly, these cars were equipped with a mechanical gadget from Europe called a "Taximeter" (from the Latin taxa for "tax/charge" and the Greek metron for "measure").

New Yorkers shortened the name from "Taximeter Cab" to just "Taxi."

It was the \$5 rip off that led to the metered fare;

Angry Allen handing over the \$5 bill that led to what stuck till today



Yellow and other colors is Born:

John Hertz (of Hertz Rental fame) founded the Yellow Cab Company in 1915, choosing the color based on a University of Chicago study suggesting it was the most visible color from a distance.

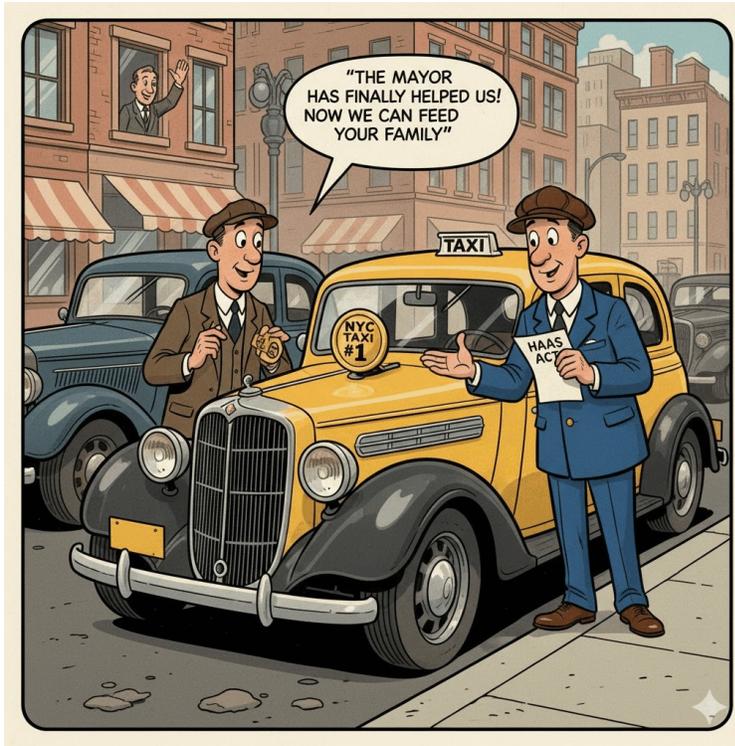


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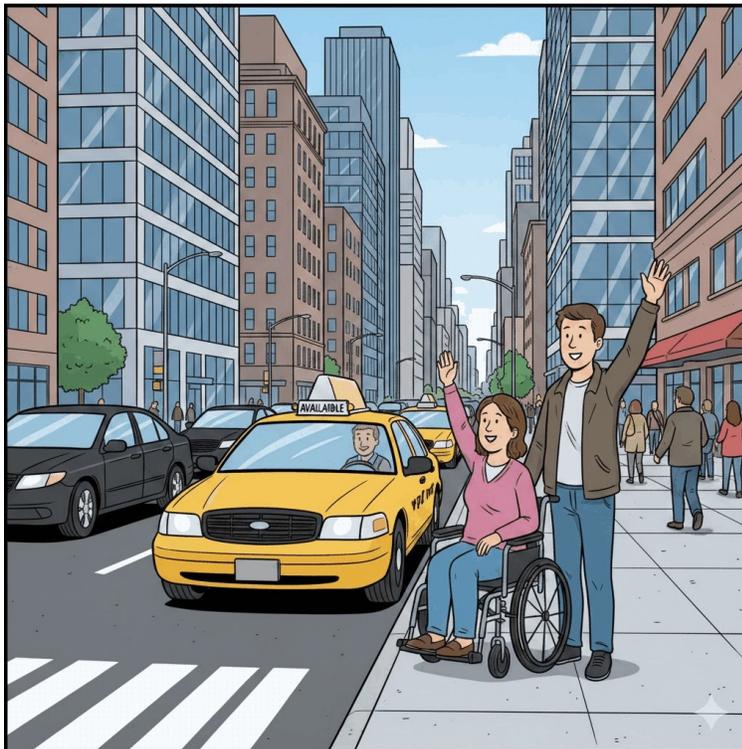
All other colors were introduced



## THE 1937 HAAS ACT



"It was 1937, and the Great Depression had turned the streets of Manhattan into a battlefield. Thousands of desperate men were driving 'wildcat' cabs, fighting over pennies. No one could make a living, and the congestion was a nightmare.



80 years later the Medallion Taxis still have the street hails despite competition from others who are illegal