This Date in Safety History: December 17, 1791: The One-Way Street Revolutionizes Traffic Control



“Ladies and Gentlemen will order their coachmen to take up and set down with their horses’ heads to the East River, to avoid confusion.”

And with the issuance of this traffic order, the modern traffic control device known as the one-way street was born.

It was December 17, 1791 in the city of New Amsterdam, later to be renamed New York. The area around what is currently Ann and Beekman Streets near City Hall was the city’s theatre district. And it was a traffic nightmare, especially at the start and close of shows when carriages would drop off and collect theatregoers at the Park Theatre. The enactment of the point-your-horses-head-to-the-East-River ordnance helped alleviate the congestion. A star was born.

Who Really Invented the One-Way Street?

In the interest of full disclosure, there’s some controversy over whether New York City truly was the site of history’s first one-way street. Some claim that the honour actually

belongs to Lima, Peru. Others give the credit to London.

One thing that we do know is that London was the first European city to create a one-way street, Albemarle Street in Mayfair, site of the Royal Institution whose popular lectures created the same kind of carriage congestion that led New York to order theatergoers to point their horses' heads to the east.

The first one-way streets in Paris, the *Rue de Mogador* and the *Rue de la Chaussée-d'Antin*, were created on December 13, 1909. Eight years before that, Canada got into the act by making appropriately named Leader Lane in Toronto the nation's first recorded one-way street.