James Murtaugh’s Standard Dumbwaiters
by Dr. Lee Gray

The dumbwaiter occupies a unique place in the history of vertical transportation. When the average person thinks about elevators, he or she first imagines machines designed to transport people, with the transportation of freight and other goods coming in a distant second place. In this scenario, the humble dumbwaiter is often forgotten. It is, in fact, often not perceived as a true elevator or as belonging to the world of vertical transportation. Yet, it is one of the oldest elevator types and constituted, in one sense, one of the first mass-produced, special-purpose elevator systems. This article will serve as an introduction to modern dumbwaiter history through an examination of one of the first and one of the best-known American dumbwaiter manufacturers of the 19th century—James Murtaugh of New York City.

In 1898, Murtaugh’s products and professional standing were described as follows:

“The hand-power dumb waiters and elevators manufactured by James Murtaugh have reached a standard of excellence not only in this country but throughout Europe. He is the modern Nestor in his line. Since 1855 he has been placing dumbwaiters of such marked superiority on the market that it would be untrue to say he has had competitors.”

As is the case with many 19th-century statements, this one requires a degree of translation for many contemporary readers. For example, the accolade that Murtaugh was a “modern Nestor” is a relatively unfamiliar reference. Nestor was a figure from Greek mythology. He was the elderly King of Pylus who served as an advisor to the Greek army that besieged the city of Troy, because of his wealth of experience he was perceived as a senior statesman and a respected leader. On the other hand, the reference to 1855 seems clear enough—this date marked the start of Murtaugh’s dumbwaiter business. However, additional research reveals that this date is also tied directly to a patent that was awarded not to James, but to Andrew Murtaugh.

At this point, the familial relationship between Andrew and James Murtaugh remains a mystery; in fact, references to Andrew disappear after 1860. What is known is that Andrew pursued two patents that formed the foundation for the business. In fact, Andrew’s 1855 patent was one of the first dumbwaiter patents granted in the U.S.: Pulley Arrangement for Dumb-Waiters, Patent No. 12,640 (April 3, 1855). The basis for the invention was described as follows:

“My improvement relates to that description of dumbwaiter which is suspended by cords and weights and moved up and down suddenly by the hand of an attendant; and is designed to place the operation of hoisting and lowering the waiter under the perfect control of the attendant, and also render said operation very easy and convenient, and likewise prevent the mischief commonly experienced from suddenly jarring, occasioned by too great a force being suddenly applied to the waiter, by the hand, in its up and down movements.”

To avoid the “mischief” commonly associated with dumbwaiter operation, Andrew Murtaugh proposed to
use separate upper and lower ropes, both of which were attached to a counterweight. The lower rope was also attached to an arbor such that the rope could be tightened if needed. The dumbwaiter was powered by a hand crank attached to a large ratchet, which was also used to hold the car in place when it was being loaded or unloaded. To ensure its smooth operation, Andrew Murtaugh also proposed to employ "friction rollers" that ran on semicircular guide rails.

In his second patent, *Dumb-Waiter* (Patent No. 30,831, December 4, 1860), Andrew Murtaugh provided three schematic drawings that depicted his 1855 dumbwaiter, a common type, "which has know for a long time," and his new invention, which effectively combined the best features of both systems. The new design employed a counterweight attached to the top of the dumbwaiter, which was a more normative arrangement. Although the drawing also appears to show a system of additional weights that could be added to the main counterweight, Andrew Murtaugh’s patent made no reference to this feature. The hoisting rope was attached to the top of the shaft, traveled down under two small sheaves located on the top of the car, up over a large sheave at the top of the shaft, down under a similar sheave at the bottom of the shaft, up over two small sheaves located on the bottom of the car (that were set perpendicular to the upper pair of sheaves), down to the bottom of the shaft under a small sheave equipped with a ratchet, under a third large sheave and finally up over a small sheave, where it ended and was attached to a small counterweight, which was intended to keep the hoisting rope taut. The perpendicular arrangement of the pairs of sheaves mounted on the car was intended to "prevent the dumb waiter canting over and binding in the framing [sic], which it inevitably does."

On January 12, 1861, *Scientific American* offered the following review of Andrew Murtaugh’s dumbwaiters:

"By his untiring efforts for more than four years, this inventor has succeeded in bringing his machines to heretofore unattainable perfection. They can be used with equal advantage in dwelling houses and in stores. Their action is safe and steady, and so perfectly direct that nothing can get out of order; they are not liable to jar, spill or break the articles conveyed on them. Their mode of construction gives purchase for heavy articles – such as trunks, coal, etc., [and] they are so arranged that coals can be hoisted or ashes lowered on them without soilng the waiters. They can be used as a fire escape if the communication with the stairs is cut off, as a person can stand on the top and hoist or lower himself with ease; they require less head room than other dumb waiters, and they can be fastened in any story and left without danger of their falling; and, finally, they can be made

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cheaper than others, considering their durability and the advantages gained.”
Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of this description is the casual reference to the dumbwaiter’s potential use as a fire escape, should the need arise.
In addition to having skills as a designer, Andrew Murtaugh was also an effective promoter of his products. Throughout the 1860s, advertisements for “Murtaugh’s Patent Dumb-Waiters” were a common feature of numerous publications. In 1877, the advertisement copy changed slightly; it now promoted “Murtaugh’s Improved Patent Dumb-Waiter.” This change reflected the presence of a third patent and the arrival of James Murtaugh as the leading figure in the company. The new patent, *Improvement in Dumb-Waiters* (Patent No. 195,526, September 25, 1877), featured an improved brake system and reflected—in the gearing located at the top of the shaft—a normative means of transmitting power to the dumbwaiter through the hand or “actuating rope.” According to James Murtaugh, his new dumbwaiter effectively combined “ease of working and security, with the utmost durability,” and he encouraged “Architects and Builders, or parties about to build,” to consider the “many advantages” of his product. In fact, his advertisements featured a list of 13 “advantages,” which included the following:
- It is adapted to any place where an old dumbwaiter has been, as well as new buildings.
- Its speed is such it can be run up and down four stories in less than a minute.
- It stops where you leave it without fastening, with or without an ordinary load.
- It can be raised or lowered from any floor with which it communicates.
- Being a pulley arrangement, there is no noise from gearing or undue wear of ropes.
- Besides being the best dumbwaiter in all other respects, it can be used as a fire escape in case communication with the stairs is cut off.

In addition to what he referred to as his "Standard Dumb Waiter," James Murtaugh advertised that he also manufactured "several other kinds of House Dumb Waiters, also Hoist Wheels, Store Dumb Waiters, Carriage, and Invalid Elevators of the most approved patterns, at the shortest notice."

In 1880, James Murtaugh claimed that 75,000 of his dumbwaiters were in use "in all large cities throughout the U.S." Within five years, this number had increased to approximately 87,000. An 1885 appraisal of these machines followed the pattern of earlier accounts: "The pulley arrangements made by Mr. Murtaugh are without doubt the safest, and most durable manufactured... and

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HOST WHEELS, STORE DUMB WAITERS, CARRIAGE AND FURNITURE ELEVATORS, HOSTING MACHINES FOR FACTORY USE AT SHORT NOTICE.

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with the recent improvements that he has put upon them, they are believed to be the most perfect now before the public." Although the precise nature of the "recent improvements" was not specified in this account, James Murtaugh did pursue one final patent the following year: Dumb-Waiter, (Patent No. 353,458, November 30, 1886). This patent concerned the operation of two dumbwaiters in one shaft; however, it is unknown if this system were ever manufactured. The 1885 appraisal also went beyond James Murtaugh's machines to comment on where they were manufactured. "The interior arrangements are perfect, and are equipped with all the most approved machinery and appliances for the production of dumbwaiters. None but the best workmen are employed and all work is guaranteed."

One of the last accounts of James Murtaugh's company was published in 1898, only four years before his death in 1902. This account, published in A History of Real Estate, Building, and Architecture in New York, included the comparison between Murtaugh and Nestor, and offered an enthusiastic endorsement of his dumbwaiters:

"Over 100,000 of his make are now in use in all the prominent hotels, clubs, public and private institutions, apartment houses, residences and hospitals throughout the U.S. and Europe. Ninety percent of the hand-power dumbwaiters and elevators in use on Fifth Avenue and Murray Hill are of his manufacture. It may be added that Americans in all parts of the world have sent for the Murtaugh dumb waiter when building in foreign countries, and during his long business career there has never been a fatal or serious accident resulting from the use of his hand-power machines."

While the references to the broad range of its application and the dumbwaiter's powerful presence in the homes of the rich and famous (found along Fifth Avenue and on Murray Hill) are noteworthy, of perhaps greater interest is the idea of these machines also being employed in Europe and elsewhere across the globe. The production of over 100,000 machines, built over the course of almost 50 years, coupled with an international marketplace (however modest), speaks to the powerful presence of the humble dumbwaiter in the history of vertical transportation. And, of course, although he was one of the leading manufacturers of dumbwaiters in the 19th century, James Murtaugh was not alone; there were other individuals and companies who were equally active in this dynamic and specialized field. Future articles will explore the efforts of these companies, which included Sedgwick Machine Works of New York and Burdett-Rowntree Co. of Chicago.