

A vast expanse of asphalt bordered New York City's Madison Square Park in 1907.



CHAPTER SIX

“Artificial” Asphalt

“If we did not have asphalt, we would have had to invent it.”

THE BARBER ASPHALT COMPANY conducted a survey while following nearly one million horses for more than six months. They then announced their findings: The average horse slipped and fell only once every 585 miles while traveling on asphalt, compared to a slip and fall every 413 miles on Belgium blocks or cobblestones. The more asphalt, the fewer slips, falls, and injuries—asphalt was good for you, and it was even better for your horse.

In 1893, proclaiming their results in pamphlets distributed around American cities, the Barber Asphalt Paving Company also boasted that asphalt was more durable, smoother, quieter, and cheaper, even proclaiming asphalt pavement was “healthful” because its smooth surface was easy to clean compared to Belgium blocks and other stone pavements that collected horse urine and manure in their crevices. After scrutinizing nearly a million beasts, Barber’s men had earned the right to make their equestrian proclamation.

By 1900, these facts were old news and the Asphalt Trust was the sole proprietor of the supply of nearly all the asphalt put down as pavement in America’s major cities. The smaller cities and towns were unable to afford the desirable pavement. The only vessels delivering the Asphalt Trust’s Trinidad and Venezuelan asphalts were oceangoing vessels, and the only practical place to put down an asphalt pavement was in a city that had access to a seaport. Otherwise, freight charges were cost-prohibitive.