

**Mount Beacon Incline Railway
Restoration Society**
Post Office Box 1248
Beacon, New York 12508
administrator@inclinerrailway.org
www.inclinerrailway.org



MOUNT BEACON

INCLINE RAILWAY
SINCE 1902

History of the Mount Beacon Incline Railway

The rails are silent now, but from 1902 to 1978 they hummed under the weight of two sturdy cars making thousands of passenger runs annually. Traveling 2,200 feet of sheer mountainside track-way to 1,540 feet above sea-level, this was the Mount Beacon Incline Railway, the world's steepest passenger funicular. Easily the number one tourist attraction in the Hudson Valley during its heyday, the railway brought over 3.5 million people to the summit of Mount Beacon and enjoyed a perfect safety record during its years of operation.

The Incline was the vision of several Manchester, New Hampshire entrepreneurs who were charmed by Mount Beacon's incredible history, natural beauty, and panoramic vistas. Partnering with prosperous local businessmen, by 1901 they had raised enough capital to begin building. The Otis Elevator Company engineered the railway and supervised its construction by several subcontractors. These included the Mohawk Construction Co. of Mohawk, New York and the Ramapo Iron Works of Hillburn, New York (which manufactured the railway cars).

The railway was built by hard men in the dead of winter, requiring every bit of their grit, endurance and ingenuity. When their strength failed, pack mules picked up the slack. As spring approached, the work gangs could marvel at their handiwork: a "classic" funicular with an upper powerhouse; an average grade of almost 65 percent; two trestles; and for 800 feet of its length, a maximum grade of 74 percent, greater than that of its contemporaries. In fact, when restored to operation, this engineering marvel will again be the steepest incline railway of its length in the United States.

The Otis Elevator Company, then of Yonkers, New York, had an impressive track record when it came to mountain railways. They had installed several in the Northeast prior to the Beacon Incline, to include the [Otis Elevating Railway](#) in the Catskills and the [Prospect Mountain Railway](#) at Lake George, New York. The Mount Beacon Incline Railway bore several similarities to these, as they were all designed by the same Otis engineer, Mr. Thomas E. Brown. For example, each track bed was standard cut and fill, 3-foot gauge, with stone ballast along its length, and each railway had an upper powerhouse.

With every new railway, however, Otis improved upon previous designs, and the funicular on Mount Beacon enjoyed several technological advancements over its

Preserving The Past, Building The Future

predecessors. It was the first with an electrically driven power plant, the others having been steam-driven (and then later upgraded to electric drive). Its cars were also equipped with electric lighting and signaling systems, much like the Prospect Mountain Railway, but unlike that railway, the copper signaling cables were strung overhead rather than beside the track bed, a much more reliable method.

The Mount Beacon Incline Railway was an unqualified success from its opening in 1902 until the late-1920s. This was due not just to the railway itself, but also to the history of the mountain and the entertainment that awaited visitors at its top. Mount Beacon had a basic appeal to many Americans because of its role in the Revolutionary War, when it served as part of the Continental Army's early warning and signaling system. In fact, the mountain takes its name from the beacon fires lit upon its summit during that conflict.

The developers of the Incline knew, however, that history and natural beauty alone would not entice a sufficient number of people to the mountain. Therefore, as was the case with many American mountain railways, a casino and hotel were built on the summit. Here visitors could enjoy the natural setting and incredible vistas without leaving the comforts of civilization behind. While people sweltered through summer days in the industrial centers of Beacon and Newburgh, below, visitors to the mountain enjoyed temperatures ten degrees cooler, refreshing breezes, spring water rising from mountain aquifers, as well as dancing and dining.

In 1926, the Mount Beacon Incline Railway and resort complex enjoyed a banner year. Over 110,000 passengers roared the railway to the mountaintop, and there was every reason to believe that business would continue to grow with each successive season. Several railroads converged on the Beacon-Newburgh area; and the Hudson River, the super-highway of its day, made the mountain accessible to millions in New York City, who could take day excursions by steamship to reach the railway. From riverside, a short trolley ride brought visitors to the base of the mountain. The railway's continued success seemed inevitable.

There was no indication that October 16, 1927 would mark a turning point in the life of the Incline Railway. While it was late in the summer season, several hundred people had enjoyed a day's pleasure at the summit. Shortly after midnight, however, a fire broke out in the Casino that quickly spread to the Beaconcrest Hotel, destroying both. Only the Incline's powerhouse survived. With the railway still in operation, rebuilding was able to commence, and a new Casino opened in 1928. Before the hotel could be rebuilt, however, the nation entered the Great Depression. There would be future good days for the railway, but its high-water mark had been reached.

The 1930s and 1940s were decades of crisis in America, and the twin blows of the Depression and World War II hurt tourism nationwide. The Mount Beacon Incline Railway was no exception: its ridership declined significantly during these years. It somehow survived these lean times, however, despite a second fire in 1934 that destroyed 480 feet of track way and a third in 1936 that destroyed one railcar and 300 feet of track. With the successful end of the war and the return of prosperity, however, the Incline

seemed poised to enjoy new fortunes. It was still a technological marvel, remained in a beautiful and historic setting, and still had its Casino awaiting visitors at the summit. But there was another threat to its prosperity: the automobile. Cars provided Americans with the ability to see what they wanted, when they wanted. No longer were they constrained by steamship and trolley schedules. While these earlier modes of transportation had funneled visitors toward major attractions, they too were slowly killed off by America's love affair with the auto.

The fifties saw a steady flow of visitors to the Incline (as well as *another* fire in 1954), and business was sufficiently good for the railway's president, J.M. Lodge, to estimate that 1.5 million passengers had ridden the railway by 1959. The sale of the railway in 1960 by Mr. Lodge, however, was perhaps a sign that it was no longer as lucrative as it had once been. A New York City-based business consortium named Mountaintop Lands Ltd. had grand plans for redevelopment of the mountain and railway, none of which ever materialized. But the Incline, by then clearly showing its years, continued to run.

By 1963, ridership of the Incline was down to 20-30,000 passengers annually. Declining revenue had the railway in a precarious situation, and the last thing it needed was another fire. Yet fire struck again on November 10, 1967, 40 years after the Beaconcrest Hotel had gone up in flames. This time it was the lower station that was destroyed, with a railway car burning up as well. The financial burden this placed upon the Incline's owners was so significant that no real capital improvements would ever be undertaken again, and service would become sporadic as the incline entered its last decade of activity: the seventies.

The 1970s was the beginning of the end for the Mount Beacon Incline Railway. Paralyzed by debt and continuously ravaged by fire, it struggled mightily. In 1972, the New York State Department of Tourism closed the railway for unsanitary conditions at the upper station, and it didn't open again for regular service until May 30, 1975, the 73rd anniversary of its operation. That return to "regular" service was short-lived, however, as the Incline continued to operate sporadically until 1978, when the owners lost title to the land at the top of the railway due to a tax sale. Divided, bankrupt and in disrepair, the Mount Beacon Incline Railway locked its station doors, parked its two cars at mid-track to discourage vandalism, and awaited better times.

In 1982, it seemed those better times might somehow be on the way when the railway and its upper powerhouse were both placed on the National Register of Historic Places by the U.S. Department of the Interior. The reality, however, was quite different. One final, cataclysmic fire swept the mountain in September 1983, destroying the railway from top to bottom. Nothing was spared--both stations, the powerhouse, the cars, the track way and trestles: all were consumed by a suspicious fire, likely the result of vandalism. It was a sad ending to a historic railway that embodied so many of the things inherently good about America: the pursuit of a dream, the excitement of the journey, and the harmonious blending of technology and nature.

The Mount Beacon Incline is the Coney Island Cyclone of mountaintop railways. Though no longer the steepest in the world or a technological marvel by 21st century standards, it earned its place in history by operating across four generations, thrilling millions, and always getting its passengers back down the mountain safely. To restore it is to honor those who came before us and to preserve a tremendous piece of American industrial, engineering, transportation and leisure history.

