

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE PROVIDENCE AND DANIELSON RAILROAD

By Harold G. Young

It has been a long time since the cheery whistle of the trolley cars has echoed in the valleys of western Rhode Island. Many of you, no doubt, remember the trolleys that used to run out this way and perhaps many of you have ridden on them. To renew memories, and to inform the younger generation, many of whom do not know that trolley cars once ran to Scituate, Foster, Greenville and Chepachet, I would like to give a brief history of the Providence & Danielson Railroad that served western Rhode Island for over twenty years.

Let us turn back the pages of history to 1869, when a steam railroad was first planned for the western part of Rhode Island. At that time, a charter was granted to the Ponnagansett Railroad Company to build into this territory, but the plans were forgotten and no road was built.

Another attempt was made in 1883, when a charter was granted to another steam road, the Coweset Terminal & Transportation Company. Although this project also failed, the idea was kept alive and fifteen years later, in 1898, the dream was realized. The charter of the Coweset Terminal & Transportation Company was amended so as to make the name Providence & Danielson Railroad and the motive power electricity. This railroad obtained a franchise to operate in the towns of Johnston, Smithfield, Scituate, Foster and Gloucester.

At the Providence end of the line the Providence & Danielson connected with the already existing Hartford Avenue line of the Union Railroad Co. On the Connecticut end it connected in East Killingly with a line of the Peoples Tramway Company, later part of the Shore Line Electric Railway.

Construction started in June 1901 from Hartford Avenue to North Scituate. The next steps were to Saundersville, Ashland, South Scituate, Richmond, Rockland, Clayville and then to Foster Center. The main offices and shops were located in Rockland. The following year the line reached East Killingly and the first car ran from Providence to Danielson in November 1902. The fare to Danielson, incidently, was sixty-five cents. Later this was raised to eighty-five cents.

An interesting fact about the operation of the cars was that the Providence & Danielson crew brought the cars to the city line, then a crew from the Union Railroad brought the cars the rest of the way into downtown Providence.

Power was always a problem on the Providence & Danielson. When three or four cars were out on the line, the further they got from the powerhouse the slower they went and it was very easy for the passengers to admire the scenery. In the winter, the lack of sufficient power for plowing out after some of the famous Scituate-Foster blizzards caused service to be suspended for three or four days until the line was dug out by hand.

The road operated uneventfully until 1911. The Grand Trunk Railroad was projecting a line through Rhode Island to Providence. As a part of its plan to hinder the Grand Trunk, the New Haven Railroad acquired control of all street railway properties in its vicinity. In May 1911 the Rhode Island Company, a subsidiary of the New Haven Railroad, leased the Providence & Danielson for 99 years.

In 1915 Providence started construction of a reservoir which was to cover much of the land west of North Scituate. This meant that the villages of Saundersville, Ashland, South Scituate, Richmond, Rockland and part of Clayville would be under water. As time progressed, demolition of houses, mills, stores and churches went on. Operation of the cars, naturally, was affected and in 1920 the line was abandoned west of North Scituate and the tracks torn up. Cars were operated to North Scituate until 1925. Traces of the old right of way are still visible in many places and the carbarn is still standing at the city line.

The line in its day was a typical rural line and for quite a number of years was a paying proposition. Both passenger and freight business was plentiful. All the small villages had their stores and mills which depended on trolley freight. The houses were located on several ponds, sawmills along the streams and many farms along the way shipped milk to Providence. When the hunting season was on in the fall, the cars carried crowds of hunters and the front vestibule was reserved for dogs.

There were open cars on the line in the summer and very often special excursion cars were run over the line from Connecticut cities such as Norwich, Willimantic and Putnam to Rocky Point and Crescent Park.

The Providence & Danielson owned one car called the "Oregon", a beautifully kept up car with green window curtains, cane seats, and with a baggage compartment in front. This car was used as a private car by officials of the company and could also be hired by special groups for trolley trips. Its most noted use was as a funeral car. Thirty or forty years ago there were few automobile hearses and often a funeral party hired the "Oregon" to take them to a cemetery in a neighboring city, the casket and flowers being placed in the baggage compartment. This car is now leading a prosaic existence as a diner near Woonsocket.

The northwestern part of Rhode Island was served by a line operated by the Providence & Danielson which went from Providence to Chepachet. This line was abandoned in 1920.

Pascoag, Harrisville, Glendale and other northwestern towns were served by the Columbia Street Railway. This line was a separate company until taken over by the Rhode Island Company.