

THE
PHENIX NATIONAL BANK
OF PROVIDENCE

Established 1835



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ROMANCE
of
RHODE ISLAND
INDUSTRY

A Radio Presentation

by

THE PHENIX NATIONAL BANK
OF PROVIDENCE

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"The Hen or the Egg?"

NOBODY has yet decided which came first — the hen or the egg. Nor in the study of economics can we decide which comes first — industry or transportation. But this much we know for sure: In Southern New England, industry and the New Haven Railroad are interdependent.

They have grown up together, and the prosperity of one is consonant with the well-being of the other. And as the world grows smaller, in terms of distance measured in miles per hour, we can look to the New Haven system to bring our markets closer to our shipping rooms. Long ago, the New Haven discovered what has now become a popular concept: that distance is a matter of minutes, not miles.

For example, there's the distance between Providence and Boston. The little scale in the corner of your map says that these two capitals are approximately forty-four miles apart. But three hundred years ago, Roger Williams made the journey — with stop-overs — in about six months; a century ago, any stage coach could do it in nine hours; and in 1935, the New Haven's streamliner "Comet" hung up a record of thirty-eight minutes for the course.

Like Roger Williams, the hay-burning coach of the Eighteen-Twenties made many stop-overs. Every eight or nine miles out of Providence, there was a tavern where

horses were changed and passengers had a drink. At the halfway mark, there was a two-hour pause for refreshment; after lunch the coachman collared his passengers, restored them to their seats by force or diplomacy, and whipped up his horses on the Post Road toward Boston.

Then came a new type of road, with rails on which horses could pull a coach or wagon more swiftly and smoothly. And soon, imported from England, came the wood-burning steam engine of the Eighteen-Thirties—progenitor of the New Haven's mobile power plants that now derive energy from such varied fuels as coal, gasoline, diesel oil and electricity.

The great modern network of rail and bus lines that speed the transport of New England had its origin in a two-mile length of track between the Neponset River and the granite quarries at West Quincy, Massachusetts. Along that track, the first railway in America, horses pulled truckloads of granite blocks for the building of the Bunker Hill monument. The Granite Railway, as it was called, was first of the two hundred railways that soon crawled from town to town across Southern New England. In 1835 the Boston & Providence railway was opened; it was intended to be a toll road, along which anyone could travel on payment of a fee.

An enterprising group of Yankees promptly incorporated the Seekonk Branch Railroad. They proposed to build a quarter-mile spur of private track at the Seekonk end of the new line, and a private depot in Boston. For the miles between, they would operate their rolling stock on the right of way of the Boston & Providence, paying toll for the privilege; and there was no legal way to rule them off the track.

For three years, the threatened encroachment kept the proprietors of the Boston & Providence in a state of uneasiness, until they collected funds to buy out the opposition and obtain passage of a law. Henceforth, said the law, no railroad company could enter upon the tracks of another without express permission.

Meanwhile, the trial of strength between natural horsepower and mechanical horsepower had gone to a decision. It had been a foregone conclusion that the new railroad, like the old Post Road, would be powered by horses. But the steam engine was a new force pervading New England; as it supplanted waterpower for the mills, it displaced horsepower on the rails. Experiments proved that horses showed up better in a sprint; but in the long haul, steam engines kept 'em rolling farther and faster.

By the year 1848, Providence had rail connections with many towns both inland

and alongshore. Until that year, each line had its own terminus within the city limits. In 1848, for the convenience of shippers and travelers, all the termini were united under one roof—the Lombard Romanesque roof of the new Union Station on the south shore of Great Salt Cove. This striking—perhaps even astonishing—architectural marvel stood in Exchange Place; when it burned to the ground in the Nineties, its successor was erected on higher ground a few hundred yards to the north.

During half a century, boys fishing in the cove watched the trains of many lines pull into the original Union depot; there were the Providence & Worcester, Providence & Springfield, Providence & Plainfield and a long list of other individual lines.

Not until 1889 could you travel all the way from Boston to New York by the present route; there were bridges to build, and proprietorships to merge, as well as a tradition to break. The earliest trunk lines were feeders, carrying freight and passengers to the sea; it had to be proved that rail transport was as efficient and inexpensive as sea-borne commerce.

Yet as early as 1837, the distance between Boston and New York had been shortened by many hours. The engineer of the Boston & Providence line—decked in silk hat, silk cravat and white shirt—bade his passengers

a cheery "bon voyage" at the depot on India Point, near the Tockwotton House. Thence they were transferred by ferry to the riverfront terminal of the Stonington Railroad. Once aboard the cars, it was a brisk run to Stonington, in Connecticut, to meet the New York boat. It was a brisk run, that is, compared to making the same trip entirely on foot. Certain inevitable delays were enforced by peculiarities of the right of way. First came the sharp curve, near the Providence town line, where male passengers were sometimes required to get out and push. Then came a series of deviations from the surveyor's true line, dictated by local conditions.

At East Greenwich, the surveyor's line ran through a peach orchard; when the line was building, the landowner registered a protest. After he had run the construction gang off his property with a shotgun, and thrown their tools into the Bay, the Stonington line sought neutral ground along the waterfront—where the New Haven tracks run today.

By the same token, neither Wickford nor Kingston Hill would play host to the new railroad; wherefore the New Haven's modern right of way avoids the former by three miles, and the latter by a mile and a half. Compelled to meander through cow pastures and alder swamps, the trains of 1837 took

longer than need be on their route to Stonington; and even at their journey's end, there was further delay. So far and no farther might the steam engine come, said the town fathers of Stonington; the locomotive must be detached from the train in the outskirts, and from that point the cars were drawn by horses to the steamboat dock.

But familiarity with the new mode of transportation did away with mistrust. Rail lines pushing out from Boston toward New York met rails that were creeping from New York toward the northeast. In 1872, the New York & New Haven merged with the Hartford & New Haven, under the style of New York, New Haven & Hartford. This was a symptom of economic evolution, the early dawn of order arising from chaos. Before common sense enforced more efficient organization, there were generations when the population learned to demand rail service; and in answer to that demand, scores of small local lines crept from point to point.

All through the Nineteenth Century, such lines as these came into being: the Newport & Wickford; the Warwick & Oakland Beach, which began operations between Auburn and Oakland Beach in 1874, and was eventually extended all the way to Buttonwoods; the Woonsocket & Pascoag; the Wood River

Branch, between Wood River Junction and Hope Valley; the Moshassuck, from Woodlawn to Saylesville; the Narragansett Pier road, which ran — and still does — from Kingston to the Pier. The map of New England was wrinkled with railway lines like the skin of a dried apple; New England clocks told a dozen different versions of railroad time; and New England timetables set a new mark for abstruseness in literature.

A typical quotation from a Nineteenth Century time-table gives this ruling: "The 7:45 a. m. train from New Haven will be considered a regular train at Guilford until 8:40 a. m. If it cannot reach Guilford at 8:40 a. m., it will become irregular and must keep out of the way of all passenger trains." In that same era when the 7:45 led the hunted existence of a guerilla, way freights were limited to twenty miles an hour and had to "keep out of the way" of all regular or delayed passenger trains; night freights had to "keep out of the way" of day freights; and extra trains were completely orphaned. They had to "keep out of the way" of everything but a handcar.

Out of this confusion of routes and schedules, the New Haven system evolved. As need for rail service grew, so grew the need for organization. The primary stage of development, in which dozens of little lines

wandered all over the map, brought about its own conclusion. The secondary stage was ruled by the oldest law of nature: Eat or be eaten.

Like the gingham dog and the calico cat, small railroads consumed each other; and those who survived were absorbed into larger networks. Only an historian with legal training could trace the mergers, consolidations, leases and purchases that knitted our New England rail transport into the New Haven system; but you can put your finger on the approximate date when that system came of age.

The outward signs of maturity were manifest about the turn of the century, in an access of more efficient service, a standardization of procedures, an assumption of responsibility toward the well-being of Southern New England. In brief, local industry and the New Haven system arrived together at a common understanding that sound transportation and a healthy community are interdependent, that one cannot exist without the other.

Once the New Haven had become unified, there began the process that our contemporary jargon calls "streamlining". Even before the first World War, all parlor and sleeping cars were replaced with modern steel equipment. In 1925, the New England Transportation Company, a bus

and truck subsidiary, began to speed shipments to and from manufacturers on motor highways tributary to the railroad. In 1933, the New Haven experimented with air conditioning; soon, two hundred air conditioned coaches were in service. And during the war just ended, while the New Haven handled twice as much freight and carried passengers more miles than ever before,—the planning board thought in terms of tomorrow.

New types of cars, new standards of comfort, new rates of speed, new sources of power—the New Haven will fit them into the schedule. And as to which comes first, transportation or industry, the past hundred years have proved that they grow together.

Here in Rhode Island, we need only to build that better mousetrap the story tells about; the New Haven has already beaten a path to our door.

FOR ONE HUNDRED AND TEN YEARS the Phenix National Bank of Providence has been a factor in the forward progress of Rhode Island industry. This present series of short radio talks is being inaugurated as an additional service to the community.

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EACH MONDAY AT 8:15 P. M. over station WEAN this Bank is presenting the story of a leading Rhode Island business concern. It is hoped that these broadcasts will be interesting and informative, as well as serve as a reaffirmation of our common faith in the free enterprise system.

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THE PHENIX NATIONAL BANK is grateful for the cooperation of the commercial and industrial concerns who have made this program possible. They have offered an important contribution to successful business enterprise. And in their story is contained the romance of Rhode Island industry.