

All Aboard!

Erie's Rail History from Trolleys to Railroad Tracks

As a result of Erie County's growing population, and increased trade on the Great Lakes, it became apparent in the mid 1800s to local government officials and regional business leaders that Erie needed improved methods of transportation – Erie's steamship lines and stagecoaches quickly faded and were replaced by a state-of-the-art electric trolley line and miles of railroad track. So...All aboard! Find a seat and have your ticket in hand as we explore the history of Erie's rails!

What was to become one of the best trolley, or streetcar, systems in the nation began as a small horse-drawn trolley operation. William Loesch opened horse-drawn transportation rail lines in 1860. Loesch's trolley line, known as "Bill Loesch's Band" because his drivers used tin horns to communicate with passengers and pedestrians, traveled from Perry Square to Federal Hill (26th Street) by way of State, Turnpike and Peach Streets. As per his agreement with the city, Loesch provided transportation to the people of Erie every day. He maintained his horse-drawn trolley line without competition until 1867, which was the year the Erie City Passenger Railway Company was chartered. Competition between Loesch and the newly chartered Railway Company was fierce. The Railway Company became the city's main transportation provider when all of William Loesch's horses mysteriously died in their stalls one night. Unable to provide service to the City of Erie, Loesch lost his contract to the Railway Company. The Railway Company maintained Erie's horse-drawn rail system for the next eleven years, and by 1888, they managed 8 ½ miles of track, owned 20 cars and 103 horses.

Although the Erie City Passenger Railway Company had a monopoly on Erie's public transportation, the company experienced several years with low profits and decided to begin development of the city's first electric trolley system in 1888. A committee was formed and sent to Richmond, Virginia to explore the electric trolley system found there. Impressed by the trolley's speed (10 mph vs. 2 mph of the horse-drawn trolley), the Railway Company began electrification of the rail lines in Erie immediately. Passenger made the first electric trolley trip on Thursday, June 25th, 1889. The total cost of the new trolley system was \$300,000.

Erie's electric trolley lines carried passengers and goods throughout the region (Erie County and southwestern New York) for more than forty years. In 1928, one of the last good years for local trolley companies, Erie's trolley lines operated with 65 miles of track, 110 streetcars, 180 motormen and 60 mechanics. Streetcar companies were unable to compete with the automobile and the new cheaper, faster and more efficient bus routes in the 1920s and 1930s. The last electric trolley line arrived at Franklin Avenue at 1:30 a.m. in 1935. Crowds gathered to witness the historical event sang "Get Along Little Trolley" and "Getting Ready for the Last Roundup."

The electric streetcar had a very important affect on the region's growth and development during its forty-year rein as Erie's primary public transportation system. It united farmers, suburbanites and city dwellers alike because rail lines traveled throughout the city and county. Because it was an affordable source of transportation, it gave both the rich and the poor opportunities for travel. Population growth in the city and surrounding towns occurred along streetcar lines. The trolley system aided development of towns or villages, such as Lawrence Park, Wesleyville and Millcreek, because, for the first time, these areas were easily accessible.

Construction of Erie's first railroad lines began in the mid 1800s with tremendous conflict. Three entrepreneurs, Charles Reed, John Tracy and John Walker, received a charter in 1842 to create the first local railroad company, which was named the Erie and North East Railroad Company. The Erie and North East track between the town of Erie and the New York state line had a 6-foot gauge. (A six-foot gauge track had rails six

feet apart.) The track connecting Erie to Ohio was a 4-foot, 8 ½ inch gauge track. Due to the difference in track gauges, it was necessary for trains to stop in Erie, unload and reload rail cars. Several of the large railroad companies found the change of gauges in Erie to be a serious impediment to travel, and started efforts to change the track to a uniform gauge. By 1854 railroad companies from Buffalo to Cleveland were making plans to unify the track gauge to 4 feet, 10 inches. Local residents resented the plan to unify track widths because they wanted the railroads to be forced to stop in Erie. It was a great benefit to the hotels, taverns and other businesses of Erie. Eventually, the people of Erie resolved to prevent any changes to the track gauge, and forced the Mayor and City Council to act. Initially, they restricted access to the railroad companies in the city through a series of ordinances, but problems escalated in 1853 when City Council passed an ordinance ordering the Mayor to remove all bridges, tracks, embankments, ditches, timbers and other construction or obstructions placed by the railway companies in the city streets. The Mayor, with 150 newly sworn in special police constables, city engineers and a crowd of angry Erie citizens, marched along State Street and cut every railroad bridge in half. The conflict in Erie worsened, however, and the matter was carried to the courts in Pittsburgh, where Erie's railroad men were ridiculed and abused. U.S. Marshals traveled to Erie on more than one occasion to serve injunctions to restrain the people of Erie from destroying the railroad companies' property. The "Gauge War" dissipated as the Civil War loomed at the nation's doorstep, and all railroad gauges were eventually standardized.

Resolution of the Gauge War enabled railroad lines to expand throughout Erie County, and companies such as the Philadelphia and Erie Railroad, the Bessemer and Lake Erie Railroad, and the Nickel Plate Railroad began construction of tracks in the region. Railway expansion connected Erie to Buffalo, Cleveland, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. Goods, raw materials and passengers traveled fluidly through Erie County.

Bessemer and Lake Erie Railroad

The Bessemer and Lake Erie Railroad developed primarily because of Pittsburgh's need to access Lake Superior ores. During the 1800s all of the major railroads traveled east to west, and connected Midwestern cities with ports along the Atlantic coast. Andrew Carnegie decided in 1888 to bring iron ore directly from Lake Erie to his Pittsburgh mills using the existing Pittsburgh, Shenango and Lake Erie Railroad lines. Using resources from the Carnegie Steel Company, a connecting line was built between Butler and the steel mills. Construction of the new line was one of the most spectacular operations ever undertaken in the region. More than 4,000 migrant workers worked simultaneously at many locations 24 hours a day and in all seasons of the year. Carnegie's new line opened in October 1897.