



*Busy railroad and complicated at-grade crossing have challenged drivers since horse-and-buggy era*  
**'Hamilton's Death Trap' scheduled to disappear under South  
Hamilton overpass after 125 years of wishing; formal  
groundbreaking set Aug. 17**

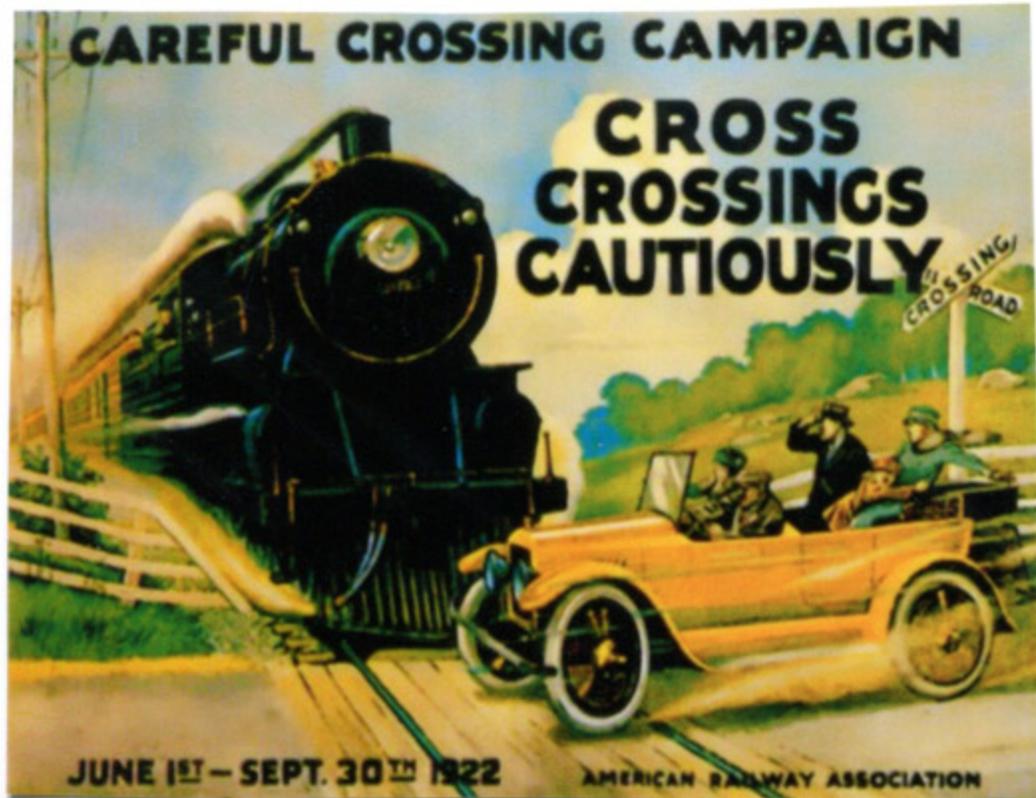
*(Jim Blount, chairman of the board of the Butler County Transportation Improvement District, will participate in the groundbreaking for the South Hamilton Overpass.)*

**Compiled by Jim Blount**

At least 11 times in about 125 years, there's been a concerted effort to eliminate the at-grade crossing at South Hamilton, once the site of a large, busy railroad yard vital to Hamilton industry. Despite its economic importance, it also was regarded as "Hamilton's Death Trap."

No one knows exactly how many people have died at the complicated intersection and crossing where Central and Pleasant avenues meet on the west side of the tracks and connect to Grand Boulevard, Dixie Highway and East Avenue on the east. In one year, 1910, local newspapers reported 12 fatalities there.

Some older residents, recalling their youth, remember parents imploring them "not to drive across that crossing when you learn how to drive!"



In recent decades, the death rate has declined, but there are still accidents on the tricky crossing. Few recent mishaps have involved train/motor vehicle collisions. Instead, many have been two-vehicle sideswiping accidents, or single cars or trucks running off the side of narrow lanes crossing the tracks at an unusual angle. Poor visibility -- especially at night -- has contributed to the problems.



**In August 2013 a semi-tractor trailer crashed into the crossing warning structure on Central Avenue between East and Pleasant avenues, damaging the crossing arms and lights. The driver had ignored the No Trucks signs posted on the approaches on both sides of the South Hamilton crossing.**

Vehicles leaving the right-of-way and stuck on the mainline tracks usually cause emergency stops and delays for railroad traffic for miles north and south of the city.

Until the late 1950s, the South Hamilton railroad crossing was considered the city's most dangerous crossing and its No. 1 traffic bottleneck. In addition to dozens of through freight and passenger trains, the crossing was in the middle of a complex rail yard for most of its existence. Simultaneous switching movements near the crossing often confused drivers.

The gradual shutdown of General Motors' Fisher Body plant in Fairfield in the late 1980s reduced switching in the South Hamilton yard. The auto parts factory had generated between 50 and 70 outbound freight cars daily. In late December 1989, the last employee left the plant on the east side of Dixie Highway (Ohio 4), north of Symmes Road.

The late George Crout, a Middletown historian, said until the \$15 million High Street underpass opened in 1984, Hamilton had an unwanted distinction -- "The largest city in the nation divided by street level railroad tracks." The 19th century South Hamilton crossing helped sustain that negative label.

Now, in the 11th attempt to eliminate the crossing, a formal South Hamilton Overpass (SHX) groundbreaking is scheduled at 10:30 a.m. Wednesday, Aug. 17, at University Boulevard and Marshall Avenue, near the Lane Libraries Administration Center. Parish Auditorium at nearby Miami University Hamilton is the rain alternative.

\* \* \* \* \*

The danger and inconvenience of the wide, angular at-grade South Hamilton railroad crossing (SHX) have concerned Hamiltonians since Sept. 18, 1851, when the first train entered the city on the newly-built Cincinnati, Hamilton & Dayton Railroad (CH&D).

Public concern mounted in the 1890s horse-and-buggy era with rapid industrial growth in East Hamilton and a residential boom in Lindenwald, then outside the city. By 1900, the crossing was known as "Hamilton's Death Trap."

As industrial growth continued and the automobile became popular and affordable, public demand increased for either an underpass or overpass to avoid the busy tracks of the CH&D (later the Baltimore & Ohio, then the Chessie System and now CSX).

In 1860, a year before the Civil War, Ohio had 2,999 miles of railroad, up nearly four fold from 515

miles in 1850. By 1860, Hamilton had a busy rail line south to Cincinnati and three mainlines extending northeast, north and northwest from the city.

In one month, August 1887, the CH&D in Hamilton sold 8,432 passenger tickets, a total that didn't include discount tickets between Cincinnati and Hamilton. In that era, 170 coaches would have been needed to carry the more than 8,500 passengers departing the Hamilton station that month. In November 1887, the CH&D operated 50 passenger trains a day through the city, an average of more than two per hour.

A new CH&D timetable for "Cincinnati Suburban Service" in July 1900 included 37 trains to and from Hamilton. Weekdays there were 18 northbound and 19 southbound runs between the cities. of that total, six northbound and seven southbound were non-stop express trains between downtown Cincinnati and the Hamilton depot on South Fifth Street.

\* \* \* \* \*

A 1909 parks and boulevard plan prepared by George E. Kessler, a prominent St. Louis professional urban planner, was the first city document to propose an underpass at the busy South Hamilton crossing.

Citizens and city leaders supported an underpass after SHX accidents killed 12 people in 1910. Railroad traffic was increasing with 140 industries in the city. Daily activity included 80 freight trains, 64 passenger trains and numerous switching operations for local industries in the era before development of trucks and paved roads.

Horse-drawn vehicles still outnumbered cars in the 1910-1915 period when the Socialist Party, then strong in Southwest Ohio, opposed changing SHX. The party claimed an overpass or underpass would benefit "only the rich" who "could afford to buy automobiles," not the working man or the poor.

A 1911 report said "Hamilton has become the greatest tonnage producing station on the CH&D system," which included four states. The railroad handled an average of 5,000 freight cars a month in and out of the city; about 165 cars daily. Car capacity averaged about 35 tons. The number of daily freight trains had increased to 75 daily. The CH&D freight houses (demolished years ago) employed 78 people.

\* \* \* \* \*

The March 1913 flood -- when 75% of Hamilton was under water -- diverted attention and money to rebuilding the city's infrastructure instead of a South Hamilton underpass. Top priority was re-establishing railroad lines and yards vital to the recovery of local business and industry.



**The March 25, 1913, flood left jumbled freight cars and twisted and undermined tracks in the South Hamilton yards. Recovery costs dashed hopes for an underpass at the dangerous crossing.**

City council considered six SHX alternatives in December 1916, three underpass designs, ranging from \$88,000 to \$164,000, and three overpass plans, \$193,000 to \$332,000. Four months later, the U. S. entered World War I. Manpower and materials were limited or rationed for military use and inflation spiked project costs. Another complication was the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad's acquisition of the CH&D in mid 1917. Crossing improvement was tabled again.

\* \* \* \* \*

The first city master plan in 1920 urged combining the north-south railroads outside Hamilton and elevating mainlines through the city, eliminating all grade crossings, except for local switching. "The [city's] most vital problem in connection with the transportation situation is that of grade crossings," the plan said. "By concentrating attention and expenditures upon important points, a great saving would result to both city and railroads."

The master plan said "operation of trains through the heart of the city on grade, with the resultant delays to traffic and increasing dangers to life and property, shows clearly the necessity of removing tracks from the streets. The several fatal accidents in and near Hamilton in the last year [1920] should serve as incentives to abolish this source of danger."

At least 25 passenger trains on all railroads passed through Hamilton daily in 1920. Twenty years later -- when the Great Depression gave way to World War II -- the total was down about a dozen trains.

\* \* \* \* \*

A \$150,000 SHX plan was unveiled in 1929. A newspaper said coroner records "show heavy loss of life at the crossing and police reports for recent years reveal hundreds of accidents." The proposal was revealed a few weeks before the stock market crash. During the ensuing Great Depression, the city mercifully bore some of the burden of aiding jobless citizens. The SHX scheme was shelved.

In 1930, the B&O enlarged South Hamilton Yard to store 1,151 cars. It expanded to 19 tracks south of the crossing and 17 north of Central Avenue. The at-grade crossing wasn't changed. The yard's storage capacity was strained during the World War II years.

\* \* \* \* \*

Although exact figures were secret, World War II (1941-1945) railroad employment in Hamilton probably peaked between 400 and 500 people. Estimates include 250 to 350 B&O workers and 75 to

100 employed on the Pennsylvania.

World War II concerns boosted the number of railroad detectives, but exact total was a military secret. With at least 125 local factories, large and small, producing products or components for U. S. forces and allies, Hamilton was considered a potential target for sabotage. Plainclothes railroad police rode trains and patrolled railroad right-of-way, yards and properties in the 1940-1945 period. No major incidents were reported in Hamilton.

\* \* \* \* \*

During the steam locomotive era, SHX yards featured numerous supporting facilities: A semi-circular roadhouse with an 80-foot turntable. A 100-ton coaling tower. An oil house. Water towers. And office, shop and storage buildings used by Hamilton-based off-train workers, including clerks, track and car inspectors, section crews, signal operators and maintainers and other duties required to keep trains operating with safety.

The last steam locomotive operated through Hamilton guiding a B&O freight train in May 1958. A year later, in May 1959, two retired steam locomotives stored at SHX were sent to Cincinnati to be scrapped.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the 1960s, the city's emphasis shifted to railroad-related blockages on High Street where two railroad mainlines, only a block apart on the eastern edge of downtown, blocked the city's only complete east-west thoroughfare. In recent years, the Jack Kirsch High Street Underpass has separated vehicle traffic from 60 to 70 daily freight trains crossing High Street.



**The Jack Kirsch Underpass on High Street is the only grade separation on the busy north-south mainline through Hamilton shared by CSX and Norfolk Southern trains. Traffic is seldom as light as when this photo was taken on a weekend morning.**

In December 1970, the B&O reported about 250 employees based in Hamilton. The Penn Central (formerly the Pennsylvania and now Norfolk Southern) had 25 workers.

Crossing vehicle traffic started to decline in the late 1950s, but a 2005 study found an average of 1,660 vehicles delayed daily at SHX. It noted an average of 220 blockages each day with the total stoppage averaging 4,287 minutes (71.4 hours).

\* \* \* \* \*

In January 2010, the city requested the Butler County Transportation Improvement District (BCTID) to

become the lead agency in restarting the SHX project in cooperation with the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT) and the Ohio-Indiana-Kentucky Regional Council of Governments (OKI). For about two years, there's been some preliminary work and property acquisition for the project. Inter-government agreements that year led to the scheduled Aug. 17, 2016, groundbreaking. It's the first time in 11 tries over about 125 years that dirt will be moving for a South Hamilton Crossing Overpass. Construction bids were opened in April. Closing the "Hamilton Death Trap" is expected to cost \$32 million.

"Our second, east-west unfettered connection will make residential access, the movement of business goods and faster response for public safety a much easier proposition," said City Manager Joshua Smith.



**Grand Boulevard, upper left, will extend west on the overpass and connect to Pleasant Avenue and University Boulevard. Existing angular crossing is at the center right below the Pleasant Avenue label.**

An obvious benefit will be direct access between the Erie Highway (Ohio 4) business corridor on the east side of the overpass and Pleasant Avenue and University Boulevard on the west. It will provide a safer, quicker route to and from Miami University Hamilton and the Vora Technology Park. The city also owns develop-able land on the west side of the project. Revitalization of the Grand Boulevard-East Hamilton business district is another possibility.



Jim Blount's local history books are available in Hamilton at the Butler County Historical Society, 327 N. Second Street, and the Ross Avenue Barber Shop, 907 Ross Avenue. His history columns are posted periodically on the Lane Libraries web site and are also available via email subscription. A searchable archive of these columns, including Mr. Blount's columns from the Journal-News dating back to 1988, is available at [www.lanepi.org/blount](http://www.lanepi.org/blount).