

In the 1920s, a former New York governor warned about creating "a savage septic wound" to the face of Syracuse

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By **Dennis J. Connors, Post-Standard contributing columnist**



Courtesy, Onondaga Historical Association

Construction of the elevated [railroad](#) over Townsend Street in Syracuse in 1936. In 1925, while the train debate raged, former Gov. Horace White wrote: "Elevation ... would doubtless be the cheapest, the most expeditious, the easiest in the matter of engineering work for the railroads, but it would be like ripping a savage septic wound across a human face – likely to infect the whole body, sure to ruin its appearance."

We all know that one of the most critical decisions in our community's history is before us — the future configuration of **Interstate 81 through downtown.**

Syracuse has faced monumental transportation corridor decisions in the past. These have had profound, long-term impacts in shaping the physical form and economics of our community.

They included, for example, both finding a path for, and later filling in, the Erie Canal. One of Syracuse's biggest challenges, however, arose in the 1920s, when the city sought to remove major train routes from downtown streets.

Since before the Civil War, tracks of both the New York Central and DL&W railroads had entered downtown at street level.

The most disruptive was the Central's, which ran down the middle of Washington Street, intersecting cross streets at 29 places. With nearly 70 trains using the tracks on a daily basis, the disruption of [auto](#) and streetcar traffic at these locations, as well as the danger to pedestrians, increased every year. It even made Syracuse the brunt of vaudeville jokes as "the city where the trains run through the streets."

In December 1925, at the height of the railroad removal debate, former State Sen. and **Gov. Horace White** (1865-1943), a Syracusan from his childhood, wrote an article for the Syracuse Herald stating his position. Let me [offer](#) a portion. He writes of railroads, not highways. But with very little imagination, his words could have been written today, relating to I-81:



Courtesy OHA

Horace White

"In my humble opinion, the proposed elevated plan ... would mean the infliction of another monstrosity upon our home for a time beyond calculation. Of course, ... elevation ... would doubtless be the cheapest, the most expeditious, the easiest in the matter of engineering [work](#) for the railroads, but it would be like ripping a savage septic wound across a human face — likely to infect the whole body, sure to ruin its appearance.

"It would mean that the city would be divided into sections, property would be seriously damaged, the environs would be marred and disfigured, the public health and comfort would be endangered and our taxes would be increased by depreciated assessments.

"Imagine the thoughts of a traveler returning to Syracuse after a span of years, seeing such blemishes and barriers. What kind of citizenship would one think could have perpetrated such an outrage? Aside from the needs of the hour, have we no obligation to the future? Are we to consider merely the quickest, cheapest, easiest way, or is it our duty to try to do something, while we are here, to add to the welfare and beauty of the future Syracuse?"

"I am firmly convinced that the depressed route ... is far superior to any other answer. I wish every woman and man in Syracuse could have an opportunity ... to walk out Park Avenue from the Grand Central Terminal in New York City northward. Within a few years that beautiful thoroughfare has developed. No danger from railroad crossings, no noise from trains, no dirt or filth from the operation of cars, and yet under its surface runs that vast system."

Constructed just before World War I, the buried railroad approach to Grand Central Station became the valuable real estate of New York City's present **Park Avenue**, still in use today. White is advocating for a similar tunnel system in Syracuse.

White continues:

"There is no practical reason why the same thing could not be accomplished in Syracuse.

"Suppose it did cost a little more. Suppose there were some engineering difficulties ... it would be, for all time, a final, safe, economical, wholesome settlement. ... We have enough courage, brains, determination and vision among our citizens to work out the best plan. Why temporize with mere makeshifts!

"Of course, a united movement for a depressed route ... might mean that we would be obliged to make a hard fight, to use all the resources at our command to wake the railroad owners to their duty, and to rouse our citizens from their lethargy. But we are not likely to reach a consummation of our hopes ... until we prepare for and go through such a struggle. However, let me express the confident opinion that there are powerful influences, wise enough, public-spirited enough, and potential enough to realize the superiority of a depressed route ... and to aid us in carrying it to completion when a movement of sufficient unity, force and magnitude gathers here for that end."

White was opposed to elevating the trains. But the railroads were against the costs associated with tunnels. Eventually, the choice came to either elevating the tracks or rerouting the trains north of downtown. Put to a public referendum, the community chose what they were told would be the most expedient, an elevation project.

Today we live with three elevations: the 1936 New York Central (now converted to Interstate 690), the 1940 DL&W Railroad (still used along the West Side) and the big one, Interstate 81.

White's opposition to elevation in 1925 was based, in part, on a general belief during the Roaring Twenties that Syracuse's population and boundaries would continue to grow, as they had for the previous 100 years. He and others saw downtown continuing to expand in all directions, as well, and forever scarred if two large railroad elevations cut through it. The Depression, World War II and the growth of the suburbs initially curbed the expansion of downtown's territory. The two railroad elevations, to the west and north, became more like edges to downtown rather than disfiguring "barriers." White could not foresee, however, the economic giant that University Hill has become, nor envisioned an elevated highway between it and downtown, one that is actually wider in scale than even that of the railroads.

I am not a civil engineer, nor a politician who has to court votes or worry about taxes and budgets. But Horace White's stirring words, speaking to his fellow Syracusans over 85 years later, are a call to not be passive and settle for something expedient or mediocre.

Like the earlier transportation decisions that had impacts for nearly 100 years, he asks us to be visionary and bold — to do what is best for the long term.

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Courtesy Onondaga Historical Association

Construction of Interstate 81 in the 1960s after demolition to clear this path through the middle of Syracuse.