

Remarks of Mayor Paul A. Dyster
Niagara Falls International Railway Station & Intermodal
Transportation Center Ground Breaking
June 9, 2014

Once upon a time, the spot where we are standing now was a very, very busy place.

Once upon a time, the teen-aged Homan Walsh won \$10 (some historians say only \$5) for flying a kite across the Gorge with a string attached that would then pull across the first cables for the first bridge across the Gorge. It was completed in 1848—the Niagara Falls Suspension Bridge.

Once upon a time, after that first bridge was replaced in 1855 by the Niagara Railway Suspension Bridge, Harriet Tubman led slaves to freedom in Canada on the Underground Railroad, reportedly carrying a shotgun to prompt those who got cold feet when the moment of truth arrived, and they had to make their bold move within earshot of the Falls. But move they did, one way or another.

Once upon a time, the Village of Suspension Bridge was a transportation hub—or perhaps bottleneck is the more apt description. It bustled with stockyards full of pigs and cows and horses, and hotels—at one time over a dozen, and some famous ones in the mix—surrounded the bridge, and the German and the Irish immigrants jostled in the neighborhood bars... Seems like a lot of pretty incompatible stuff happening in a very small geography if you ask me... But that's the way it was...

Once upon a time, as the weight and frequency of the trains back and forth to our rapidly expanding Canadian neighbor grew too much for the suspension bridges to bear, workmen raced against the clock to strengthen a new cantilever bridge's ironwork. One of the ironworkers was Henry Sippel. The following appeared on June 15, 1900 in *The Rochester Democrat & Chronicle*: “Yesterday morning between 8 and 9 o'clock Henry Sippel, a blacksmith, fell off of the cantilever bridge on the American side of the river at Niagara Falls, and tumbled to the slope or abutments below, being instantly killed. At the time of the accident Sippel was engaged in assisting in putting in the new columns and truss on the cantilever. He was working on a platform and in some manner lost his footing or balance and made the plunge to death.”

“One reason assigned for the accident is the fact that Sippel was up nearly all last night to welcome a little baby born to him, and it is thought that the loss of rest and the strain of the high position may have had much to do with the terrible fall to death.” Henry Sippel was 35 years old when he died, just a few hundred feet from where we stand today. The daughter he stayed up all night to see born was my maternal grandmother, Catherine (Sippel) Toohill.

Once upon a time, on June 15, 2012, Nik Wallenda, seventh generation of the legendary Great Wallendas high-wire act, crossed some 1,800 feet on a wire cable strung across the Gorge below

the Horseshoe Falls. I didn't tell Wallenda until after the walk that my great-grandfather Henry Sippel fell from a bridge under construction across the gorge 112 years to the day before his historic walk. I didn't want to make him nervous. I, for one, was glad he wore the safety harness.

Once upon a time, Main Street was bustling with traffic and commerce, and not a storefront was empty. Same for Queen Street on the Canadian side's North End. And a kid on a bicycle with no identification of any kind could ride his bike back and forth across the Whirlpool Bridge without much more than a wave and a "howdy-do" to the Customs Agent, as long as the Customs Agent knew the kid was going to visit his great aunt on 6th Avenue. Of course, what the Customs Agent didn't know was that the bike's handlebars were usually stuffed with firecrackers on the way home but that was a long time ago...

Once upon a time, the New York Central was the way to arrive in style from New York City, at a 3rd Street station we wonder now why we ever let urban renewal send to the landfill. The Pullman dining cars with their logo-marked silver service were the very height of elegance.

Once upon a time, trains and trolleys carried passengers from Niagara Falls through the Tonawandas and the then-village of LaSalle to the growing metropolis of Buffalo, the "City of Light" that had stunned the world at the Pan American Exposition of 1901 with the most dazzling display of electric lights ever seen.

Once upon a time, as early as 1838, with horses rather than steam locomotives drawing the carriages for the first year, the Lockport and Niagara Falls Railroad ran first to Lower Town, then after 1851 to the current downtown of the canal-side city, with stops in Walmore, Sanborn and Cambria.

All of this was once upon a time, and we all know that "the good old days"—perhaps never as golden in reality as in our polished memories—are in any case not coming back the same as they were before. That's just the way the world is. Fair enough.

But enough about the past. Let me speak for a moment about the future.

Someday soon, the busy sounds of construction will fill the air, as laborers and tradesmen—operating engineers, carpenters, electricians, plumbers, masons and yes, ironworkers, too—take up their tools once again to write the latest chapter in the history of the great river crossing.

Someday soon, joined to the Civil War-era Custom House by an atrium of glass, a new Niagara Falls rail station and transportation center will arise to replace the shoddy current station—a freight warehouse if the truth be known—with a facility worthy of an internationally famous destination.

Someday soon, visitors will step off the train not in an industrial district far from the City center, but on the very lip of the great Niagara Gorge, just a short hop from the downtown center and the Falls itself.

Someday soon, they will be greeted on disembarking by an interpretive center commemorating the deeds of Harriet Tubman and the other heroes of the Underground Railroad, and have a chance to gaze across the Niagara's swirling waters at what runaway slaves once called the Promised Land.

Someday soon, there will be trains again running between Buffalo and Niagara Falls, opening up job opportunities at all the stops in between for people who don't own cars but want a chance to work.

Someday soon, Main Street will come alive again, providing all the goods and services the train-riders need.

Someday soon, as our high speed rail improvements advance, New York City and Toronto won't seem so far apart, and crossing the border by train in either direction won't be the most time-consuming part of the trip. And being the border-crossing station on the line will be a very good place to be.

Someday soon, excursion trains will take carless visitors to the Locks in Lockport—welcome new Lockport Mayor Ann McCaffrey—and to the Wine Trail beyond, giving them a chance to sample the local varieties with only the engineer getting stuck as “designated driver.”

Someday soon, cyclists will jump off the train eager to retrieve their bikes from the baggage car and speed off along a Gorge Rim trail upstream to the Falls or downstream to Lewiston and Youngstown. Hikers will cross the street and immediately descend the steps into the Gorge to hike the trails there, joined by fishermen and bird watchers and everyone else who enjoys the great outdoors.

Someday soon, on a Sunday afternoon in November, Bills fans from southern Ontario will pass through the station on their way to root for their favorite American team—wherever it ends up playing. On a Friday night in February, they will head to First Niagara to cheer for the Sabres, or I suppose the Leafs if so inclined. And if it snows hard on the way home, they can watch the snowflakes falling through the passenger car window. That's the way to travel.

Just a few short years ago, it seemed like these wonderful “somedays” were just fantasy. After all, the City has been trying to build a new station since 1986! But through the unrelenting efforts of some dedicated and determined people, we are here to break ground today.

Thanks to Dave Duscherer, Mark Molnar and especially Sue Sherwood and the great team at Wendel for the years of painstaking work to make our plans a reality—we could not have done it without them.

Thanks to Bruce Becker of the Empire State Passengers Association, and Gladys Gifford and Doug Funke of Citizens Regional Transit Corporation, who never lost faith in the future of passenger rail. Thanks to Regional Chair of the Niagara Region Gary Burroughs, former Lord Mayor of Niagara-on-the-Lake and past chair of the Niagara Parks Commission and Shaw Festival, who has championed the improvement of the cross-border rail service for many years, and to His Worship my colleague Jim Diodati, Mayor of our sister city across the river, to his predecessor Ted Salci, to current Lord Mayor David Eke, to the Lord Mayor of Ft. Erie, Doug Martin, and to all the Canadian mayors and officials who gave us help and encouragement along the way. Thanks to your advocacy, our two great nations will be drawn even closer together by this great ribbon of steel.

Thanks to Gov. Andrew Cuomo, his Regional Representative Sam Hoyt—a longtime advocate for rail—and State DOT Commissioner Joan MacDonald for closing a funding gap at the very end of the process of getting the project started. Thanks to Karen Rae, who helped push the project at both the State and Federal levels.

Thanks to our great Senator Charles Schumer, to our great Congressman Brian Higgins, and our great former Congresswoman Louise Slaughter. They not only fought for and secured the bulk of the funding for this project—a \$16.5 million TIGER II grant—but helped guide it through the bureaucratic maze of Washington when the whole thing was—pardon the terrible pun—in danger of going off the tracks.

And thank you to our great President Barack Obama, who made it his business in his first ever budget as President to make sure there was funding for High-Speed Rail. It was your vision, Mr. President, and today the first high-speed rail dollars to be spent in New York State start going into the ground—and into the economy.

Thanks to the many citizens who turned up at Council meetings—and the ballot box where necessary—to make sure that the City stayed the course. Thanks to Councilmembers past and present who supported the project at critical times. A special thanks to the Commissioners and supporters of the Underground Railroad Heritage Commission, to the ever-faithful members of the Main Street Business Association, and especially to the men and women of the Niagara County Building Trades—you help build the future in more ways than one.

Finally, a very special thanks to two individuals with whom I have shared every step of this long and winding road, and without whom we would not be here today. Council Chairman Charles Walker and City Planner Tom DeSantis are men of vision and dedication who would not let a great idea die. My friends, I salute you; the road has been long and twisted, but I can see the end in sight. Hallelujah and Amen!

I often look at those grainy photographs in the history books of people standing around at ground-breakings and ribbon-cuttings and wonder how many of them realized at the time the significance of what they were there to witness. I suspect some events that were expected to be

historic turned out to be less significant than expected, and some events that drew little attention at the time turned out to be major turning points.

I feel confident that today's event falls into the fortuitous third category: occasions where pretty much everyone in attendance is happy to be there because they know history is being made, a better future is being created, and they were blessed to live to see it happen.

Thank you for coming here today to share in this great event in our City's and region's history. May all your good memories last a long time, and God Bless You.