

Darienite

News for Darien

<https://darienite.com>

The Great 10-Hour, New York-to-Chicago Railroad That Never Was: Cameron on Transportation

Author : David Gurliacci

Categories : [Opinion](#), [Transportation](#)

Tagged as : [Cameron on Transportation](#), [Cameron on Transportation 2017](#), [Jim Cameron 2017](#), [Jim Cameron's Transportation Column](#)

Date : April 21, 2017

What happens when a great transportation idea gets ahead of itself? Consider the story of the greatest American railroad that was never built.

Many people have heard of [The Twentieth Century Limited](#) and [The Broadway Limited](#), the trains of the [New York Central](#) and Pennsylvania Railroads that ran for decades between New York and Chicago.

Those daily trains defined deluxe, pampering passengers with plush Pullman cars, fine dining and even an on-train barber shop. But their circuitous routes made it a 16-hour trip.

Darienite

News for Darien

[*https://darienite.com*](https://darienite.com)

The New York Central followed the “water-level route” north to Albany, then across upstate New York and down the coast of Lake Erie. The Pennsylvania Railroad journeyed south to Philadelphia, then west to Pittsburgh and beyond.

Like this article? ...

- *Sign up for the [Darienite.com weekday newsletter](#).*
- *Like [Darienite.com on Facebook](#).*
- *Follow [Darienite.com on Twitter](#).*

Today, Amtrak’s New York City-to-Chicago run takes 19 hours following the route of the Twentieth Century. Compare that to modern Chinese high-speed trains that run from Beijing to Shanghai — about the same distance as New York to Chicago — in just five hours.

But back in 1905, inventor Alexander Miller had a better idea: Build a new, flat and straight interurban railroad that would run directly between the two cities, [The Chicago-New York Electric Air Line Railroad](#).

The train would be “faster than the limited” and make the run in 10 hours for \$10 a ticket. Powered by the new marvel of electricity, the train could operate at a third of the cost of steam engines. By running in a straight line, the 743-mile route would be 168 to 237 miles shorter than its competitors. In principal, it was brilliant. And the timing was perfect.

However, its interurban cars (think trolley cars on steroids) might not be as plush, but they average 70-plus mph thanks to the nearly flat grade and no pesky grade crossings. There would also be few stops since the route would bypass all major cities. And this train would be fast — 100 mph on the straightaways.

Five million dollars worth of stock was issued with shareholders promised first priority for thousands of potential jobs. Railroads were the dot-coms of the era, and people rushed to invest.

With no bonded debt, the company’s prospectus promised stock dividends of 14 percent on top of the shares’ appreciation. You just couldn’t lose.

Construction began from west to east, as the railroad opened in stages to help pay for itself and construction toward New York. A mighty four-track railroad, akin to Metro-North, was envisioned to be completed in just 10 years. Spur lines were planned to serve the cities by-passed by the “air line.”

Then the depression hit in 1907 and 1908.

Construction got as far as Gary, Indiana, about 25 miles from Chicago, when the money started to run out. The engineering of the railroad was just too expensive.

Shareholders revolted when they heard the railroad's officers were getting fat paychecks as the coffers were drained. A bailout by British banks never happened.

Shareholders lost everything. The impending arrival of automobiles might have doomed the line anyway. Even The Twentieth Century and Broadway Limited eventually succumbed to the competition of true "airlines."

But for a brief moment, a century ago, a dream nearly became a reality for the greatest railroad that was left unfinished.

Jim Cameron on Trains and Metro-North

- [Pay Your Fare Even When the Conductor Doesn't Ask — or You're Shoplifting](#) (Dec. 4, 2016)
- [Trains Slip Sliding on Wet Leaf Goo is a Bigger Mess Than You May Think](#) (Nov. 26, 2016)
- [Staying Safe on the Train](#) (Nov. 19, 2016)
- [The Billion Dollar Bridge](#) (Nov. 17, 2016)
- [Politicians and Promises](#) (Nov. 15, 2016)
- [Metro-North Hasn't Enforced Quiet Car Rules, But They're Expanding Quiet Cars](#) (Dec. 30)
- [How a 10% ConnDOT Cut Would Affect Connecticut: Cameron on Transportation](#) (Jan. 10)
- [Predictions for Planes, Trains & Automobile Traffic in 2017: Cameron on Transportation](#) (Jan. 14)
- [CT's Problem with Turning Commuter Drivers into Train Riders Is Lack of Station Parking: Cameron on Transportation](#) (Feb. 10)
- [Metro-North Could Learn a Lot from Amtrak: Cameron on Transportation](#) (Feb. 24)
- [A Train Station in East Bridgeport Would Be a \\$300M Waste of Money: Cameron on Transportation](#) (March 3)
- [Where the Good News Is for New Haven Line Commuters: Cameron on Transportation](#) (March 9)

Darienite

News for Darien

<https://darienite.com>

Jim Cameron has been a Darien resident for 25 years. He is the founder of the Commuter Action Group and also serves on the Darien RTM and as program director for Darien TV79. The opinions expressed in this column are only his own. You can reach him at CommuterActionGroup@gmail.com

Republished with permission of Hearst CT Media.