

Treacherous Railroad Crossing Closed in 1959

By Bill Poray, Perinton Town Historian

Accidents at Fairport railroad crossings were far more common in the days prior to automatic signals and gates, activated when a train approaches the crossing. Over sixty years ago, a dangerous railroad crossing was eliminated in Fairport. Since the 1880s, the crossing allowed pedestrians, horse-drawn wagons and carriages, and later, cars and trucks, to pass over the railroad tracks at Water Street. The crossing, just north of Donnelley's Public House, the old Green Tavern, was removed in August of 1959, and for a good reason. It was a menace to safety.



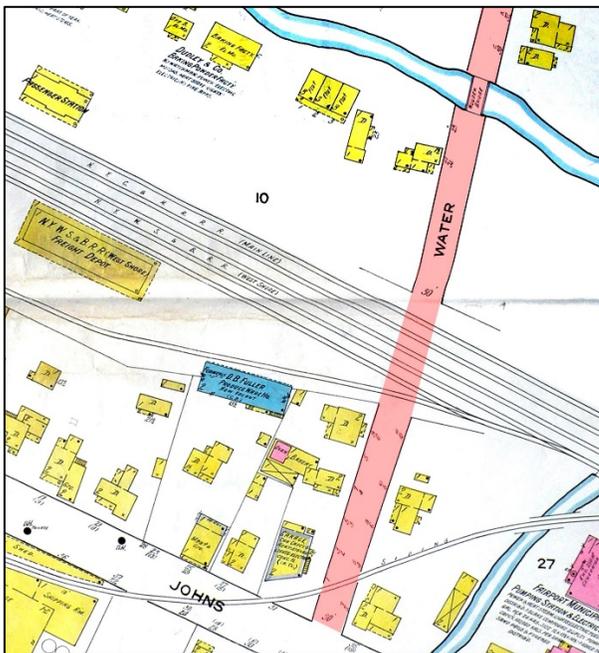
In this early 1900s image an eastbound passenger train approaches the Water Street crossing.

At the time, there was much debate regarding the benefits of replacing railroad employees functioning as crossing guards with automatic gates. A 1957 traffic study recorded 86 trains - 47 passenger and 39 freight trains, passed through the village of Fairport in a 24-hour period. According to testimony at a hearing before the Public Service Commission in Albany in 1957, the maximum speed of trains passing through Fairport was recorded at "50 miles per hour for freight, and 80 miles per hour for main line passenger trains." In the case of the Water Street crossing, 750 feet east of North Main Street, pedestrians and vehicle traffic were on their own. There was no crossing guard or gates of any kind.

On a snowy day in February of 1941, a fast-moving eastbound train originating from Chicago approached the village of Fairport. Just seconds after crossing Main Street, it slammed into an automobile operated by Adrian Zonneville, traveling south on Water Street, killing the driver. A page-one report of the accident in the Fairport Herald-Mail stated, "This crossing is guarded in no way, either by a watchman, flasher, or gates." The crossing at Water Street included five sets of tracks, and a siding, meaning vehicles and pedestrians were required to travel a distance of 80 feet or more to cross all the tracks.



Circa 1905 view looking southwest. The Water Street crossing is in the center of the image.



1915 Sanborn insurance map, showing Water Street, running north from John Street, now Lift Bridge Lane. The street straddled five sets of railroad tracks and a siding. Drivers and pedestrians utilized this crossing at their peril, as no flashing signals, gates or crossing guards were present.

By 1957, the railroad planned to close the crossing at Water Street. However, doing so would limit access to a handful of houses at the north end of the street. At the time, Railroad Street was an unimproved access way owned by the New York Central. The railroad and village authorities negotiated a plan to improve Railroad Street, which became village property in 1959. The agreement resulted in the closure of the Water Street crossing. At the same time, gates and signaling devices were installed at the crossings on North Main Street. The era of railroad crossing guards in Fairport was over.