

The Dangerous Old Fairport Road Underpass

Increased auto traffic in the first quarter of the 20th century resulted in a growing recognition of the dangers associated with street level railroad crossings. As a result, these crossings were replaced with overpasses or underpasses when possible. In the case of the first bridge that carried the West Shore Railroad over Fairport Road just east of Baird Road, the old underpass itself was a hazard. Automobiles and pedestrian traffic were funneled through a narrow curving tunnel under the railway. A Fairport newspaper described the underpass as “so extremely dangerous in approach from either side, drivers instinctively slow down as they approach, through inability to determine instantly whether the hole leads through or simply into a cave.”



The Underpass Garage at the left was located where Fairport Hots operates today, at the corner of Baird and Fairport Roads. In the distance is most likely a temporary replacement for the first West Shore Railroad bridge, replaced with the current structure in 1936.

In February of 1930, several hearings were held in Rochester by the New York State Public Service Commission regarding the unsafe underpass at Fairport Road. Replacement of the underpass was contemplated as part of a larger project to widen Fairport Road from the canal west several miles to East Avenue. About fifty Perinton residents attended one such hearing. Those in attendance included members of the Fairport Fire Department, the Highway Department, and Mark B. Furman, District Superintendent of Schools, whose father had died in an auto-train accident fifteen years earlier at Penfield Road, discussed in my previous column. He stated that over thirty children must use the underpass to reach the Midvale School on Baird Road each day, and that two pupils had been seriously injured after being struck by cars. He said he had gone so far as to seek cooperation from the Sheriff's office in "deputizing some of the older boys to aid in the situation."

The New York Central Railroad Company offered what many viewed as a self-serving proposal to remedy the safety concerns, one that would make no changes to the railway or underpass at all, but instead would widen the street's approaches at each end of the bridge. Perinton residents in attendance at the hearings did not support this proposal, and it soon became apparent that the old underpass would be replaced with a new, improved design.

By late September of 1930, the state announced an order "approving the widening and straightening of the dangerous underpass at the West Shore railroad just west of Fairport". The newspaper linked the issue to the safety of school children, citing the most recent accident, "when a schoolboy, Marvin Holter, of Jefferson Avenue, was seriously hurt by an automobile in front of which he attempted to cross. The lad is now entirely recovered and normal." Although the state's engineer testified that "there is no question that the road will be under construction this fall or next spring", in fact, it took another six years for the dangerous underpass to be replaced. It appears the priority was to eliminate a large number of dangerous street level railroad crossings across the county, prior to replacing the old Fairport Road underpass.