

Robert Gillham

Rapid Transit Pioneer
1854-1899

by Janice Lee

In the 1870s, getting around downtown Kansas City meant inching along steep, unpaved streets on slow, mule-drawn wagons. Robert Gillham transformed the primitive transportation system into “one of the mechanical wonders of the world” when he designed and built the Kansas City Cable Railway System.

Born in 1854 in New York, Gillham was one of the first to engage in cable railway construction. When the ambitious young engineer moved here in 1878, he noted that bustling Union Depot could be reached only by steep hills stretching from Quality Hill to the valley bottom. Gillham boldly proposed a cable car railway. The extreme grade made this a daring venture, particularly since cable railways were in their infancy. Completed in 1885, the Ninth Street Incline’s roller-coaster dips and curves made it a city landmark.

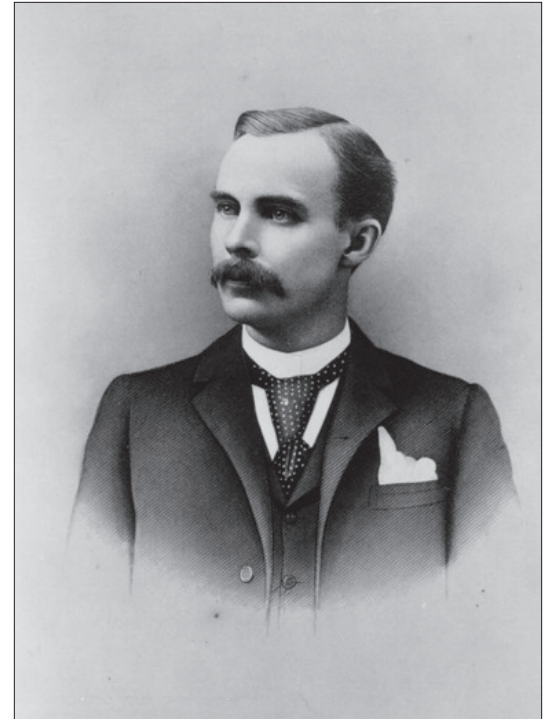
Gillham later decided to extend the new line to Delaware Street, in the heart of the city. A towering bluff loomed directly in the proposed path. Finding it impractical to run the line over or around the bluff, Gillham decided to tunnel through it. This solution seemed farfetched, even to his friends and fellow engineers. Gillham amazed his doubters by successfully completing the Eighth Street Tunnel in 1888, in just under a year.

During his extraordinarily busy career, Gillham also became organizer and chief engineer of numerous other railway car lines. Gillham capped his engineering career by helping construct the Kansas City, Pittsburgh, and Gulf Railroad and becoming its general manager. A civic leader as well, Gillham actively helped plan and promote the city’s Parks and Boulevards system. He served on the Board of Park Commissioners from 1895 until his death from pneumonia in 1899.

The brilliant, innovative engineer, who made Kansas City only the third city in the country to have cable railways, was just 45.

Sources

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