

# 2010

## Mount Beacon Incline Railway



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<sup>1</sup> Photo Courtesy of JuneNY flickr.com user. Uploaded March 15, 2010

The Mount Beacon Incline Railway provided easy access to a breathtaking view of the Hudson Valley. Rising 1,540 feet in the air, the peak overlooked New York from Kingston to the Manhattan skyline. The Incline Railway served as a popular tourist attraction throughout the 1900s.

Unfortunately, it ceased operation in 1978 and currently the only way to reach the top is by hiking. A group



**View from the top of Mount Beacon. Both the Newburgh-Beacon Bridge and the Mid-Hudson Bridge are visible.**

known as the Mount Beacon Incline Railway Restoration Society (MBIRRS) dedicated themselves to restoring the attraction with its history and the environment in mind. They hope that “The Incline Railway will serve as a living museum and centerpiece asset in the restoration of the Mount Beacon summit as a scenic, historic, educational and recreational resource.”<sup>2</sup> They also want to make the peak more accessible to the elderly, the young and handicapped Hudson Valley residents and tourists.

In 1901, Manchester and New Hampshire businessmen Jesse Pattee and Henry George recognized the economic potential that the mountain held. They capitalized on the mountain’s natural landscape by installing 2,200 feet of passenger tracks to cart tourists up and down the mountain. Each ride cost just \$1, which for NYC residents included a steamship ride up the mighty Hudson, a trolley ride up and down the mountain, and transportation back home down

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<sup>2</sup> Mount Beacon Inclined Railway Restoration Society. "Mission, Vision and Strategic Goals of the Mount Beacon Incline Railway Restoration Society." (Mission Statement, Beacon), 2010. [http://www.inclinerailway.org/society\\_overview.htm](http://www.inclinerailway.org/society_overview.htm).

nature's highway. Such engineering was a modern marvel: the power and precision to scale the mountainside at 500 ft/minute, the rumble of the two 75-horse power engines, and the breathtaking view provided an unforgettable experience. The mountain top was home to a superbly provisioned hotel and a casino/dance hall for guests' pleasure. Pattee and George were able to recognize what lay before them and wanted to share it with their community. The same sights, the same mountain, and the same goal still exists today. The only obstacle left to overcome is putting it all back together.<sup>3</sup>



**Remains of the hotel atop Mount Beacon**

The history of the Incline Railway is filled with “ups” and “downs.” Over the years the tourist attraction grew and expanded, but it also met some difficulties. Plagued by fire, the Great Depression, and World War II, the tourism industry of Mt. Beacon suffered. By one way or another, the Incline railway managed to keep its

doors open until 1978. In an unfortunate series of events, the land, the power, and the beauty of the mountain that a couple of men mastered had been left to waste away.

To get it started, in 1901 Pattee and George sought the help of the Otis Elevator Company to realize their dream. Otis then supervised various contractors in the Inclined Railway's construction from October 1901 to May 1902. They battled the winter, rain, and an average gradient of 65%, then the steepest passenger incline railway in the world. The railway itself boasted 2,200 feet of track, two electrically illuminated passenger cars and about 110,000

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<sup>3</sup>Mount Beacon Inclined Railway Restoration Society,. "History of the Mount Beacon Incline Railway." (Article, Beacon), 2010. [http://www.inclinerailway.org/history\\_construction.htm](http://www.inclinerailway.org/history_construction.htm).

guests annually, even though it only operated 5 months of the year. This \$165,000<sup>4</sup> investment brought tourists up 1,540 feet a 36° angle for nearly a century.<sup>5</sup>

The Incline Railway began to serve as an escape from the hustle and bustle of commercial and manufacturing centers throughout the Hudson Valley, as its peak years of operation coincided with the industrialization of New York State. Newburgh, New York City, and Beacon, known as the “hat making capital of America,” swelled with factories. To be taken from an urban to rural environment within four minutes served as a refreshing experience to counter the rapid expansion, allowing the Incline Railway to function well with the Naturalist movement that had begun. The hotels that awaited guests on the top served as month-long vacation rooms for prominent and wealthy persons who needed a break from the city air. The casinos and views gave a pleasurable day trip to the less affluent middle-class families without completely isolating themselves from civilization. The Railway was further stimulated by Hudson River steamships, bringing thousands of New York City tourists closer to what would have otherwise been inaccessible to them. The booming business showed no signs of slowing down until 1927 when a fire damaged their infrastructure.<sup>6</sup>

Fire, technology, and a shift in American leisure patterns would eventually close the Incline Railway. The fire of 1927 foreshadowed the Great Depression of the 30s and 40s and two more fires within those two decades. The predominately wooden infrastructure, poor land management, and wild brush accumulation made the Railway particularly vulnerable to fires, especially in its later years. In this sense, aged technology, or a lack thereof hurt the Railway. On the other hand, new technology also hurt it. The rise of the automobile downplayed the innovation of the Incline Railway. Cars provided people with the opportunity to travel where

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., This is roughly \$4,000,000 based on data from 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

they wanted, when they wanted. They expanded the distance an individual could travel in one day. This advancement ultimately hurt Mount Beacon more than helped it – the novelty and freedom of cars reduced the attraction of a railway. In sum, an economic decline coupled with later innovative technologies led to a decline in tourism, and ultimately in business for the railway.<sup>7</sup>

Once the decline had begun, it would never be able to restore itself to what it once was. Businesses failed to reopen at the peak as the Railway tried to cover up its aging infrastructure. To add insult to injury, the NYS Department of Tourism temporarily shut down the railway for sanitary conditions. A few years later the land was split and sold in a tax sale. Its doors were closed, the trains ceased to move, and business was no more.

Unfortunately, closing down the railway wasn't enough. Perhaps the most devastating fire came after the Incline Railway had closed. A suspicious fire in 1983 engulfed the entirety of the tracks that remained on the mountain and scorched the operating houses



**Dual 75-Horse Power engines used to power the railway. A fire scorched the engine house.**

and buildings that the previous fires failed to reach. Almost all hope of ever reopening the tourist attraction had gone up in flames. Since the fire, several inspired Hudson Valley residents have dedicated themselves to restoring this historic treasure.<sup>8</sup>

The Incline Society began as a grassroots organization in 1996 under the leadership of current Beacon Mayor Steve Gold and Andrew Chiusano. While those gentlemen remain on the Society's Board of Trustees, today the Society is led by President and CEO Anne Lynch. These

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.



dedicated citizens sought to revitalize the town of Beacon, and the Incline Railway seemed a great way to do so. The Society's efforts are finally gaining the momentum needed to reach its restoration goals. Cost/benefit analyses are now complete and reconstruction cost estimates have been solicited. The Society's target completion date for the renovation is set for July 4, 2013, the centennial anniversary of the city of Beacon, and would serve as the focal point of the celebration. A recent study, *Economic and Fiscal Impact*, shows that nearly 2 million Canadians and Americans are within a day's trip to the Incline Railway that would open up more than an estimated 700 new jobs for Hudson Valley residents, and perhaps more jobs than that.<sup>9</sup> Upon its restoration it would be the steepest Incline railway on the East Coast. The Railway would bring more than just economic benefits. A day trip to the peak is a refreshing experience. It can bring the balance of work and leisure that so many people lack. It seems the only thing preventing its reconstruction is a lack of publicity and a resulting lack of funds. Projected costs for the not-for-profit attraction run about \$14 million for construction and another \$4 million for its companion museum start up.<sup>10</sup>

The new railway will not have the problems of the old. It will be obviously more technologically advanced than the first while providing the same historic and natural beauty that it always had. In fact, most of the railway is still in great condition and can be shaped-up and reused for the restoration. The entire complex will be compliant with the American Disability Association's guidelines. Less wood will be used in



**The beginning of the railway. It has since been covered by overgrowth but is in working condition.**

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<sup>9</sup> Dr. Dean Dudley, *Economic and Fiscal Impact*, West Point, 2010.

<sup>10</sup>Michael Colarusso, interview by Peter Rottenbucher. *Chief Operating Officer* (May 27, 2010).

an effort to maintain the environment and prevent fires. There will also be a fire suppression system and improved land management to ensure the quality of the machinery and safety of the environment and its visitors. The goal for the viewing gallery is a zero-energy building – entirely energy self-sufficient. It will be built using “green” building practices outlined by the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC). The USGBC cites the benefits of green buildings as improving air and water quality, the ability to enhance and protect ecosystems and biodiversity, and operation cost reduction, among many others.<sup>11</sup> The viewing gallery will blend into its environment, rather than appear as an intrusive addition. Plans for development are still in the making. The addition of the museum will provide an insight that previous visitors were unable to receive. What should be clear is that the Restoration Society is working not for profit, but to improve and build upon the Hudson Valley for its residents and visitors. They are trying to envision a finalized project which all people can enjoy: the history buff, the grandparent, the hiker, and the foreigner.<sup>12</sup>

There are a couple more issues to be addressed to prevent concern for its reconstruction. It is incredibly safe, with a perfect passenger safety record. With the modern improvements that will be made, it should only be even safer. Moreover, it is incredibly quiet due to a continuous steel track. Conservative estimates for a year round operated system project 110,000 annual visitors, stimulating local business and economic expansion for the Hudson Valley. Taxes will not be used for the construction of the railway, it should be entirely self-sufficient. The entire complex will be well-accommodated, including restrooms, refuse bins, pet-access, and more. And of course; all the old hiking trails will be open as they are now.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.usgbc.org/DisplayPage.aspx?CMSPageID=1718>

<sup>12</sup> Michael Colarusso, interview by Peter Rottenbacher. *Chief Operating Officer* (May 27, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Mount Beacon Incline Railway Restoration Society. *Frequently Asked Questions*. 2010.

<http://www.inclinerailway.org/faq.htm> (accessed May 27, 2010).

With so much history behind it, so much passion, and so much yet to be experienced, the Hudson Valley and its inhabitants would be doing themselves and tourists an injustice by failing to take action. Help is always welcomed, whether through donation or volunteering. Donations can be made on the MBIRRS website or at any of their various events. Volunteering can also be registered for at their website. You can serve as a tour guide, historian, photographer, marketer, event planner, and many other roles. This project cannot be completed without the efforts of the Hudson Valley residents. Become a part of the movement, of your community, and of history – get involved with the restoration of the Incline Railway, “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.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> MBIRRS, “History of Mount Beacon Inclined Railway,” 2010.