

Transcript of Lecture Delivered by
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The Cannonball and the Long Island Railroad

I am happy to present this very interesting story about how the Long Island Railroad got out to Eastern Long Island.

Most of the effort out here was in the 1890's, and a lot of it grew out of one man's dream, Austin Corbin, who was a very wealthy banker in New York. He became President of the Long Island Railroad in 1881. As soon as he got onto this job, he had a lot of problems because he inherited a railroad that was bankrupt and actually had been formerly three different railroads. Once he put those together after about a year or so, he turned to the fulfillment of his dream and that was, not necessarily to build a railroad to the end of Long Island. His objective was to shorten the distance by water, over the ocean, between England and New York. Now you probably know at the time that people usually took almost a week by steamship at that time to come from England over to this harbor. It occurred to him that as long as he had the railroad on Long Island, why not become a link in this chain of transportation. If he could build his railroad eastward from its terminus in Bridgehampton, at that time, and if he could continue it the rest of the way out to Montauk Point, it would be that much less travel time for both mail and people to come to New York. The statistics are kind of interesting on that. Apparently, if you mailed a letter at that time from Southampton or Liverpool or one of those places, it took ten days to get to New York. Obviously, there wasn't any airmail at that time, so if you wanted real speed, you had to depend, of course, on a very, very vast way of getting it through. The other big thing, of course, that was very attractive at the time was the possibility of getting people just as quickly as mail and to cut down the travel time to only five days across the Atlantic Ocean, rather than the usual seven. And the way he could do that was to build a big depot at Fort Pond Bay. Today, when we look at it, it seems a very placid and certainly uncommercial body of water. But he visualized it in terms of a great trans-Atlantic port that would be full of custom houses, it would be full of ocean liners and, of course, everybody would immediately transfer to his Long Island Railroad and to be whisked through the island to Brooklyn where they would have a large terminus, and he picked Brooklyn because Brooklyn, as he saw it, had more space to work with than the crowded west side of Manhattan. He was anxious, too, to help the United States in terms of boats. He wanted it possible to have five luxurious steamships that would carry people back and forth. The cost would be very high for these steamships; it would be \$10 million which, of course, at that time, was a great deal of money. They would make something like 18 knots on the water, which was an unheard of speed at that time, and I guess even today to some extent. Each boat would have 7,000 horsepower; each vessel alone would cost \$1,250,000. This was certainly a very, very ambitious venture that he was proposing. Naturally, if he was a banker, he had money himself. Of course, he had a great many wealthy friends and acquaintances that he wanted to bring into this process and in order to make the thing go even faster. He called a book on his project, "Quick Transit Between New York and London", and he published this in 1896, just about at the time when the railroad was actually built out to Montauk Point.

He began with this idea very seriously about 1882, as near as I've been able to figure out. He sent some of his surveyors from Bridgehampton which, at that time, was the end of the railroad before the railroad turned up into Sag Harbor, the actual end. The rails had reached Sag Harbor in 1869, and his idea was simply to continue another 20 miles. The problem was, of course, to get out here, get the land, and to put a railroad through. It was not too easy, as it worked out. He first sent some of his surveyors out here to see what the land looked like and, of course, in his day, there wasn't the development that there is today. Once you got beyond East Hampton, there was nothing at all. The entire East End of Long Island—it's difficult for us to believe that today—was owned by the Town of East Hampton, and it was used entirely as a pasturage during the summer time. The sheep, particularly—7,000 head of sheep—roamed the whole area here, and the people who owned the cattle and the horses and the sheep paid the Town \$3 per animal for this whole summer pasturage. If you owned a horse, they paid the Town \$5 a piece, and they led them out here through the streets of East Hampton—it must've been an interesting sight to see—something like a western mining town, I guess. All these animals would go the street and then they would drive them out through Amagansett and out to the hills, and then leave them on Hither Hill all summer long. And then, when Labor Day came along, the opposite would happen. The owners would gather all their own animals and they usually were able to tell them by the earmarks that they had pinched into the earlobes of each of the animal and they would drive them all the way back and, again, you had this great big western scene of all the animals coming through Main Street, East Hampton, and then being distributed to their various owners. So, that's what his survey people reported back to him. There would be no great problem really; there were a few hills in the way, there were a few valleys in the way, but nothing really seemed difficult. It took quite a while to do this. In 1884, he took his next small step and that was to purchase all of the hills—the Shinnecock Hills, as they were called at the time. And he first got that into his control and got a lot of other of his wealthy friends to also put in money and buy it. The idea was for them to have a kind of private, personal summer residence and it worked out fairly well. He bought what land he could get hold of and he spent quite a few years—apparently, 1884, 1885, 1886, and so on—getting these various cottages built and trying to develop a road that would lead up to it. Meanwhile, he kept working on this idea of getting the land. The land situation was very interesting at that time. It's hard for us to believe today that the entire East End—all the land beyond East Hampton—was in the ownership of one man—a man who gave his name to Bensonhurst in Brooklyn. Arthur W. Benson had bought the whole of this Montauk area in 1879, and he paid only \$11,000 for it—the entire area. The problem was, of course, was to get Benson to sell a right-of-way for the railroad and to go in with the scheme, if possible. So they worked on this. It turned out that Benson was perfectly willing to do it. Before they could really get started too well on it, the man who had originally bought it died in 1889 and the land passed to his three children: Frank, Mary, and Jane Benson. And they, too, were willing to sell the land, but as so often happens in the real world, the lawyers decided that there was some ambiguity in the will that might prevent them from selling the land in small sections. They could sell the whole thing and there would be no legal objection, but to sell a small amount to the railroad, and perhaps to other people, might be challenged in court. It took them something like three or four years by the time this thing slowly made its way through the courts. Finally, they got permission in 1893. So, even in those days, any legal entanglements was something to be avoided.

The immediate problem now was to build 9.78 miles from Bridgehampton to Amagansett and then, from there on, 11.5 miles from Amagansett out to Montauk. So, the whole extension was really not tremendously long, in terms of distance, but there were problems all the way through. In 1893, he decided the first thing to do was to get permission. If you want to build a railroad in the United States, you have to go to the railroad commission of your state and get permission to do it. Well, with his money and with his reputation, he had no difficulty in getting Albany to agree, so he incorporated the Montauk Extension Railroad, as it was called, and everything seemed very good in that respect. In 1893, he and his friends took the train out during April and they decided the best thing to do would be to get everybody out in the Township of East Hampton to get behind this project. So, one fine day, he went out in his parlor car and had the train run all the way out to Bridgehampton, which was as far as the rails went, and thereafter, he went by carriage all the way out here to East Hampton. They seemed to have made three successive pitches to the various people out here. The first time, they gathered together all the citizens that were around here and told them what a good idea would be if they could get the railroad, how it would benefit their property values; it would make a great kind of summer residence; it would open up a wonderful new area of the island to everybody; and everyone would prosper from it. So, he came out here and he gave these talks. Apparently, he did very well. On April 5th, he brought Mr. Benson, who owned all the property, along with him, and they went out and they gave this talk to the East Hampton people. The people liked what they heard. I guess Corbin was a fairly persuasive speaker. Two weeks later, on April 19th, again, there was a mass meeting of the citizens here in East Hampton and, again, he talked to the people and, again, after they had had two weeks to think this project over, they applauded it this time, and it seemed like a very good idea. The final meeting, apparently, was in May, and they agreed to give him one important thing and that was to give him the land for nothing. Corbin was a very shrewd businessman in those days and whenever he built a new section to his railroad, he tried to get people to donate the right-of-way. It wasn't a very princely gift when you think about it because the right-of-way was only 66 feet wide for two tracks of the railroad. Even today, we don't think that's a lot of land. But, of course, it may be only 66 feet wide, but remember, it was miles long. The people decided it's not a bad investment; they were willing to donate that much of their property to give him what he needed. So, he got legal permission from the people who liked the idea; for people who had their hesitations about the whole thing, he was able to persuade them to sell their property and as often happens in projects like this, there are always a few obstructionists who don't want to go into something at all. So, again, he lost time because he had to take a handful of people through the courts. Finally, he was able to condemn small, little chunks of property here and there and he was able to string himself out a complete railroad. Now, all this while, this big Benson lawsuit was going on, and it wasn't until June 1, 1893 that the courts finally turned to the Benson heirs and said, okay, you can sell your father's property, and that was really the beginning of the whole railroad project. Once Austin Corbin had this permission and these deeds in his pocket, finally, he was able to get out the shovels and begin to build the railroad. This really, I guess, is the cornerstone and really the beginning of the development—June 1st, 1893—that was when the green light finally came on. So, with the railroad legally incorporated and with everybody apparently happy, they got going.

The original intention was to build the railroad not only to where it ends today—which is right below that hotel that's up on the little mountain there—but to run it along the lakeside and up to Culloden Point. Later on, because of the little Indian cemetery up there and the fact that this had formerly been the site of an Indian raid, they decided not to take that part and to terminate it where you see it today. So, that was really the only change between then and now. During the rest of 1893, he was able to clear away any other little problems. The man who operated the Sag Harbor Turnpike tried to stop them because the railroad crossed his turnpike at two points, and he didn't like the idea of having a grade crossing where he operated his stagecoaches. So, they had to take him to court and the judges threw out the whole thing for him, so he was alright on that problem. They cut the land in three pieces. The Fort Pond Bay area, which is where the railroad terminates today, was the part sold to the Long Island Railroad. The Hither Hills section—that very beautiful forest there that is now a state park—the Bensons kept that in their own property, and it wasn't until years afterwards that New York State bought the whole of Hither Hills—the nice forest park there—and made it the state park it is today. The extreme tip—the third piece of land out there—also remained with the Benson Heirs and that's the place now where we have a little village in Montauk and where you have Montauk Point. So, this whole vast area—and, incidentally, I'm speaking of 5,500 acres, a lot of ground, and it's hard for us to believe that all of that in 1896 had only three houses on it, and those are still on the map today; if you go along the Montauk Highway, they still tell you where the first house, second house, and third house existed at that time. Today, with all the settlement and with all the development, it seems incredible that on the whole 5,500 acres, that only three houses could have been occupants of this great, great area. Starting with 1894—one year now we move on in our story—a great deal of preparation was necessary on the part of Corbin and his railroad. He had to get all kinds of people out there to do the building; he had to get all kinds of material out there; he had to get all kinds of material out there; he had to build all kinds of freight cars, and so on, to bring this out and this was a great problem for him. In New York—luckily, for him—there was a vast labor pool at the time, and he was able to get a large group of men willingly to come out to what they regarded as a desolate waste out here. Many of them were Italian, there were a small number of Germans, and a sprinkling of many other groups. One of the things that they comment on in these days is that if you went to the construction camp, you will hear three or four foreign languages spoken all day in addition not only to the supervisory personnel, who were usually white men and well educated, but you also had a large group of Negroes who had come from the south, who were not well-educated, and of course, they spoke a dialect of their own. But they were very happy to get this employment that lasted all year long. Since there was no place to live, what do you do with all these men? So, this is one of his early problems. He took a lot of broken-down, old freight cars—box cars, as we call them today—and he moved them out here, took them off their wheels, and just put them along the potential railroad track there, and the men lived in those cars all during the rest of the year. As you can imagine, since they were cars that were no longer serviceable for railroad use, they were not too serviceable either for living in. So he simply fitted them out with bunks and I daresay it must have been very, very uncomfortable because many of the men—particularly, the Italians—wanted to bring their home life with them and they brought out their wives and children, so you can imagine if there were something like 40 men in one box car, in addition, maybe, to a couple of wives and children besides, how crowded and how uncomfortable it

might have been. I guess it's a tribute to the fact that in the 19th century, people were used to not having any luxury at their fingertips and were more willing to compromise than we are today for our comfort. But, apparently, it worked out alright. The papers of the day gave a very vivid idea of what the construction was at that time and what an effort it was to put it through. There were no steam shovels invented at that time yet, so all of this work had to be done with horses and ox carts, and things like that—everything had to be done by hand, so it was a slow process. Most of the area they went through, of course, were sand hills and that made it a little bit easier to do a lot of digging. But the ground was very irregular, particularly, through Hither Hills, and that meant, of course, that you had to have deep cuts through the woods, you had to clear away all kinds of growth all through it, and it took a long time, considering that this was all hand work, to go through this area. Once the original clearing was done, they were able to bring in the ties, and once the ties had been laid, the next step would be to put down the rails, but there were still some problems. You had to have a perfectly flat roadbed at this time. Remember, all movement on the railroad in these days was done by steam locomotives, and the steam locomotive has one big disadvantage: it cannot climb. The steam locomotive can only take a grade, at the most, of 2% which, of course, is two feet in every hundred feet. Anything more than that can't climb, so it was very important in the beginning for them to do grading, to have a perfectly smooth roadbed, if possible, and once you achieved that by means of any bridging, or ditch-digging in, or filling in whatever you needed, once you had a level plain to work with, then you could bring in your ties and, finally, your rails. So, it took most of the summer of 1895 to get this work done. It was, as you can imagine, a slow and difficult business. One advantage, I guess, for the people at the time was that they could walk along with it and pretty well follow what they were doing. I think one of the most interesting scenes—and I wish I had been there to see it—was the arrival of the first locomotive in East Hampton. Remember, there were no tracks laid yet; yet, they brought a locomotive to East Hampton. Now what they did was to hitch up a small locomotive—a contractor's locomotive, really—and it was put on a flatbed trailer and eight oxen were attached to it, and they pulled this thing all the way from East Hampton, which was the last carrier, and this had to go all the way through this new construction before it finally arrived here in town. I wonder what this must have looked like coming along the Montauk Highway, such as it was in that day and age. It worked. So, when it finally came in, of course, it was the sensation of East Hampton at the time it arrived. We know its name; it was called "The F.H. Clement"—no one knows who he is—and it arrived here and was set up on Newton Lane, and the reason for that termination was the fact that they had determined that that would be the site of the station and that it would be the site where the railroad would come through. So they began their track-laying, not from Bridgehampton where the tracks ended, but they started a new railroad right here on Newtown Lane, put the locomotive on it. Of course, once they had this assistance of the railroad, after that, it was no great problem to get the use of the railroad. Naturally, they were able to put their freight cars and so on on it, their locomotive would go up and down, it would jump ties, it would pick up all kinds of stuff for them, and it certainly accelerated the speed of the road. Things went much faster in the middle of summer after this engine had been delivered. Once the track got close to East Hampton, Austin Corbin came out in his private car. He had a luxurious parlor car called "The Manhattan" and "elegant" would certainly be the word—beautifully painted, leathered on the outside, the interior was four or five different rooms: kitchen, bedroom, bathroom—everything you needed on wheels. Behind that, there would be 2 or 3 parlor cars

for the officials and anyone else--like newspaper reporters--would ride in the coaches in the back. So he would come out and try to follow the locomotive from time to time in his own private car.

When the courts finally gave permission to continue the road, he was able to get the deed that he wanted to get to Montauk. You might be interested to know that the whole right-of-way all the way out to Montauk Point sold for \$200,000—5,500 acres of land to the railroad for \$200,000. Now, in 1895, people were earning \$6 a week if they were ordinary workers. If they had a college education and could be a superintendent or whatever, they might make \$8 a week. The locomotive engineer who had a lot of responsibility, he took home \$10, and if he was on a big railroad, like the Pennsylvania, he might get as much as \$12. But that was the salary that people made in those days. So, you can imagine a sum like \$200,000 was something astronomical in that day and age.

Things went through very, very well. The three Benson heirs signed off on the right-of-way, and everything seemed absolutely perfect for going through. By June 28th, the tracks had reached almost through to the Hither Hills area and, surprisingly, they were able to run the first train as far as Amagansett—that is through East Hampton and up to Amagansett—on June 1st. This was a big source of satisfaction and a little bit of celebration on the part of the railroad. I found from the timetables of the day that the first service was with two trains; they ran a train leaving at 6:50 in the morning—a God-awful hour certainly, but, remember, to get all the way to New York was a long journey in those days, and then there was one afternoon train at 3:00. So that was the beginning of service from Amagansett. Meanwhile, work continued on the Montauk section as much as possible. During July and August, they had 250 men and 34 teams at work through the hills and down into the main part of Montauk today. They worked like beavers, of course, all during that period. Finally, when the thing was ready, the first train that pulled into Montauk was on December 17, 1895. So, both Amagansett and Montauk both finished not too far away from each other—the one on June 1st and the other on December 17th. To celebrate this, of course, there wasn't anybody who lived out there, so it was really the railroad that celebrated its accomplishment. The first train that came out again with Corbin and all of his officials was "The Manhattan", the private car, and a mail car behind it, and a parlor car, and then two coaches. So it was a 5-car train on the first run pulled into town. The mail, by the way, was changed starting with this day. Formerly, if there was any kind of mail to be sent, it went by stagecoach from here over to Sag Harbor and then from Sag Harbor, it would continue by rail into New York. So, starting with this day, it was possible to mail a letter from Amagansett and from Montauk and, for the first time, of course, it would be in New York the same day and not a long, slow journey through Long Island.

Once the service opened, the big problem was, of course, to get anybody to ride the trains. Now East Hampton, as you well know, is an old village and long-settled and there was a fair amount of service at the time and, rightly so, because a fair number of people lived here. But Amagansett was still a very, very small place and, of course, originated almost no traffic. Nobody at all lived in Montauk; there were something like, as near as I can tell on the map, perhaps, 12 or 14 bungalows—summer-only bungalows—along Montauk there and, of course, these men would come out once and then they stayed there maybe for the whole

summer. So, there wasn't any traffic or any revenue from them either. So, they didn't run the train to Montauk at all. The early timetable that we have—and this is true right down to 1900, 1902, and so on—the trains didn't go to Montauk even though the track was laid. All the trains turned back at Amagansett and that was the end of the run. If you wanted to go, if you were one of these wealthy men who had a cottage out at the end of the line, they would accommodate you for an extra charge of \$10, and you had to notify the conductor and then he would run you in one coach and one locomotive and go the remaining distance out to the end of the track in Montauk.

As the years went by, two other things that became familiar later on began to come out and this was special trains—trains that were distinguished because of their speed or because of what they meant. I think you've heard, of course, probably of the Long Island Railroad Cannonball. Many people have said that this really started when the tracks reached Montauk. Well, that's not true, apparently. I checked on the timetables and the first appearance of the Cannonball—and this, by the way, means no stops; that's why it's called the Cannonball—there was no bridge in those days, there was no tunnel. All the trains began in Long Island City—that was the terminus right on the East River. The train would stop only at Jamaica, and the next stop was Southampton. So, you can see that's a pretty fast run. Now, if you have nothing in your way and the tracks are clear, you can make pretty good time. The locomotives that they generally ran 45 miles an hour. Once in awhile, with real testing, they might go up with 50 and 55, but the engine, remember, in the beginning, was small, and the track was not that solid either. So, they made the trip in 2 hours. Now this was considered like a meteor in those days—fantastic speed; the whole length of the island in two hours. Well, you might smile to yourself now because sometimes it still takes two hours to get out here. They thought it was wonderful speed, and that's how the train came to be named The Cannonball. It had a little higher fare at the time and to distinguish the fact that the train was very special, all the cars were painted white. When we think about it, of all the colors they could've used, considering that they were operating speed trains which were full of soot, of course, white?! How do you ever keep the trains clean? Now, I suppose the answer was manpower was cheap in those days and they were able to give it a good wash once it made a round-trip. So, beginning in 1891, you were able to get speed, if you wanted it. The other service that they frequently offered was the parlor car service. Of course, they built a special car with carpet on the floor, all the seats were loose (they weren't screwed to the floor or anything like that), you had over-stuffed chairs and you could move them the way you wanted to, there was usually a bar at the end of the car and you could be served with anything you liked; they had beautiful chandeliers overhead. They tried as far as possible to duplicate a drawing room or a parlor that you would find in a wealthy, New York home. And this was available for the traffic out here because very early, East Hampton, Amagansett and Montauk attracted a wealthy, summer clientele. This was the beginning really of what you have out here now—an affluent group of people for whom money was no great object. They want to be catered to, they're used to being catered to, and they're willing to pay the money to get it. So, starting really at this time—in 1895—we begin to have this luxury of parlor cars for the first time. While I think it's astonishing the way time has changed, the Long Island Railroad up to this year is the last railroad in the United States that still offers any kind of parlor car service. It's astonishing to realize that how the quality of the railroad has gone down with the

tremendous competition of the airlines, the jitney buses, and so on, and it's a shadow of what it use to be.

The other interesting thing that they had over the years were the fishermen's trains. This gained reknown very early because of the idea of being able to go out all day on a fishing journey and this was particularly true for Southampton where you had a special fishermen's train leaving New York and Jamaica very early in the morning—6:30 in the morning—and getting out here very quickly and, of course, you would change to the boat very quickly and spend the rest of the day fishing. It became very popular. It lasted until very, very recently. They would also take care of your catch by icing it for you and having all kinds of large containers to bring back your catch if you had been successful. So, the railroad over the years has tried to accommodate that type of service as far as possible.