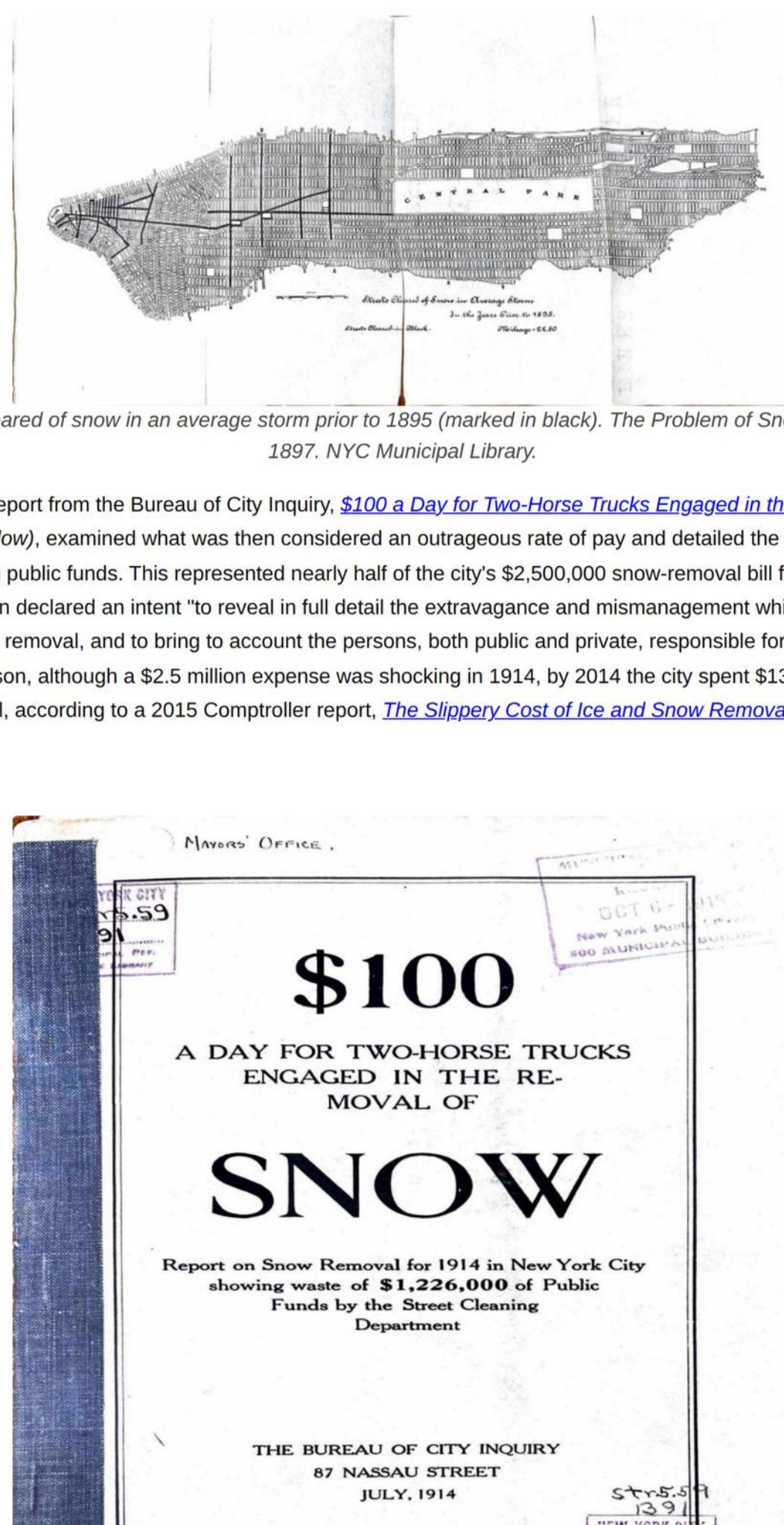


## Municipal Library Notes

December 2025

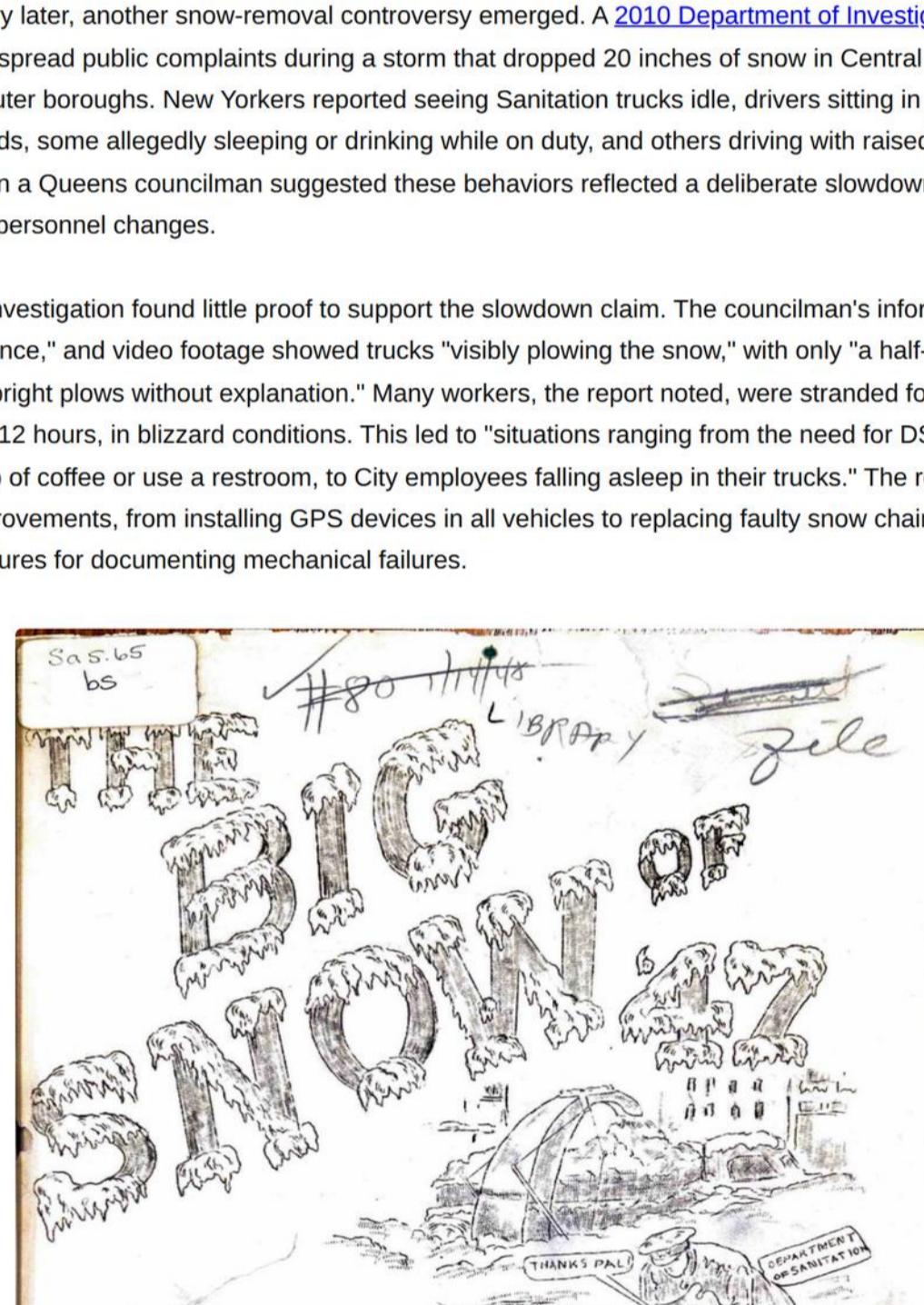
### Snowed Under: A Century of Snow Removal Controversies in NYC



Two-horse team doing snow removal. Department of Sanitation photograph collection. NYC Municipal Archives.

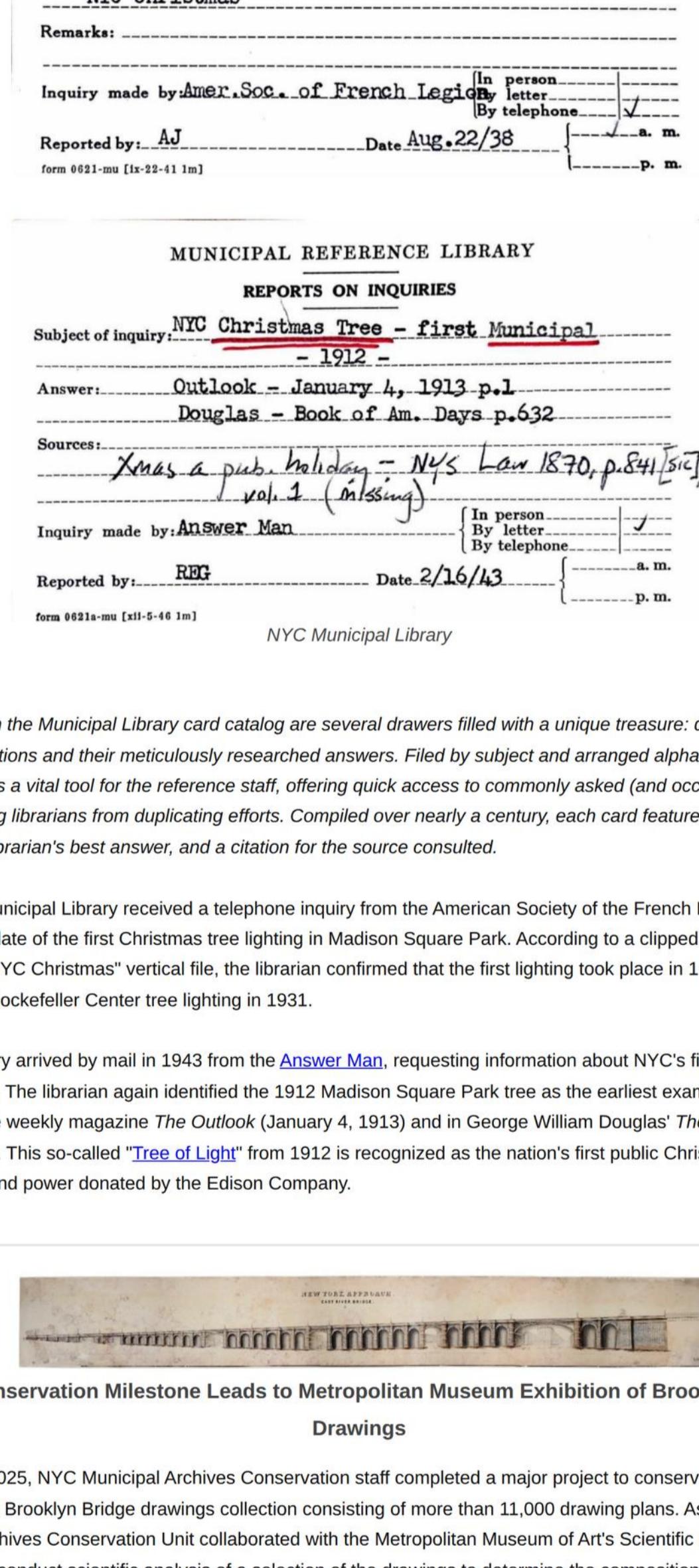
By Lauren Gilbert, Director of the Municipal Library

Until 1881, when the Department of Street Cleaning (later the Department of Sanitation) was established, snow removal in New York City fell to the police department. Only a small portion of roadways was cleared with any regularity (see below). The new department reframed snow removal as a "moral obligation to the vast traffic interests of congested Manhattan Island." (This was still before NYC's 1898 consolidation into one city consisting of five boroughs.) According to *The Problem of Snow Removal*, an 1897 publication of the Department of Street Cleaning, annual snow-removal expenditures increased from \$21,000 in the winter of 1881 to \$445,000 by 1896, largely due to dramatic increases in the areas being serviced. Under this new approach, even the "congested tenement district," that "human bee-hive" where "a delay in the removal of...snow and befouled slush is at the cost of much sickness, and probably many lives," was now "virtually entirely cleared in every storm."



Streets cleared of snow in an average storm prior to 1895 (marked in black). *The Problem of Snow Removal*, 1897. NYC Municipal Library.

A July 1914 report from the Bureau of City Inquiry, *\$100 a Day for Two-Horse Trucks Engaged in the Removal of Snow* (see below), examined what was then considered an outrageous rate of pay and detailed the waste of \$1,226,000 in public funds. This represented nearly half of the city's \$2,500,000 snow-removal bill for that winter. Its introduction declared an intent "to reveal in full detail the extravagance and mismanagement which marked last winter's snow removal, and to bring to account the persons, both public and private, responsible for the same..." (For comparison, although a \$2.5 million expense was shocking in 1914, by 2014 the city spent \$130.7 million on snow removal, according to a 2015 Comptroller report, *The Slippery Cost of Ice and Snow Removal in New York City*.)



Report on Snow Removal for 1914. NYC Municipal Library.

The 1914 investigation uncovered striking abuses. Contractors' trucks earned over \$600 per week, far above the City's regular maximum of \$42 per week, with some claiming to have removed physically impossible quantities of snow in a single day, amounts equivalent to a column "143 feet higher than the Woolworth Building." Poor record-keeping enabled the fraud, with the only documentation of where contractors had worked consisting of "a penciled note of telephonic communication from a foreman." Responsibility for the graft, the report argued, fell across several individuals and agencies, with sharp criticism directed at Mayor John Purroy Mitchel and the Department of Street Cleaning.

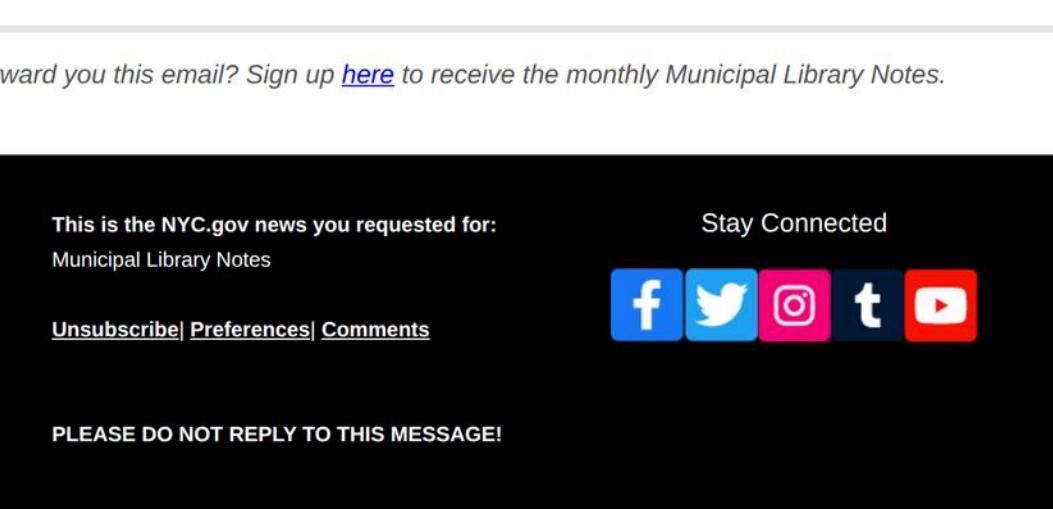
Later in 1914, the Street Cleaning Committee presented *recommendations to the Board of Estimate and Apportionment* urging the creation of a "large working force" drawn from existing city departments. These city employees would earn "one and a half times their rate of compensation" while performing emergency snow-removal duties, a plan the Committee predicted would be cheaper than continuing to rely on outside contractors.



Men observing snow removal, 1926. Queens Borough President Topographical Bureau photographs. NYC Municipal Archives.

Nearly a century later, another snow-removal controversy emerged. A 2010 *Department of Investigation report* examined widespread public complaints during a storm that dropped 20 inches of snow in Central Park and up to 30 inches in the outer boroughs. New Yorkers reported seeing Sanitation trucks idle, drivers sitting in parked vehicles for extended periods, some allegedly sleeping or drinking while on duty, and others driving with raised plows. Speculation intensified when a Queens councilman suggested these behaviors reflected a deliberate slowdown in protest of recent and upcoming personnel changes.

However, the investigation found little proof to support the slowdown claim. The councilman's information "contributed no actual evidence," and video footage showed trucks "visibly plowing the snow," with only "a half-dozen instances of stationary or upright plows without explanation." Many workers, the report noted, were stranded for long stretches, some for up to 12 hours, in blizzard conditions. This led to "situations ranging from the need for DSNY personnel to get a warm cup of coffee or use a restroom, to City employees falling asleep in their trucks." The report recommended a series of improvements, from installing GPS devices in all vehicles to replacing faulty snow chains to establishing uniform procedures for documenting mechanical failures.



The Big Snow of '47. NYC Municipal Library.

While seasons without scandal rarely prompt special publications, at least one record praises a job well done. *The Big Snow of '47* (see above), a 1948 compilation, consists entirely of letters and telegrams from city officials, citizens, and business owners congratulating Sanitation Commissioner William Powell and Mayor William O'Dwyer for their handling of the "Great Blizzard," which deposited a record 26 inches of snow in under 24 hours. Its cover features a *Daily Mirror* cartoon depicting the Department of Sanitation helping a fallen "Father Knickerbocker," the personification of New York City, back to his feet.

### From the Question Files: The First Municipal Christmas Tree

MUNICIPAL REFERENCE LIBRARY

REPORTS ON INQUIRIES

Subject of inquiry: NYC Christmas tree - first in the park?

Material used: Article in "Home Office" December 1912 in VF

NYC Christmas

Remarks:

Inquiry made by Amer. Soc. of French Legation in person

NYC Christmas

Answer: Douglas - Book of Am. Days p. 632

Sources: Xmas a publ. holiday - NYC Law 1870, p. 841/5

Inquiry made by Amer. Soc. of French Legation By telephone

NYC Christmas

Date: Aug. 22/48

Form 0021-mu (11-5-46 1m)

NYC Municipal Library

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In conjunction with the exhibition, the Met hosted an "Expert Talk" on December 9th with Lindsey Hobbs, Head of Preservation and Conservation at the Municipal Archives (see above), Marco Leona, David Koch Scientist in Charge at the Met, and Met Curator, Elena Carrara. Open to the public, the panel spoke about the history and preservation of the collection, the scientific work performed by the Met, and the exhibition process. More talks are in the works in the coming months before the exhibition closes on February 22nd, so keep an eye out for future dates!



Major Conservation Milestone Leads to Metropolitan Museum Exhibition of Brooklyn Bridge Drawings

In November 2025, NYC Municipal Archives Conservation staff completed a major project to conserve and photograph the Brooklyn Bridge drawings collection consisting of more than 11,000 drawing plans. As part of the project, the Archives Conservation Unit collaborated with the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Scientific Research Department to conduct scientific analysis of a selection of the drawings to determine the composition of media and paper, causes of degradation, and to use infrared imaging to reveal faded writing and drawings in graphite. The successful collaboration prompted the Met to mount an exhibition of seven of the most spectacular drawings in a joint special installation with the Met's Education Department.



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