

Bernard Corrigan

Railroad Magnate
1847-1914

by Daniel Coleman

Once called “the biggest man that Kansas City ever knew,” Bernard Corrigan was a larger-than-life figure who dominated the local construction industry, streetcar system, and city government during the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He earned his millions as a building contractor, but Corrigan became famous for his very public fights over the destiny of Kansas City’s street railways—battles that did as much to establish the reputation of his perennial adversary, *The Kansas City Star* publisher William Rockhill Nelson.

Bernard Corrigan was one of 12 children born into a prosperous Irish-Canadian farming family near St. Chrysostome, Quebec, on August 15, 1847. In 1868, he followed his eldest brother, John, to Kansas City. Brothers Thomas, Edward, and Patrick joined them, and the Corrigans went to work cutting streets through the limestone bluffs on which the frontier town had been platted. Soon the legendary physical strength of the “Corrigan boys” was matched by the political influence they wielded as contractors who could deliver the votes of their many employees.

The Corrigans purchased seven of the eight horse-drawn streetcar lines that traversed Kansas City in 1875. With Bernard Corrigan serving as a police commissioner, the brothers’ influence spread not merely among the growing number of workers in the street railway industry they dominated, but also to the ranks of the police department, which they peopled with Corrigan railway and construction veterans. However, when they attempted to use political influence to protect their streetcar monopoly, Thomas and Bernard Corrigan drew the ire of a newcomer to the Kansas City scene: newspaper publisher William Rockhill Nelson. Nelson used his recently founded *The Kansas City Star* as a platform to rally the public against the “Shameless Eight,” city council members pushing to grant a 30-year city railway franchise to the Corrigans. They lost the fight and sold out for an estimated \$1 million several years later in 1886.



Over the next 15 years, Bernard Corrigan completed numerous construction projects throughout the South and West. As a railroad builder, he completed the entire Kansas City Southern line and portions of the Denver & Rio Grande; Fort Scott, Memphis & Gulf; Oregon Short Line; and Union Pacific lines. Corrigan also built a large viaduct in Dallas and a hydroelectric dam across the Colorado River near Austin. He strove to invest his great earnings from these distant projects in Kansas City, and in doing so became an owner of its largest hotel—the legendary Hotel Baltimore.

In 1902, Corrigan was installed as president of the Metropolitan Street Railway, which had been organized from the earlier Corrigan lines. As its leader, he dedicated himself to improving the railway's infrastructure. Corrigan resigned his post in 1910 after a second franchise extension standoff. Although Corrigan's plan for a 42-year extension found support from the mayor and city council, it was defeated by popular vote in a December 1909 referendum. When he died at age 66 on January 6, 1914, this defeat, along with the tragic death of his son Bernard Jr. in 1907, were said to have shortened his life.

Corrigan's large family paralleled his extensive undertakings as a builder. He fathered 18 children with two wives: Mamie Shannon, whom he married in 1876 and who died in 1894, and Harriet Foute, whom he married in 1898 and who survived him. Sadly, Bernard Corrigan was never able to enjoy what might have been his greatest construction project—the 20-room mansion Louis Curtiss designed for him at 55th and Ward Parkway. Although it remains a celebrated architectural landmark, the residence was not completed until after Corrigan's death and was never occupied by his family.

Sources

"Bernard Corrigan Dead." *The Kansas City Times*, 7 January 1914.

"Bernard Corrigan." *National Motorman and Conductor* 1 (February 1910): 12-13.

"Death of Bernard Corrigan." *Kansas City Journal*, 7 January 1914.

Dodd, Monroe. *A Splendid Ride: The Streetcars of Kansas City, 1870-1957*. Kansas City, MO: Kansas City Star Books, 2002.

"Kansas City Beats 42-Year Franchise." *New York Times*, 17 December 1909.

Wilding, Jennifer. "Southtown History: Where They Lived." *Southtown News Magazine* 1 (August 1985): 1-15.

© 2008