

# WESTCHESTER'S FORGOTTEN RAILWAY

AN ACCOUNT OF

the



## New York, Westchester & Boston

RAILWAY COMPANY

BY  
ROGER ARCARA

REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION

including

**"WHEN THE WESTCHESTER WAS NEW"**

A collection of articles reprinted from railway trade magazines of 1910-1912, describing and illustrating the line in its early days.

# WESTCHESTER'S FORGOTTEN RAILWAY

By ROGER ARCARA

1912



1937

THE STORY OF A SHORT-LIVED SHORT LINE  
WHICH WAS AT ONCE AMERICA'S FINEST RAILWAY  
AND ITS POOREST:

## The NEW YORK, WESTCHESTER & BOSTON RAILWAY

REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION INCLUDING

# WHEN THE WESTCHESTER WAS NEW

Consisting of reproductions of seven articles about the

## NEW YORK, WESTCHESTER & BOSTON RAILWAY

From 1912 issues of "ELECTRIC RAILWAY JOURNAL" and  
"RAILWAY AGE GAZETTE"; and two articles from 1910 issues  
of the latter about the reconstruction and improvement of the

## HARLEM RIVER BRANCH

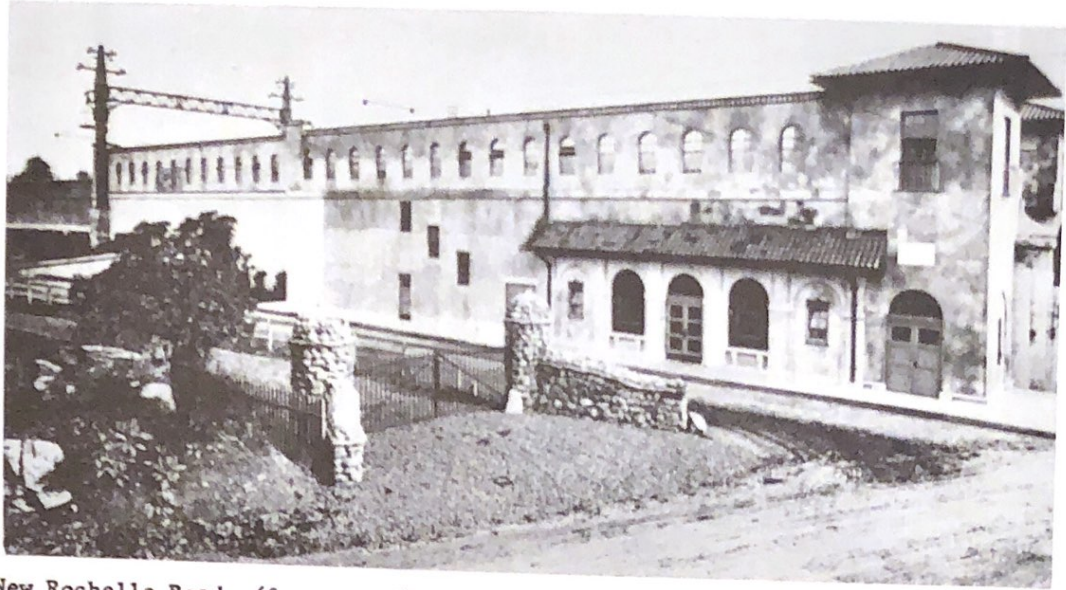
of the

*New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad*

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QUADRANT PRESS

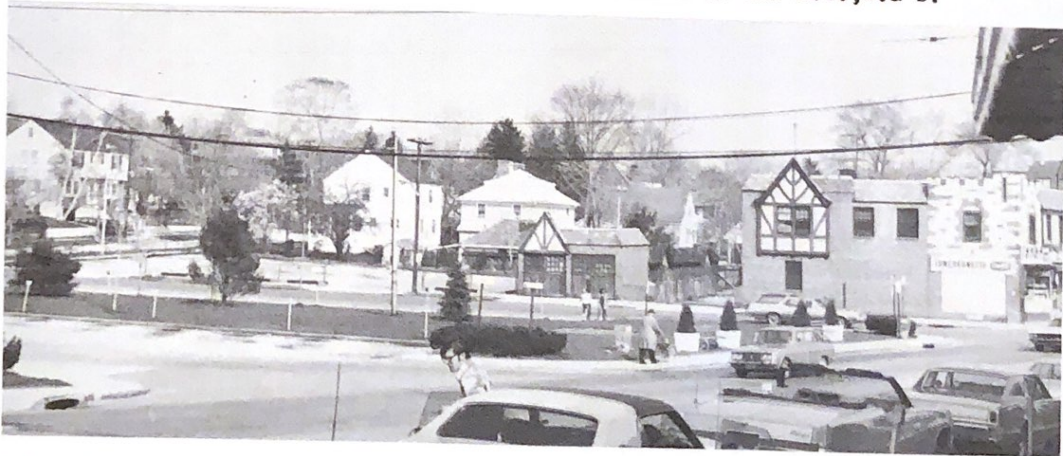
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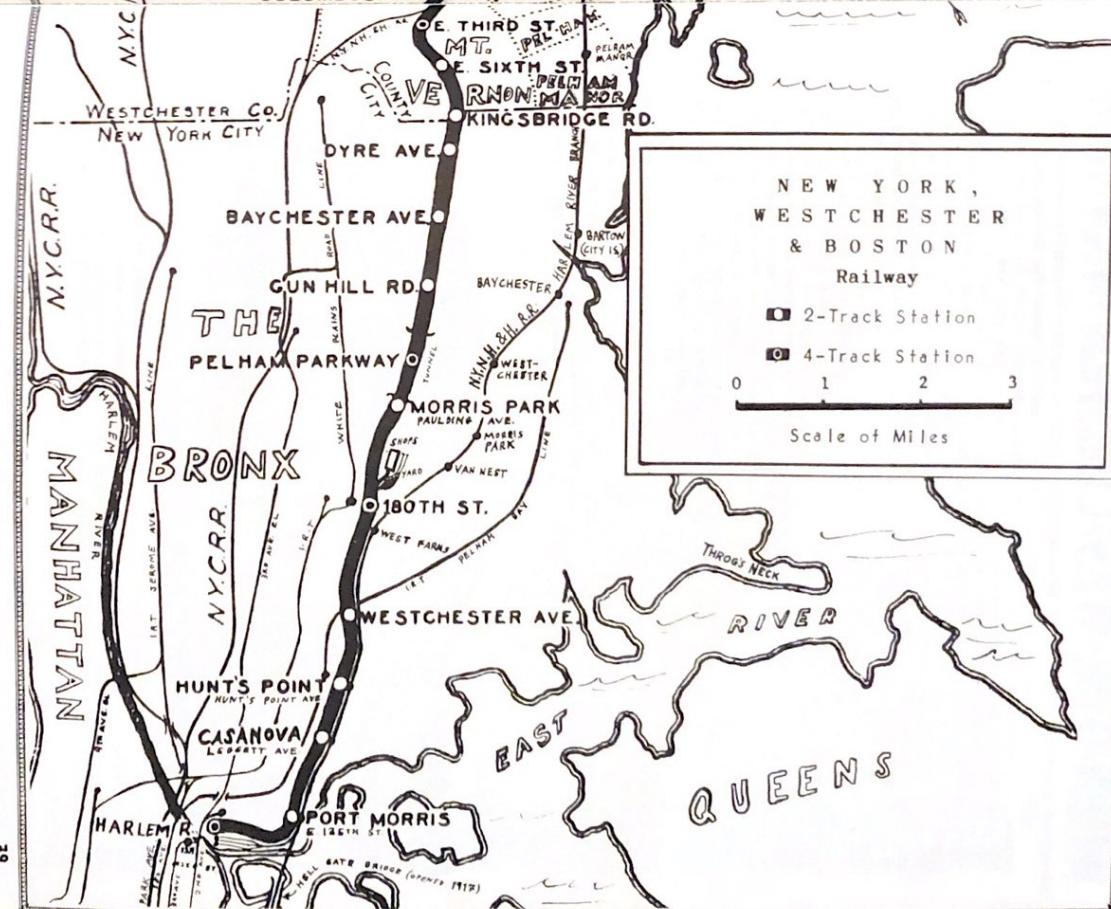
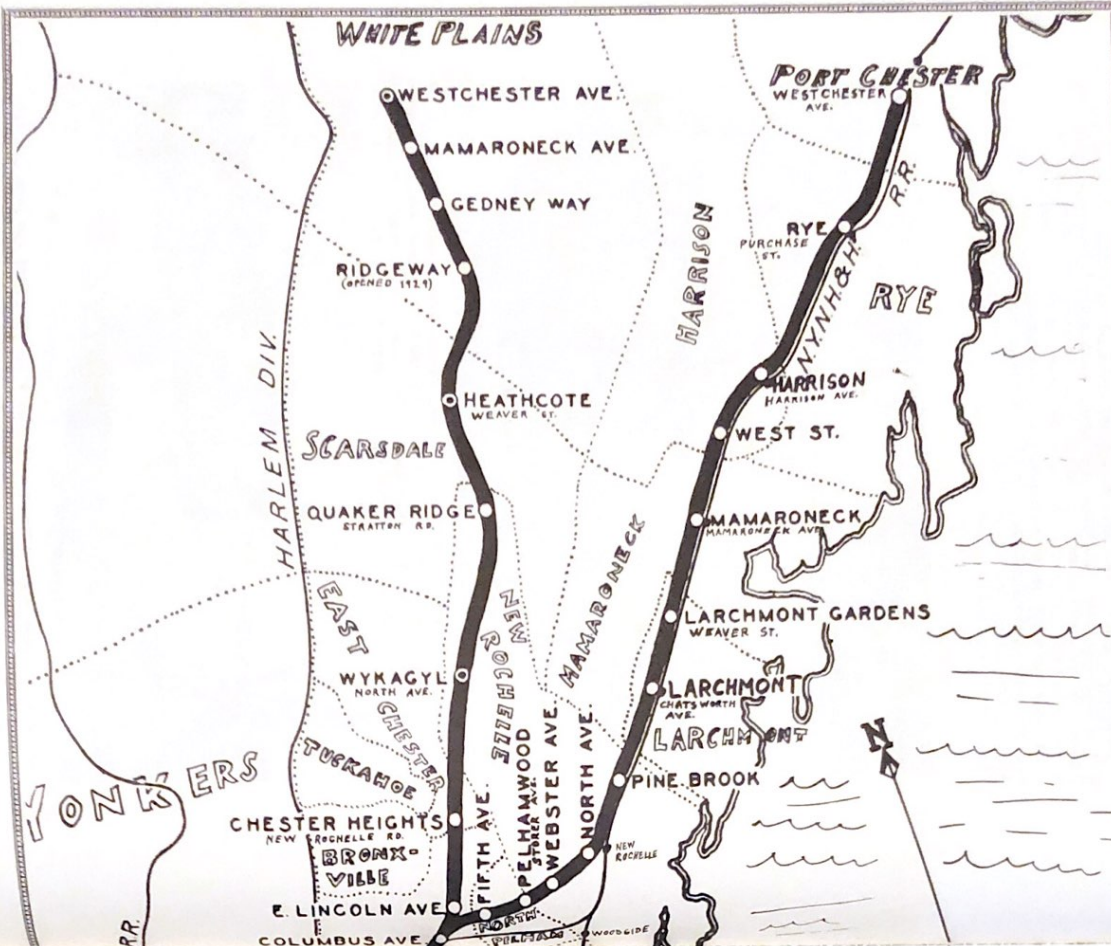
New Rochelle Road (foreground) wasn't even paved where it passed the Chester Heights station, in Eastchester, in the early days. Few persons lived nearby.





The empty shell of the once-attractive Chester Heights station became a decrepit eyesore after abandonment of the N.Y.,W.& B.



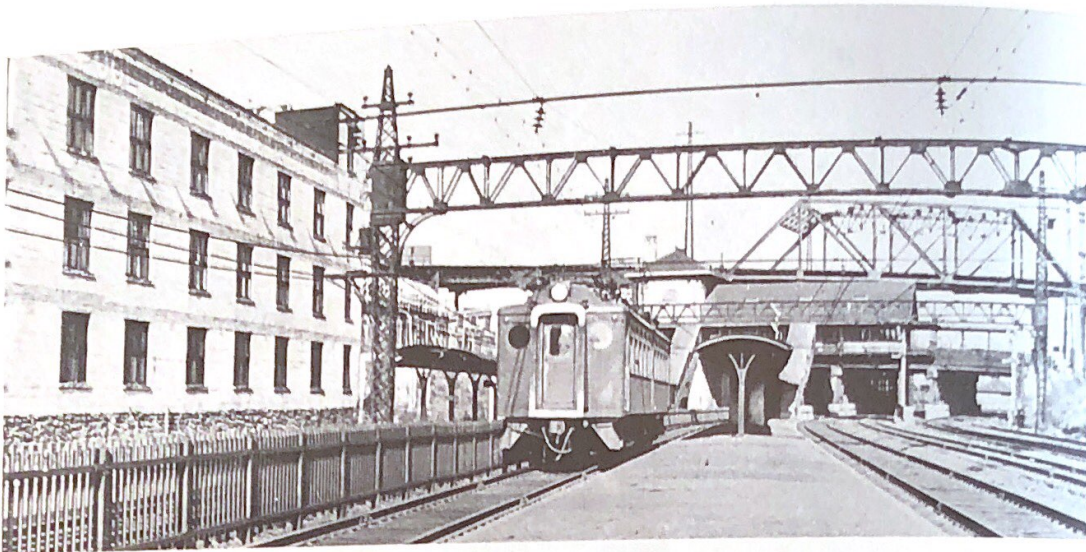
A broad, open plaza, with parking-spaces for automobiles, now forms the site of the Chester Heights station, long since demolished. This is now a busy enough neighbourhood, but no trace of the railway remains.



NEW YORK,  
WESTCHESTER  
& BOSTON  
Railway

 2-Track Station  
 4-Track Station

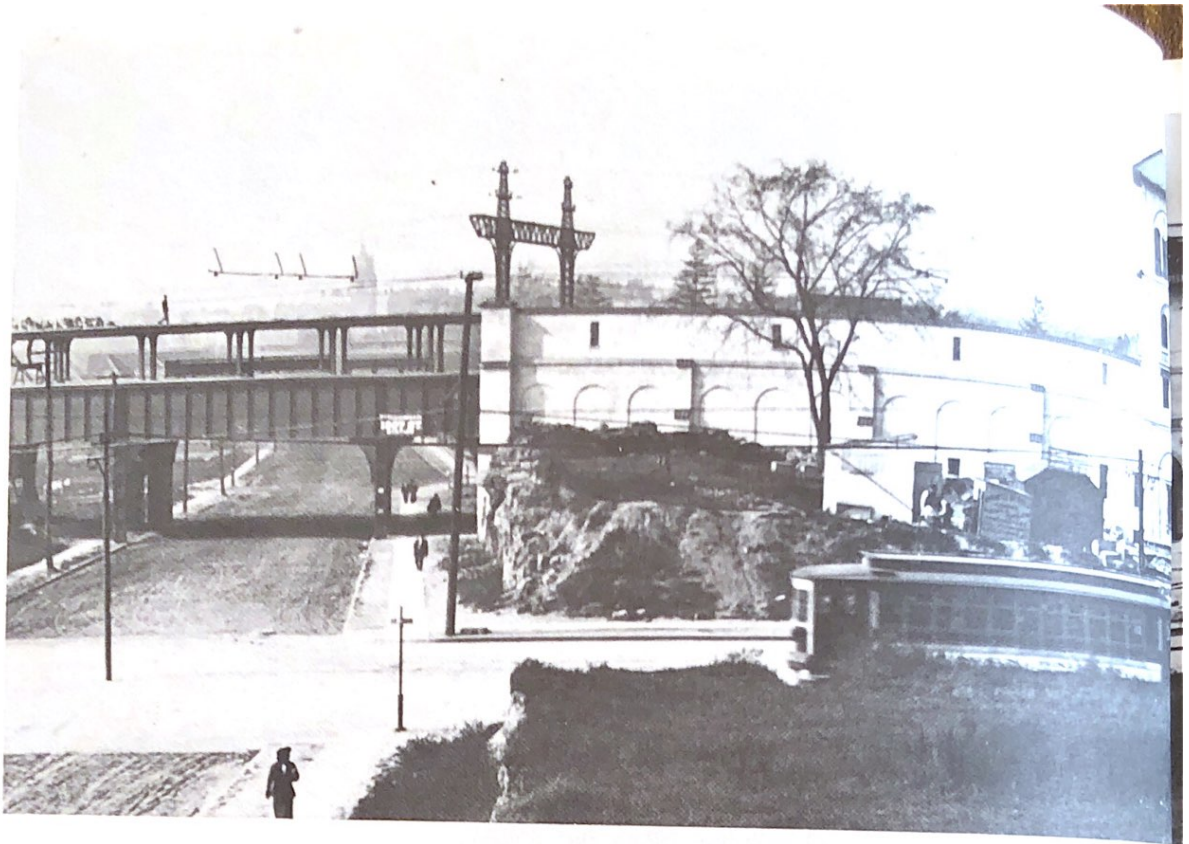
0 1 2 3  
Scale of Miles



Looking northward at the Westchester Avenue station, in The Bronx. A northbound car is just arriving; southbound track is behind fence at left. (Courtesy of G. Votava)

ecided to use concrete for these structures, styles were selected for the most tasteful appearance in that material. All stations but one had the ticket office and waiting-room either above or below the platforms, an arrangement which permitted one ticket office to serve platforms for both directions. (The exception was the Quaker Ridge station, located between the two tracks, with its ticket office and waiting-room at platform level, though the entrances were below the roadbed. It should also be noted that the Morris Park station originally had three levels, with entrances both above and below the platforms.) The Westchester would have mansions where other lines were satisfied with sheds. In keeping with its intention to render frequent, rapid passenger service, the N.Y., W. & B. would be operated entirely by electricity, then still a fairly recent development in railway locomotion, using clean and comfortable self-propelled coaches which could accelerate quickly and travel smoothly and quietly at high speeds. In fact, the Westchester was the first American railway of main-line form which was designed and built as an electric line right from the ground up, rather than being an electrification of an existing steam-powered road. Steel overhead contact wire was installed, chosen for its long-wearing property (but it was later changed to copper because of problems arising from rust and from excessive wearing of the contact surfaces of the cars' pantographs). All-steel passenger cars were designed and built especially for the Westchester. The electrical installation was of the highest capacity then known in railway practise, using alternating current at a tension of 11,000 volts. Electricity was purchased from the New Haven's powerhouse at Cos Cob, Connecticut, and was distributed to the Westchester through substations at Mount Vernon Junction and West Farms Junction. Indeed, all this was accomplished because the Westchester had become a subsidiary of the New Haven. But this very fact was to have a significant effect upon the life and fortune of the elegant short line in later years.

The New York, Westchester & Boston Railway opened for business on May 29th, 1912, from East 180th Street and Morris Park Avenue, near West Farms Square in the Borough of The Bronx, to North Avenue, New Rochelle. For nearly a month before, it had been operated on a full daily schedule but without carrying passengers, in order to test its equipment and right-of-way and familiarise its employees with operating procedures. On July 5th, the White Plains branch was opened as far as Mamaroneck Avenue, and was extended on August 10th to the Westchester Avenue terminal. By August 3rd, service was being operated all the way down to the Harlem River. Some of the stations, including the one incorporating the office building at East 180th Street, were still under construction when the railway opened, but were soon completed. There had been some vacillation about whether to locate the southernmost station in White Plains at Ridgeway or at Gedney



Way. Neither station existed when the line opened, for a decision to build a station at Ridgeway had been cancelled while construction was under way, leaving provisions in the concrete work which would be used when a station finally was built there in 1929. After railway operation began, it was at last concluded to have a station at Gedney Way, and one was built there in 1913.

The new railway passed through nearly primæval territory for most of the distance it covered, but officials and investors had every reason to be optimistic about the rapid development the presence of their line was sure to bring. Fast, punctual, inexpensive passenger transportation was the stock-in-trade (it took some time to generate demand for freight service), since there were no steep grades, no highway crossings at grade, no excessively sharp curves, and no draw-bridges (except for one, infrequently opened, on the tracks in the lower Bronx leased from the New Haven) to impede the swift and timely operation of trains. The rolling-stock was as modern as the layout: each of the twenty-eight big, green coaches was seventy-two feet long and could seat seventy-eight passengers, with plenty of room for standees. Two additional combination cars could each carry fifty-four seated passengers and a generous load of baggage, facilities for the handling of which were built into the stations at East 180th Street, East Third Street, Chester Heights, Wykagyl, Quaker Ridge, Heathcote, and the White Plains and the Harlem River terminals. Being among the earliest mainline-type multiple-unit electric commuter cars of all-steel structure, each coach weighed more than sixty tons. They were of the unit body-frame design originated by L. B. Stillwell, consulting engineer for the railway company. Powerful Westinghouse motors made possible speeds of nearly a mile a minute. In addition to the sliding side-doors at each end, the Westchester's cars had an extra sliding door in the centre of each side to facilitate quick and convenient entry and exit. Inside there were electric lamps, white enamelled ceilings, shaded windows, luggage racks (omitted on the later cars), and soft, commodious seats with armrests providing unaccustomed comfort for the commuter and the occasional local traveller. Seats were doubles only; no three-abreast seating on the New York, Westchester & Boston. All the stations except for the few shared with New Haven trains south of East 180th Street had platforms at the level of the car floors, obviating the need to climb steps to board trains. The waiting-room of each station was heated, and contained an annunciator whose flashing electric bulbs foretold the approach and direction of trains.



This was the Westchester's handsome office building at 481 Morris Park Avenue, The Bronx. It was built as part of the large East 180th Street station, as shown clearly in this view made late in 1912, as construction was nearing completion. The railway had been operating for some months before this station was finished. The Union Railway's trolley car is on Morris Park Avenue; East 180th Street is at the left. (E.J. Langford; courtesy of Peter Terry)



Sixty years separate this photograph from the one above, yet the building still remains an impressive edifice. Long a landmark, its office space is now used by the New York City Transit System, and it forms the entrance to the I.R.T. station behind it. Its own platforms, now unused, may some day be put in service again if the proposed Second Avenue subway line is ever built and extended to connect with the Dyre Avenue line, which uses part of the old N.Y.,W.&B.

A method of collecting fares which is common in Europe but seldom used in this country was employed by the Westchester. All stations were designed so that their platforms could be reached and left only through guarded entrances and exits. A passenger would buy his ticket and have it punched as he walked through the entrance to the platform. The conductor on the train did not collect it. Instead, the passenger dropped it into a "chopper" box on his way out of his destination station. With the

round-trip rate had been only five cents more. Daily use of commutation tickets made the rates much cheaper. Had enough people settled in its territory, as they were not to do until after World War II, by which time it was too late, perhaps they could have provided enough revenue to keep the line alive. But nothing then helped, not even the addition of extra, limited-stop express trains during morning rush hours which considerably reduced the running-time to the Harlem River. There simply were not enough customers using the railway to make it possible to continue operation under the onus of heavy investment and indebtedness which had brought the line into being as the most modern passenger railway anywhere. The handwriting was on the wall, and it spelt finis. The last New York, Westchester & Boston Railway train ended its run, carrying about fifty riders, mostly railfans, a few minutes after midnight of December 31st, 1937, thus heralding the arrival of the new year with that much less to offer the residents of eastern Bronx and Westchester Counties.

The New York, Westchester & Boston Railway had been in operation slightly less than twenty-five years when service ended, one of the shortest life-spans in modern railroad history. The books weren't closed yet, though, for the company remained in existence (it lasted until 1946) in order to settle with its creditors and dispose of its property. And there was still hope that operation might soon be resumed, for the public's efforts to continue service had by no means ended with the abandonment. A skeleton crew was retained who kept the cars in storage, ready for use again on short notice, and who regularly inspected the stations and trackage. One man even ran a dinkey, gasoline-powered gang car up and down the line every day, in order to legally retain the right to run trains on the property, as well as for inspection purposes.

So creditors and impatient bond-holders were stalled off for a while as eleventh-hour attempts were made to revive the line. A group of businessmen began negotiating for purchase of it, contingent upon receiving tax abatement from the municipalities through which the route passed if service were resumed. Even before abandonment, the railway company had been offered a reduction of taxes by fifty per cent, by New Rochelle, retroactive to 1936, if the other municipalities would do the same, and on condition that service would be continued at least through 1938. But it was not enough to permit a guarantee of continued operation; deficits would still have remained. Since cities and towns everywhere, including fashionable and well-to-do Westchester County, had been hit hard by the effects of the depression and were crying for money from any available source, they were afraid that other business concerns would demand similar tax reductions. With the characteristic short-sighted view which seems to prevail in times of a depressed economy, the attitude was taken that foreclosure on the property for back taxes might at least mean land which could be sold and put back on the tax rolls. So that scheme went unfulfilled. New York City Councilman Joseph E. Kinsley, representing the northeastern Bronx residents whom the Westchester had served, called for operation of the line by the New York City Board of Transportation, with the tracks connected to the I. R. T. and modified to accommodate through subway or elevated trains. But franchise and jurisdictional difficulties arose, and the various factions involved would not come to terms. Another proposal was to eliminate the part of the line below Columbus Avenue, or turn it over to some other agency to operate, and build connecting tracks from the New Haven to the Westchester near the Columbus Avenue station (in fact, rudimentary provisions for such a connection were there, and there had been single connecting tracks there during construction of the N. Y., W. & B.), so that some New Haven trains from Grand Central could be diverted up the Westchester to serve the White Plains division. Nothing came of that scheme, either. Leonard Bright, a Socialist candidate for New Rochelle City Councilman, called upon Westchester County to condemn the N. Y., W. & B. and operate it as a County enterprise. Whether socialism was believed to be good or bad at the time, his call came to nought. Then it was proposed to reöpen the line as an express system, eliminating the local stations which had not been paying for their upkeep. But this overlooked the fact that the rest of the line had not been paying for its upkeep, either.