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**THE
CABLE ROAD**

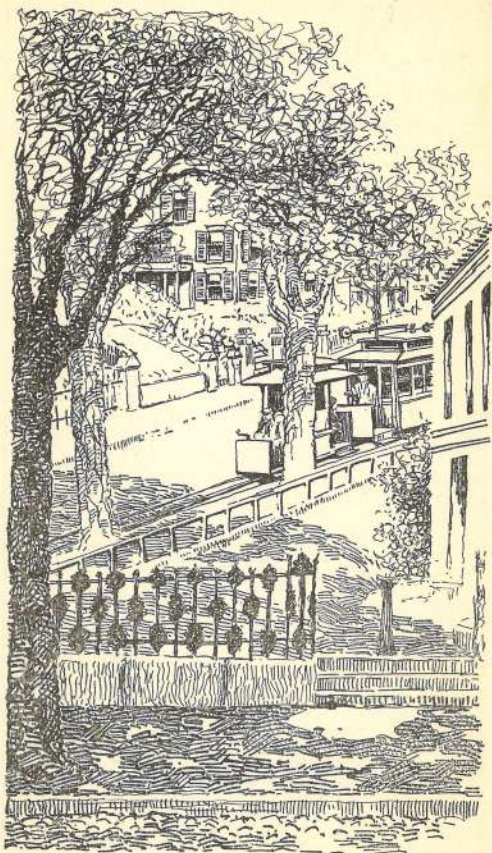


Presented by

“The Old Stone Bank”

Providence, R. I.

March 16, 1931



The Cable Road

IT WAS not long ago, not quite seventeen years, that one could ride by trolley via College Hill from Olneyville to Cable Cottage near Red Bridge on the Seekonk. The street car line was continuous, due to that ingenious use of cables and grip cars in overcoming the great obstacle of the steep east side hill. When the tunnel from North Main to Thayer Streets was opened in August, 1914, the cable system logically gave way to a superior successor. Yet, out-dated as it was, the grip car undoubtedly had many admirers who hated to see its passing. Its quarter century of operation marked what was probably the most picturesque phase in the entire development of land transportation in Providence.

Only the younger generation, those just entering upon maturity, are unable to include the grip cars in their memory. Hundreds of people now living in Providence used to climb on these cars to ride up College Hill thinking it then no more unusual than the present practice of taking a street car and riding under the same hill. Many who lived in the west side of the city

were in the habit of making frequent excursions to Cable Cottage at the eastern end of the line operated by the cable company. This cottage, presumably built by the company to stimulate the patronage of its line, was in reality a fully equipped pleasure pavilion. Here there was dancing; boats could be hired for rowing about on the Seekonk; and here candy, ice cream, popcorn, and all sorts of delicious beverages combined to tempt away whatever cash the pleasure seeker happened to have on his person.

But we have wandered from our original theme. Previous to the building of the grip car line up College Hill, inhabitants of the east side of Providence had to follow a very roundabout route if they wished to travel by street car to the center of the city. At that time lines were in operation along Hope and Brook Streets and communication with the downtown section was by a very circuitous route down Brook Street, around Fox Point and then back along South Main Street to Market Square and Exchange Place. Eastsiders often referred to this as "going into the city by way of Warren."

The project of building a grip car line up College Hill was first considered in 1884,

but the line was not completed until 1889. The plan first conceived was of building an elevator at the foot of College Hill to lift passengers about 150 feet above the level of Market Square and then running a trestle to join the top of the elevator with Prospect Street. Such a procedure was not feasible, however, and the interest of engineers shifted to the problem of a cable road. In other parts of the country cable cars were in operation, but at the time of the building of the College Hill line none were in use east of the Alleghenies and they were wholly unknown in New England. Nevertheless, by importing engineers especially for the job, the problem was solved, and Providence capitalists, through the payment of \$250,000, got the new addition to the city's transportation facilities.

A power house was built in Market Square, and the line ran from the foot of the hill to Prospect Street, at either end connecting with other lines to the east and west ends of the city. The grand opening date was on Christmas Day, 1889. The Superintendent of the cable road operated the first grip car as it made the ascent of the hill and stopped it half way up to demonstrate its safety to the immense crowd of gaping spec-

tators who had assembled in Market Square. The next two or three trips were, according to the dictates of custom from time immemorial, given to the mayor of the city and other dignitaries and high officials. After this, the public was invited to satisfy its curiosity. The trip up and down the hill was made every half-hour at first, from 8 A. M. in the morning until 10 P. M. at night, and the public was carried free until January 1, 1890. If this was a discreet measure, calculated to inspire confidence in the use of the new road, it was successful.

Mechanically, the cable road worked to complete satisfaction. No condition of weather ever prevented the grip cars from making the ascent of the hill. The tracks (and there were two sets—one for ascending and one for descending cars) looked like those used today by street cars in some cities, notably in Washington, D. C. In between the two wheel rails was a steel slot through which the grip car levers connected with the cable. The grip man in the car operated a kind of clutch with which he picked up the cable at the bottom of the hill and released it at the top. At first horses were used to haul the cable but in 1895 electric power was substituted.

When the line was electrified, counterweights were used to balance the weight of the ascending or descending cars. One designed by a man named Kuhlman was first installed; but, proving a failure, it was abandoned for a new one designed by a Mr. Bronsdon. Of course cables broke once in a while and the counterweights occasionally got away and slid down the hill, demolishing the bumper at the foot and wrecking things generally, but no one except one employee was ever hurt.

Three types of cars were in service on the cable company's line. First, there were the white grip cars themselves, small, with a square, closed, center compartment in which the gripman stood while operating his levers, and with outside benches around this compartment, providing seats both at right angles and parallel to the track. Then there were the closed box cars, about 20 feet long with a capacity of 16 or more passengers. Finally there were the open cars of the seven bench type for summer use with a capacity of 35 passengers. The box and open cars would proceed to the foot of College Hill or to the corner of Prospect Street to await the grip car that would take them up or down the hill. It seems miraculous that a

thin cable was strong enough to carry the double strain of a loaded grip car and a loaded trailer as well, but it did not break.

That the new line was popular was proved by necessary changes in the time table. The first gave the car times as 20 minutes apart. Three months later a five minute schedule was adopted, and even this was modified to two and one-half minutes during rush hours. The speed of the cable was between eight and nine miles per hour.

The front seats of the grip car were especially popular despite the fact that they were exposed to the weather. In both winter and summer, men and women seemed to prefer the outside seats of the grip car to those inside the box cars. This caused the operators of the cars a good deal of worry, for there was always the danger that some passenger would fall off and be hurt. Yet no passenger was ever hurt in the whole history of the line. On one occasion a heavily loaded car became uncoupled from the grip car during the climb up the hill; but luckily the mishap occurred on the upper part of the hill where the grade is slight, and the brakes held.

There were nearly 150 cars in operation on the whole line from Olneyville to the

Red Bridge at the time of the opening of the tunnel. It is estimated that they passed over the cable system 4,000,000 times. Some of the employees worked on the road throughout its entire period of service. Patrick Fitzmaurice was recognized as the oldest all round employee, but Oscar R. Taylor was the dean of the gripmen, serving in that capacity from 1890 to 1914.

Of course there are many incidents in the history of the grip car and the cable road that would make amusing anecdotes, but we have no space for more than one or two. A near accident happened to one workman who late one night was in one underground tunnel oiling the cable and the track of the counterweight. Entrance to this tunnel was by means of manholes, similar to those now in use along gas and water mains. This man thought he saw the cable move slightly but believed it a hallucination on his part and went on with his oiling. The next second he did see it move, for it broke with a snap and whizzed up the tunnel. He had just the necessary moment to grasp the rim of the manhole and pull himself up to safety before the counterweight shot down through the passage and crashed into the bumper at the foot of the hill. His nearness to com-

plete annihilation was measured in inches and seconds.

Another gentleman who frequently took passage on the line tells of a night ride that had every qualification of a "thriller." His car, after coming from the Red Bridge, reached the top of College Hill and was waiting for the grip car to come up and couple on. However, on this night the grip car was slow in starting and the motorman of the waiting car decided to edge down the hill a bit to meet it. He edged a little too far, and, with a sudden slip, the heavy car was off on a mad descent of the hill. On it rushed across Benefit Street and on down, until it had so much momentum that it simply jumped South Main Street. Heavy though it was, the car did not come to a stop until it had reached the Turk's Head Corner. That was the type of ride one might possibly have in the slow days before the automobile and airplane were in vogue.

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"THE OLD STONE BANK"

86 South Main Street
Providence



THE PROVIDENCE INSTITUTION FOR SAVINGS, familiarly known as "The Old Stone Bank," is in its own right a historic institution of Rhode Island. Founded in 1819 as one of the first mutual savings banks in the country, it has since contributed vitally to the development and life of this community.

Proud of its own historical significance, "The Old Stone Bank" has adopted this method of educational advertising to bring to light much that is of value and significance in the colorful annals of Rhode Island and national history.

The sketches and vignettes of old-time Rhode Island and Rhode Islanders that are broadcast weekly and then printed in this form are selected from local historical records which are full of the picturesque, romantic, and adventurous. In the hope that these glimpses into the lives, customs, and environment of our progenitors may be both revealing and inspirational to young and old, this booklet is presented with the compliments of

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