



THE NEW YORK, WESTCHESTER & BOSTON

# A Millionaire's Mistake?

BY OTTO M. VONDRAK/PHOTOS AS NOTED

DAY IN AND DAY OUT, the modern electric commuter trains of Metro-North's New Haven Line pound the four-track main line connecting Grand Central Terminal with the tony suburbs of New York and Connecticut. Running through part of the densest population corridor in the nation, the railroad strains to maintain service and meet the demands of a growing ridership. The closer you get to New York City, the more it seems like every available bit of land already has a house or a highway squeezed into it. It's difficult to imagine adding another transit line to this overdeveloped region, but more than a hundred years ago, plans were in place to do just that.

As New York City continued to grow and prosper through the 19th century, it was the railroads that encouraged growth of the first "suburbs." The New York & Harlem was the first railroad to make the leap across the Harlem River north into the Bronx and Westchester counties as early as the 1840s. Following the Civil War, there were a number of new railroad proposals to connect the city and the country, most of them connected to real estate development. The idea then, as now, was the railroad would help open up undeveloped areas if there was a convenient way to reach New York City.

Just as Cornelius Vanderbilt recognized that the city would grow north-

ward and eventually meet and envelop his Grand Central Depot on 42nd Street, real estate speculators proposed that growth would continue all the way up to the Bronx and beyond. Because of its strategic location, Westchester County was the subject of many competing trunk line proposals connecting New York with Montreal and Boston.

## Boom and bust

It was during this time that the New York, Westchester & Boston Railroad was incorporated in March 1872 to construct a new rail line from a terminal on the Harlem River in The Bronx to White Plains, along with a branch to Port Chester on the border with Con-

necticut. Since the developers were priced out of building a new terminal in Manhattan, they were satisfied that their waterfront landing in The Bronx would flourish. Some capital was raised, but the Panic of 1873 halted any progress and the company was put into receivership by 1875.

The project was dormant for nearly 25 years until a group of investors discovered the old charter and reorganized it as the New York, Westchester & Boston Railway in 1904. This was around the same time that New York

City's first subway lines were opening, which heralded the start of the region's rapid growth towards the outer boroughs and the suburbs.

In 1901, the New York & Portchester was chartered to build a four-track rapid transit line from The Bronx to Port Chester. It was designed to directly connect with subway line extensions then under consideration. The promoter was one William C. Gotshall, an accomplished engineer from the midwest who helped convert the Second Avenue Railway to electric propulsion before

pursuing his own goals. Thanks to Gotshall's reputation, the project was well financed and began acquiring property.

The NYW&B investors took notice immediately. The original "steam road" proposal was scrapped in favor of electric rapid transit. In some areas, the proposed route of the two competitors only differed by a few hundred feet, and therefore, competed for city permits to start construction. Both also ran dangerously close to the lines of the New York, New Haven & Hartford. It didn't take long for Gotshall's NY&P to file a lawsuit challenging the NYW&B, and vice versa. The third battle front came from the New Haven, who objected to either railroad infringing on their lucrative territory.

Throughout the end of the 19th century, the New Haven had assembled what amounted to a transportation monopoly controlling most of southern New England, including railroads, steamships, and trolley lines. By 1903, financier J.P. Morgan was in control of the New Haven, recruiting Charles Mellen from the Northern Pacific as president of the new road. Morgan's involvement with the railroads was well known, but he took a special interest in the development of the New Haven.

Between 1904 and 1906, all three companies were engaged in fierce court battles that did little but eat up precious capital raised for construction. Some cursory work was done here and there on both roads, but nothing of significance. The long drawn-out court battles weakened both lines financially. In 1906, investment bankers Marsden J. Perry and Oakleigh Thorne quietly purchased control of the NYW&B, and subsequently, the NY&P, as well as all associated construction and real estate companies. Following the Panic of 1907, control of these assets were transferred to the New Haven (a 1914 Interstate Commerce Commission investigation later showed Perry and Thorne were acting on instructions of Morgan, secretly financed by the New Haven). It was expected that both properties would be allowed to expire and become a forgotten memory.

To the contrary, New Haven president Mellen announced an investment totalling \$11 million (roughly equal to \$254 million today) to settle the debts of both companies and begin construction immediately. The NY&P was merged into the NYW&B in 1909, and Gotshall retired from railroading to pursue more worthwhile activities.

## New Haven takes control

Why was the New Haven constructing a railroad in its own territory to seemingly compete with itself? In most cases the board deferred to the judgement of the powerful J.P. Morgan and pressed on with construction.



OPPOSITE: This view of the New York, Westchester & Boston terminal at Harlem River in The Bronx looks east on May 17, 1937. It was also used by the New Haven's local trains until that service was discontinued in 1931. Commuters destined for Manhattan transferred to nearby elevated or subway trains to complete their journey. ABOVE: The Westchester operated a modest freight service, with ten cars separating the engine from the caboose at Columbus Avenue in October 1937. Baldwin-Westinghouse steeple-cab 701 was the only motor, handling all switching duties on the NYW&B. When the railroad was shut down, it joined the New Haven roster as part of its EY-2 class. PHOTOS BY GEORGE VOTAVA, COURTESY ROBERT A. BANG ABOVE: A two-car train passes a Tudor-styled home in Mount Vernon along the four-track NYW&B main line in the 1930s. The onset of the Great Depression curtailed suburban Westchester County's rapid growth and development until the postwar era. COLLECTION ROBERT A. BANG



To take charge of the Westchester project, Leverett Miller was plucked from the New Haven's newly acquired Central New England in 1909. Miller was well suited for the job, having previously worked engineering and managerial jobs at railroads across the West and Midwest. He was now given the job of building a state-of-the-art railroad without concern for cost, an enviable position for any executive.

The NYW&B (simply, "the Westchester") had acquired more property during its development phase, so its route was chosen over the former NY&P survey. As the New Haven was enjoying great success with the pioneering efforts on its newly electrified main line, it was decided that the

road created a 3500-foot cut-and-cover subway tunnel between Paulding and Mace avenues in The Bronx. It was also decided from early on that the Westchester would have the finest passenger facilities possible. Design specs called for stations built of cement block and finished in smooth concrete, with marble interiors and terra cotta tile roofs. The resulting construction resembled Mediterranean style man-

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**RIGHT:** The railroad spared no expense building commodious stations of the finest materials. This interior photo of East Third Street Station in Mount Vernon was taken just prior to the opening of the Westchester in 1912. Notice the fare control system including turnstiles and gate attendant. **JOHN TOLLEY ARCHIVE, COURTESY ROBERT A. BANG** **BELOW:** Trains are lined up at the White Plains terminal in preparation for the afternoon rush. Clearly the terminal was designed for a level of traffic that failed to materialize, despite increasing ridership year to year. By mid-century, all traces of the terminal had been removed to make way for shopping centers and parking lots. **PHOTO BY GEORGE VOTAVA, COLLECTION ROBERT A. BANG**



sions than a train station, but that was the intention. All new stations were designed with high-level platforms, an innovation to help speed passenger loading and unloading that would not be adopted in the New York region until the early 1970s.

As grand and commodious as the stations were, they were often built in the middle of empty fields or straddling dirt roads. Miller had tapped the firm of Reed & Stem, already known for their work on designing Grand Central Terminal, to design the new railway's facilities. Architect Alfred Fellheimer was assigned to the project, then a junior partner at Reed & Stem, and one of the planners who had worked on the GCT project. Fellheimer argued that railroads "don't just spring up fully grown" and made his case for less expensive construction that could be improved over time. Miller heard his argument, but countered that he had been instructed to build the "finest suburban railway possible" and that any objections could be taken up with "J.P."

A fleet of all-steel electric multiple-unit cars was designed for the Westchester by consulting engineer Lewis B. Stillwell. Known then for his pioneering work in alternating current, he came to New York where he was involved in power distribution projects on the Interboro Rapid Transit subway and the Manhattan Elevated Railway, as well as the Hudson & Manhattan Railroad. Stillwell's pioneering design used a steel truss to protect against crashes, based on a similar design he created for the H&M. The 70-foot cars had a seating capacity of 78, and also incorporated a center door to help quickly load and unload passengers, a design feature that would not be seen on the region's commuter coaches until the early 1990s. To accommodate the low-level platforms along the Harlem River Branch, the end vestibules were equipped with stairs as well as trap doors. The cars were manufactured by Pressed Steel Car Co. of Pittsburgh, Pa. This same basic design was later adopted for coaches purchased by the Erie Railroad, which had considered at one time electrifying their own suburban commuter services.

On May 29, 1912, the railroad opened to the public, only running between East 180th Street in The Bronx and New Rochelle. The White Plains branch opened on July 5, but only as far as Mamaroneck Avenue, as the grand Westchester Avenue terminal would not open until August 10. Service to Harlem River Terminal began on August 3, which ran along the New Haven's own Harlem River Branch connecting at West Farms Junction.

And what a fine railroad it was! Designed from the ground up to carry masses of suburban commuters in the



most efficient way possible, it was lauded by journals of the day as the finest specimen of railway construction in the country. Certainly the New Haven got their money's worth. It was later determined that the cost of construction was \$36 million, or \$2 million a mile (nearly \$43 million a mile in today's terms).

Due to franchise requirements from both New York City and Mount Vernon, service was operated at peak demand almost from the start. Most trains ran on 20-minute headways, around the clock. The tower at Columbus Avenue was the busiest point on the system, coordinating moves between the White Plains branch and the line to New Rochelle, often within seconds of each other. While trains of six cars were operated during rush-hours, the off-peak services were often handled easily by one- or two-car trains.

**RIGHT:** Station facilities on the Port Chester extension were spartan compared to the rest of the system. Two trains await the evening rush on October 31, 1937, the last day of service on the branch. The New Haven mainline is alongside at right. **BELOW:** On October 30, 1937, the photographer captured Train 828 to White Plains and two-car Train 634 to Port Chester on the Columbus Avenue viaduct. The tracks and platform on the lower level belong to the New Haven, and it was possible to make connections between the two roads here. The massive viaduct was salvaged for war scrap in 1942. **PHOTOS BY GEORGE VOTAVA, COURTESY BOB'S PHOTOS**



COLLECTION ROBERT A. BANG



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Despite grand facilities and impeccable timekeeping, it was the Westchester's awkward terminal in The Bronx that was its Achilles' heel. New zoning laws passed in 1916 all but guaranteed that the massive development expected by 19th century real estate speculators would never come to pass. Commuters destined for points in Manhattan were forced to make connections to the subways at Harlem River and later East 180th Street. While this helped, it was hard to compete with the New Haven's direct route into Grand Central Terminal. Yet the NYW&B's heavily dis-

counted fares continued to draw riders away from the neighboring lines.

Construction on the Westchester was not finished, however. In 1912, the New Haven board authorized construction of the Westchester Northern Railroad. This line was to extend north from White Plains, with branches connecting to the New York Central at Brewster, and with the New Haven at Danbury, Conn. As an afterthought, the New Haven weakly explained that the WN might offer a cutoff for freight traffic coming down the Berkshire Line from New England. There was little ev-



**LEFT:** A single passenger seriously ponders the 1937 abandonment notice in his hands. No crowds to contend with on this day (or any other, for that matter). **PHOTO COLLECTION OF J.J. SEDELMAYER** **BELOW:** Following the end of service the fleet of Stillwell m.u. cars was stored at the yards near East 180th Street in The Bronx. Vandalism has begun to take its toll on the idled cars as they await their fate in this May 1940 view. **PHOTO BY GEORGE VOTAVA, COLLECTION ROBERT A. BANG**

#### The Beginning of the End

The stock market crash of 1929 had far-reaching effects on the New Haven and its subsidiaries. Miller retired in 1930, and the New Haven assumed direct control. In an effort to control costs, NYW&B service was immediately cut in half, and loud protests followed. Despite its best efforts, the New Haven declared bankruptcy on October 23, 1935, and the Westchester followed on November 30.

Clinton Bardo was placed as trustee of the Westchester, and given orders by the bankruptcy judge to put together a sustainable reorganization plan in short order. Bardo came out of retirement after a long career that included stints on the Lehigh Valley, the New Haven, and the New York Central. He appealed to online communities for tax relief, one of the railway's primary burdens, but to no avail. The New Haven trustees called for liquidation of the Westchester as payment for rentals and other expenses. Bardo made his report to the bankruptcy judge in August 1936 explaining the situation. After considering a number of proposals, on April 3, 1937, the judge had declared that reorganization was impossible.

In the meantime, the railway did everything possible to maintain a high level of service. Riders up and down the line held town hall meetings and tried to come up with solutions to save the line. Meanwhile, the Westchester entered receivership. In a half-hearted show, the mayor of New Rochelle offered to cut his city's taxes in half if the other communities along the line would follow suit. Of course, none were willing to do so, more out of fear that other properties would demand similar treatment. This was the depths of the Great Depression, and every municipality was hurting for revenue.

The final train on the Port Chester branch departed on October 31, 1937, with service again cut back to North Avenue in New Rochelle. With the prospect of losing their railroad becoming real, municipalities along the line hurriedly put together an offer to cut back taxes from 1936 and 1937 in half. They also supported a citizen's committee plan to have New York State purchase the railroad and operate it for "public benefit." By then, it was too late. On December 18, the federal



idence of any tangible construction on this new project, except that the White Plains terminal was designed to allow WN trains to arrive on a separate proposed upper level concourse. The entire project was abandoned in 1915.

In 1925, any resources intended for the WN were diverted to complete the Port Chester extension. When the railroad opened in 1912, the "New Rochelle branch" terminated at North Avenue. By 1921, the branch extended to Larchmont, constructed alongside the New Haven's main line on a leased right of way. With a new infusion capital, the line was extended to Mamaroneck in 1926, Harrison in 1927, Rye in 1928, and Port Chester in 1929. These new stations were quite frugal in comparison to the smooth concrete "mansions" built earlier.

An additional 30 cars were purchased to accommodate the projected

growth in business, this time manufactured by Osgood Bradley, and purchased by the New Haven. These cars were leased to the Westchester, and wore small "NYNH&H" stencils near the vestibule doors.

Despite the lack of direct connections and serving an undeveloped territory, the Westchester's reputation for inexpensive high-speed service helped win customers. The railway reported 2.9 million riders in 1913, though that figure jumped to 8.6 million ten years later. By 1928, that number climbed to 14 million. At the same time, Westchester County's population grew 51 per cent between 1920 and 1930. Yet despite outward appearances that the railroad would continue to keep pace with the growth of the suburbs, the same could not be said for revenues versus expenses once the railway's bonded debt and other deductions were factored in.



bankruptcy judge signed the death order on the Westchester. The last trains would run on December 31, arriving at their terminals after midnight, a sad way to start 1938.

#### Life after death

Judge John C. Knox ordered the property remain intact so that proposals for continued operation could be considered. A bill was introduced in New York State to create a new operating authority that would purchase the Westchester and operate it. It made it all the way to Governor Herbert Lehman's desk where it was vetoed in March 1938. Considerable pressure against the bill had come from New York City mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, who opposed the new authority because of the power given to The Bronx borough president and the funding relationship with Westchester County.

In 1940, New York City purchased the segment from East 180th Street to the city line at Dyre Avenue for use as an extension of the IRT White Plains Road line. The first subway trains ran on the newly converted line on May 15, 1941, with LaGuardia at the controls.

Meanwhile, communities in Westchester County held out hope for some sort of salvation. The Port Authority inspected the property but announced in April 1941 they had no interest in its operation. More importantly, the New Haven was pushing for liquidation of the Westchester before its mortgage bonds became due in 1946.

With America's entry into World War II on December 7, 1941, the issue of the remaining NYW&B property took on a greater importance. The federal government made a cash offer to begin salvage operations immediately, and after a brief delay, Judge Francis Caffey signed the order on March 13, 1942. Scrapping began that May, and the



**TOP:** Thought the railroad had only been idle for a few years, it quickly went to seed. This 1940 view at North Avenue station in New Rochelle was indicative of the general condition of the line prior to dismantling. Memorial Drive now cuts through here on this very same route. **ABOVE:** The only steam locomotives used on the line were during construction and dismantling. In March 1942 the government purchased the property to harvest the steel for the war effort. The scrapper's train is seen here at Columbus Avenue Junction in Mount Vernon, using a borrowed New Haven steam engine. **PHOTOS BY JOHN TOLLEY, COLLECTION OF ROBERT A. BANG** **LEFT:** A two-car shuttle arrives at Baychester Avenue station in The Bronx in June 1942. These ancient wooden "gate cars" were assigned to the Dyre Avenue Shuttle operation when the New York City Subway took over in 1941. Scrapping of the remainder of the Westchester began the month previous, so that New Haven-era catenary tower won't be standing much longer. A new track connection built in 1957 allowed direct operation into Manhattan, a dream fulfilled. **PHOTO BY KARL GROH, COLLECTION OF J.J. SEDELMAIER**



**ABOVE:** The Westchester's headquarters and station at East 180th Street continues to be used by the MTA New York City Subway as division offices and a transfer point between the Dyre Avenue and White Plains Road lines. In May 2012 the MTA was wrapping up a multi-month refurbishing of this century old edifice. **LEFT:** Two subway trains arrive and depart Morris Park station in the Bronx, located at the south end of the tunnel under Esplanade. These trains provide direct service to Manhattan as the IRT Lexington Avenue Express (5 Train). The rusty center tracks are used for occasional storage and testing of equipment. **PHOTOS BY OTTO M. VONDRAK**

No. 5 subway line. The viaduct connecting to the New Haven's Harlem River Branch was removed in sections over the last 20 years, finally severing the last of the old ties. One surviving member of the Stillwell fleet lives out its retirement years in storage in, of all places, Peru.

As we mark the 100th anniversary of this unique line, we can only guess as to Morgan's original intention and ponder what it must have been like to ride "American's finest suburban railway." ■

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Westchester was soon a memory.

If you know where to look, you can still find traces of the railway throughout Westchester County. The right of way south from White Plains has been largely reclaimed by nature over the last 70 years. The Quaker Ridge station is now a private residence. The station at Heathcote served as an ambulance corps base for many years until it was purchased and renovated for use as a

real estate office. Larchmont Gardens sees continued use as a meeting place for the Girl Scouts. East Third Street station in Mount Veron is forlorn, having stood abandoned for many years. You can easily pick out the former right of way along the New Haven Line between Mamaroneck and Port Chester. Six stations between Dyre Avenue and East 180th Street continue to carry out their function as part of the

For more information about the history of the NYW&B, please visit [www.nywbry.com](http://www.nywbry.com)