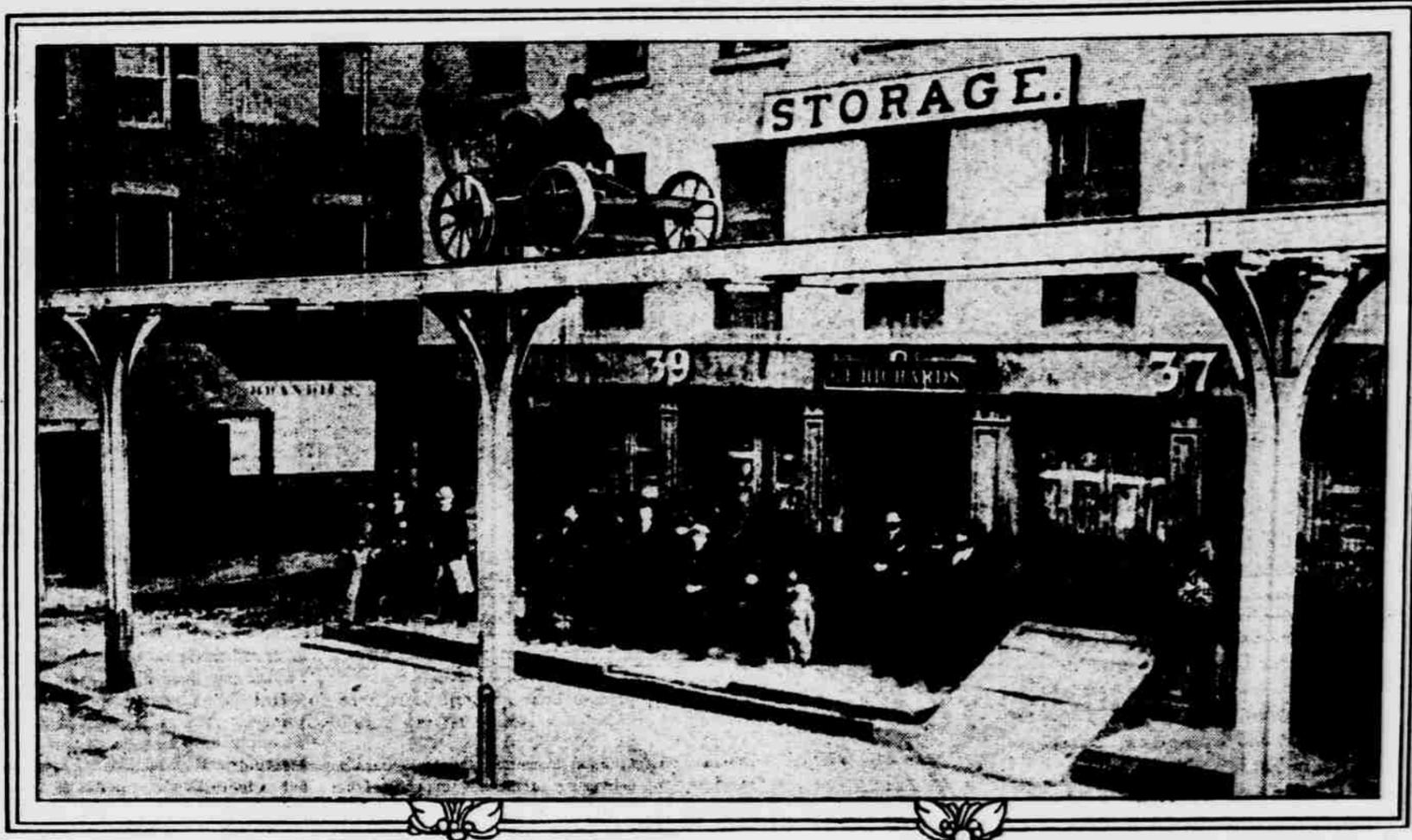


# City Rapid Transit Began 50 Years Ago

Opening of the "H" Subway Link Will Mark Half Century Anniversary of First Elevated Line—Interesting Facts About Early Struggles to Perfect System



The first elevated railroad; Charles T. Harvey, the inventor, operating a car by cable power on the Greenwich street structure in the '60s.

BY a coincidence the month of July, 1918, which will see the opening of the subway "H," the most important addition to the rapid transit facilities of the city since the first subway began operations, will bring the fiftieth anniversary of the first rapid transit line in New York. This was the elevated road in Greenwich street. It has been suggested to the officials of the Interborough Rapid Transit Company and to the civic organizations planning to celebrate the opening of the "H" that the exercises be broadened to cover a proper observance of the passage of the first half century of rapid transit.

If its promoters had been able to get the grants they sought from the State, a subway, to-day the approved method of quick travel in congested cities, would have been the first rapid transit line in this city. Gov. Fenton vetoed the bill in 1865 that would have enabled Hugh B. Wilson to build a subway in Broadway patterned after the London tube, and underground transit was deferred here for forty years. If subways had been started then the elevated structures might never have encumbered the streets.

The Willson project, however, started a scramble after transit franchises and the Legislature of 1867 authorized the construction of the first elevated railroad, which was proposed by Charles T. Harvey, an engineer. He had patents for the operation of such a road by means of cables driven by stationary engines. Under the articles of incorporation of the West Side and Yonkers Patent Railway Company it was proposed to build a line twenty-five miles long from the Battery by way of Greenwich street and Ninth avenue to Kingsbridge and Yonkers.

By the act of 1867 a commission of three, two members to be appointed by the Governor and the third by the Croton Aqueduct Board, was created to inspect the first section of the elevated line, which was to be built from the Battery up Greenwich street to Cortlandt street. The commissioners' approval, if granted, was to be certified to the Governor, who was authorized to give permission to extend the road northward on both sides of Greenwich street and on both sides of Ninth avenue, or streets west of Ninth avenue, to the Harlem River.

The company was to be permitted to charge a fare of five cents for any distance less than two miles and a cent for each additional mile or fraction thereof. The option was given to charge a uniform rate of ten cents, which might be maintained for five years.

The first public operation of the road took place on July 3, 1868. James Blaine Walker in his "Fifty Years of Rapid Transit," just published, records that there is no evidence in the news-

papers of the day that the trial of the first elevated railroad excited popular interest.

The trains started at the rate of five miles an hour and increased their speed to ten miles. The Government promptly authorized the extension of the road. The company then proposed to complete the railway as far as Thirtieth street. The construction of the line was delayed by lawsuits and financial troubles, and it was not until the following year that this section was completed.

Naturally the task of financing this first rapid transit experiment was not easy. The first \$100,000 was put up by Mr. Harvey and his associates. In August following the first operation of the road the property was mortgaged to George S. Coe and James H. Benedict, trustees, for \$750,000 and 7 per cent. bonds were issued. Subsequently the road fell into the hands of financial manipulators and its originator was forced out without reaping any of the benefits of his idea.

Mr. Walker relates that cable traction did not prove successful and operation of the road was suspended for several months. On November 15, 1870, the property was sold by the Sheriff to Francis H. Tows, representing the bondholders. It is interesting to note that the rolling stock at that time consisted of three passenger cars.

The Legislature amended the original act so as to permit the bondholders' committee to substitute locomotives for stationary engines, and April 20, 1871, a three car train hauled by a dummy engine began running. "Thereafter," Mr. Walker writes, "the road continued in uninterrupted and successful operation. The bondholders organized a new company to take over the property. They also interested in it William L. Scott, a wealthy coal dealer of Erie, Pa., whose money and influence put the struggling enterprise on its feet."

The new company was named the New York Elevated Railroad Company. Its articles of association were filed October 27, 1871. The capital stock was placed at \$10,000,000.

If the plans of the New York Elevated Railroad Company had been carried out Manhattan viewed from an airplane would look something like a huge waffle iron. It was proposed to build some 160 miles of elevated line. The supplemental act gave the company the right to charge a 10 cent fare for a ride of five miles or less and 2 cents for each additional mile or fraction thereof.

In addition to its financial troubles, the original company was hampered by the rivalry of the old Tweed ring, which sought to ruin it in order to carry out a

rapid transit project in which Tweed was interested. H. C. Stryker in his "Historical Sketches" says:

"But a new transit possibility had developed from the then political dictator of the city and the State, the most notorious corruptionist of the century—William M. Tweed—having decided to introduce another rapid transit system known as the 'viaduct plan' for exclusive extension on Manhattan Island. He had a charter granted for the 'New York Railway Company,' with a capital of \$25,000,000, of which the city of New York was directed to take \$5,000,000 at par and the county of Westchester was authorized to be bonded to aid it to any extent the Board of Supervisors might decide, which might be \$25,000,000 or more.

"The railway was to be built upon elevated masonry arches through blocks instead of streets, and a picture was published of it crossing Broadway on a heavy masonry arch some forty feet high. That its cost per mile would be in millions was certain, and that it would never serve as adequate or convenient transit for the wage earning masses was no less sure.

"The only rival in sight was the discredited elevated railway on Ninth avenue and Greenwich street, and this Senator Tweed decided to have destroyed forthwith. He introduced a bill in the Senate, March 28, 1871, authorizing him as Commissioner of Public Works to remove it within ninety days, and made his boast that within sixty days after the bill became a law he would have it wholly torn down. The bill passed the Senate two days later by a vote of 20 yeas to 9 nays and was sent to the Assembly for concurrence, it being known that the Governor would approve it.

"The clique in control of the elevated railway was taken by surprise and was hopelessly unprepared to defend it at Albany. Harvey was, however, informed of the emergency, and valuing the public interests above any instincts of personal revenge upon his despoilers, he, as its originator, appealed to Erastus Corning, then residing at Albany, to save the railway for friendship's sake, as Mr. Corning had no investment interest whatever in it. The memory of the canal episode sufficed to cause Mr. Corning to appear in the Assembly chamber to oppose Tweed's bill.

"When the vote was taken the bill was defeated by the decisive majority of 74 yeas to 34 nays—the only defeat Dictator Tweed experienced during that session. Conclusive evidence is preserved in State documents proving that the Tweed measure would have passed but for Mr. Corning's interference, and that his only motive was his personal regard for Harvey coupled with the memory of the latter's

engineering achievement before mentioned.

"But for that memory inspired victory the nucleus of the elevated railways of New York would have then been destroyed and the system become too discredited to enlist capital for its reintroduction. With Tweed in control the 'viaduct' system would doubtless have been adopted as the only transit system available. Contracts to build it would have been let with a 'rush,' New York as well as Westchester county heavily bonded under special laws and \$100,000,000 probably expended to prove the system a practical failure."

The engineering achievement of Harvey that won for him the gratitude of Mr. Corning occurred in connection with the construction of a ship canal for the State of Michigan by a company of which Mr. Corning was president. Just as the work was about to be completed on schedule time it was discovered that what was thought to be a sand bar was a ledge of rock. Harvey invented a machine that broke up the rock so it could be removed by dredges and the contract was not delayed.

In 1872 the Legislature incorporated the Gilbert Elevated Railroad Company with a capital of \$3,500,000, but the company got nowhere prior to the establishment of the first Board of Commissioners of Rapid Transit under the act of 1875. In general that act provided that whenever fifty or more householders in a county or city should make a statement that there was need of a steam railway in such a county or city the Board of Supervisors or the Mayor should appoint five commissioners, who were empowered to lay out routes, &c.

In July, 1875, Mayor Wickham appointed the following commissioners: Joseph Seligman, Lewis B. Brown, Cornelius H. Delamater, Jordan L. Mott and Charles J. Canda. Soon after the construction of the present elevated roads was begun.

In 1888 Mayor Abram S. Hewitt, often referred to as the "Father of Rapid Transit," sent a message to the Common Council advocating the use of the city's credit for the construction of a city owned rapid transit line that could be leased to a private operator. This led to the passage of the rapid transit act of 1894 and the appointment of the Board of Rapid Transit Commissioners which built the first subway. The history of rapid transit under the present public service law passed under Gov. Hughes in 1907 is more or less familiar to all.

As a matter of record it may be said that the use of dummy engines on the elevated lines, begun in 1871, was abandoned in favor of the third-rail electrical method of propulsion in 1902.