

Turn-of-the Century Safety at the Main Street Railroad Crossings

By Bill Poray, Perinton Town Historian

The spring of 1904 found Fairport residents increasingly concerned that the North Main Street railroad crossings were unsafe, especially at night. The railroad companies employed a gatekeeper day and night for the tracks used by passenger trains. The gatekeeper operated the crossing gate, and, flag in hand, was responsible for stopping pedestrian and vehicle traffic as trains passed. However, there was no such employee on duty after dark on the busy New York Central freight tracks, and that was the cause of resident's concerns. Accidents, injuries, and deaths at or near the crossings were common. In response to the concerns of citizens, the Fairport Village Board pressured the railroad to station a flagman in the nighttime hours at the busy freight tracks.

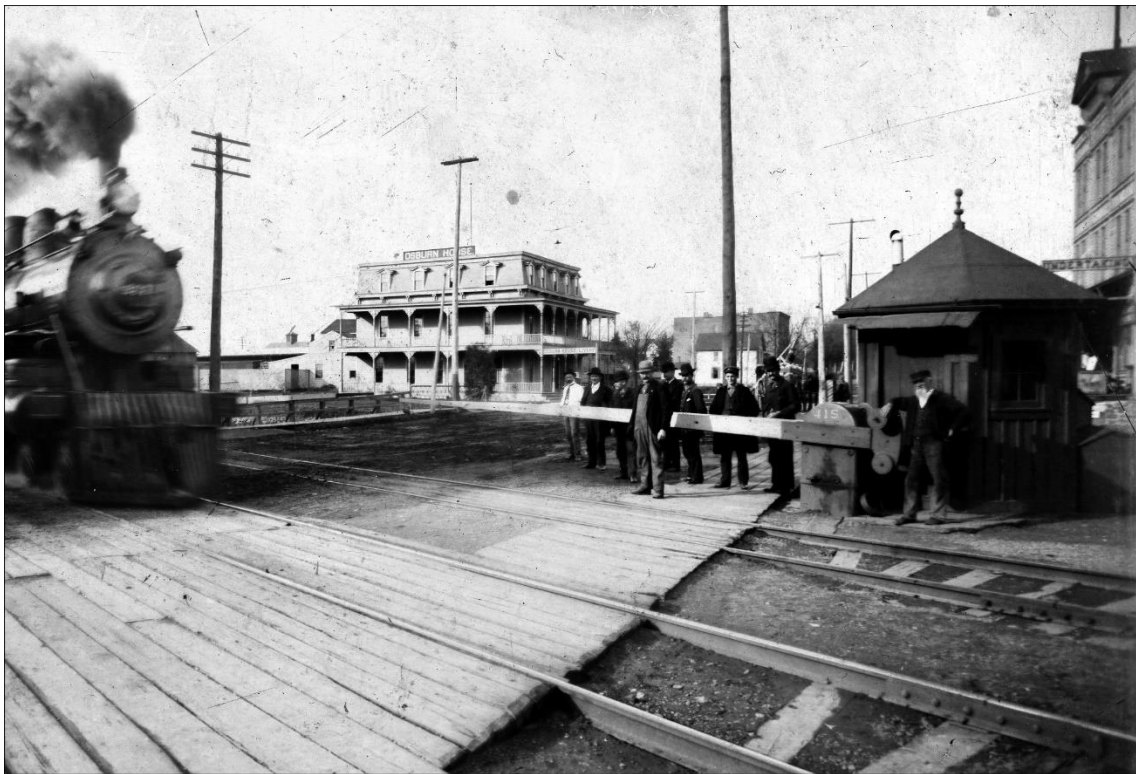


Ed Cary, proprietor of the Osburn House Hotel, a bit of which is visible at the left in this circa 1900 photograph. The New York Central freight station and railroad boxcars can be seen behind Mr. Cary.

In order to assess the validity of concerns for increased safety provisions, data on pedestrian and vehicle traffic crossing the tracks was collected for three nights in late July; a Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, between 7:00 pm and 7:00 am. Each night the volume of crossings recorded was far greater than I would have guessed. The busiest of the three nights studied was Saturday, July 30, 1904. During the twelve-hour overnight period, the following crossed the freight tracks: 4 automobiles; 117 bicycles; 273 rigs pulled by a single horse; and 64

rigs pulled by a team of horses. As for pedestrians, from 7:00 pm to 7:00 am, a staggering 1,418 individuals crossed the freight tracks, at their own peril. Over the three evenings studied, 3,496 pedestrians and vehicles crossed the freight tracks, without the aid of an operating gate or a flagman.

A few weeks after the study was completed, James Flannigan was walking along North Main Street on a Monday evening, when he heard the pained groans of a man in a ditch adjacent to the freight tracks. Identified as twenty-five year old Edward Louck, the badly injured man was taken to the Osburn House hotel, where he soon died. The coroner's investigation confirmed that Edward Louck had been struck by a passing freight train.



An eastbound train crosses North Main Street in this circa 1900 photograph. The Osburn House Hotel is in the center of the image. The gatekeeper is visible at the far right, next to his hut. At the far right is the building of the Monroe County Chemical Company.

Two weeks after Louck's death, fifty-three year old Michael Casey of Parce Avenue began a new job on the overnight shift at the freight tracks. He was hired to operate the gate, and was provided a flag, and instructed to help pedestrians and vehicles safely cross the tracks. Based on the crossing data collected on those three nights in July, it would seem he was not a lonely man.