



1907 image of creating "The Cut" courtesy Norman Gholston

A Deep Divide, A Looming Threat: How Railroad Greed Left St. Johns Vulnerable Right The Wrong Pass HB 2749

Local lore in North Portland speaks of a deliberate divide, a chasm carved to isolate the then-independent City of St. Johns from the burgeoning city of Portland. However, the enduring geographic scars are the responsibility of the railroads, an industry whose relentless pursuit of progress historically overshadowed community well-being. The construction of "The Cut" an eighty foot deep ravine disrupted the evolving streetcar system, and funneled access on the peninsula onto four bridges spanning the cut.

This physical manifestation of ambition was largely the brainchild of railroad magnate James J. Hill, the driving force behind the Spokane, Portland & Seattle Railway (SP&S). Known as "the Empire Builder" by admirers – a man who famously opposed labor unions, stating they would cause "grave financial reverse". This cut offered a direct, level route to a vital railroad bridge, ensuring trains maintained speed, unhindered by natural topography or existing neighborhoods. The earth excavated from "The Cut," a three-million-dollar project (equivalent to \$74.46 million today), was used to fill critical riparian marshlands, reshaping the natural environment to serve the burgeoning rail infrastructure. The first train navigated "The Cut" on November 17, 1908. SP&S's competition, the Oregon and Washington Railroad and Navigation Company, started operating on the one-mile long Peninsula Railroad Tunnel parallel to the cut in 1911.

The City of Portland ordinance granting both companies franchises. "The Cut" with its massive excavation was notably unfavorable, lacking a construction time limit or a recall provision, potentially violating the City Charter's common user requirement, and stipulating that the railroad would bear no costs beyond their own land investment and the replacement of existing streets with a mere four steel traffic bridges: N Willamette, N Lombard, N Fessenden (BNSF owned), and N Columbia (PBOT owned).

Despite Mayor Henry Lane's strong opposition, who famously declared the cut "a defacement of property and a visual blight [an] out-and-out give-away...destroy the unity of the neighborhood," Hill's considerable influence and financial resources ultimately prevailed.

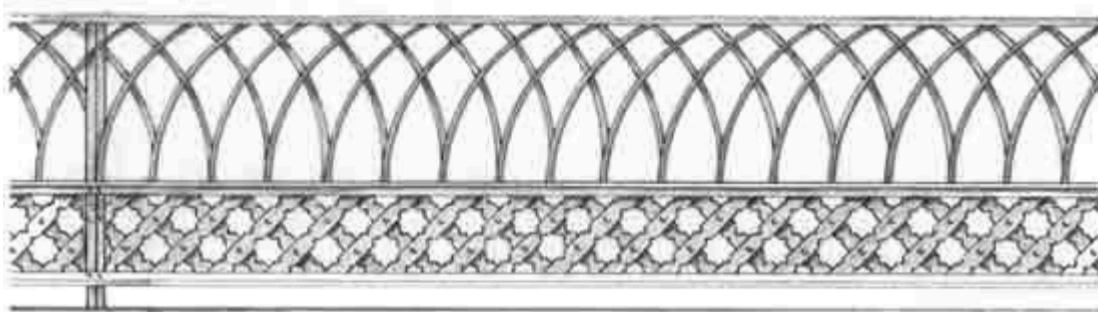
Today, this historical decision casts a long shadow. Where sixteen streets once seamlessly connected the St. Johns Peninsula, only four now remain, reliant on bridges to traverse the artificial ravine. The consequence of prioritizing railroad efficiency over community well-being is a looming crisis. Experts have determined that the four bridges spanning "The Cut" are highly vulnerable to collapse in a significant seismic event. This leaves the approximately 15,291 residents of the St. Johns Peninsula facing the terrifying prospect of being physically cut off.

The current crisis reflects a century of perceived neglect. The community seeks a seismic upgrade of the Columbia Blvd bridge, managed by PBOT. House Bill 2749 appropriates funds to the Department of Transportation for distribution to the City of Portland for the purpose of designing a bridge across Columbia Blvd. Federal funds would be requested for the construction of a new bridge across Columbia Boulevard. Without it, the fate of North Portland Peninsula residents in even a mild quake is a gamble. Without a functioning bridge, families will be separated, and emergency access will be severed. An emergency route on Columbia Boulevard is imperative.

The story of "The Cut" in St. Johns is a stark warning about the enduring consequences of prioritizing profit without considering community well-being. The current vulnerability is a direct result of past decisions. As Portland confronts increasing seismic risk, remembering the origins of this divide and demanding immediate action to ensure the safety and connectivity of the St. Johns Peninsula is crucial. The time to address this legacy of neglect and prevent a potential disaster is not tomorrow – it is now.

Sincerely Tanya Lyn March PhD

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North Fessenden Street Overcrossing (1909), Portland, Multnomah County