

Developing The Los Angeles Basin:
Henry E. Huntington's Role in Building
Southern California
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Introduction

As we conclude our study of the half-dozen Oneonta entrepreneurs who paved the way toward key areas of how we live, we can discern some common threads. The first wave, consisting of Eliakim Reed Ford and Collis Potter Huntington, improved transportation by rail and sea. In a sense, the networks they built were the inspiration for today's Internet. They reduced the time to go from the East to West Coast from 3 months to 1 week in dramatically safer and more comfortable fashion. The second wave, consisting of Harlow Elisha Bundy and George Winthrop Fairchild, opened the data processing and communications industries which provided the basis for today's connected world. And the third wave began when Sherman Mills Fairchild, George's son, founded a series of companies, the first enabling comfortable civil air transport, the last patenting and building the silicon micro-chips controlling the nodes and links of today's connected world. To complete the tale of the Oneonta entrepreneurs, let us see how Southern California grew into a vibrant, physically-networked society as Henry Edwards Huntington combined electric rapid transit with tailored city planning.

A Trip to Southern California

In 1869, Solon Huntington's 19-year old son Henry, a high school graduate, left Oneonta to join his Uncle Collis in building and administrating railroads.ⁱ His first assignment was running a sawmill at St. Albans, West Virginia which made railroad ties for Collis' latest acquisition, the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad.ⁱⁱ By the 1870's, the name of Collis Huntington's first railroad had changed from the

Central to the Southern Pacific whose presidency he retained. The 1870 census showed a population for San Francisco (near Sacramento) of 149,473 while 5728 people lived in Los Angeles.ⁱⁱⁱ Since the transcontinental railroad had opened in 1869, it stands to reason that San Francisco would continue to grow as California's largest city until a branch was constructed to Los Angeles, which until then would remain a backwater. That branch was completed in 1876, and although Los Angeles was now a port of call for Eastern settlers, its population by 1880 had only risen to 11,200.^{iv}

Before continuing our story of how Henry Huntington contributed to Southern California's explosive growth, some definitions are in order. The LA Basin (or the "city of Southern California") is the flat area extending south from the San Gabriel Mountains to the Pacific Ocean bordered on the west by Santa Monica and on the east by Pomona, encompassing an area of about 25 by 25 miles. The city of Los Angeles is basically at the center of the basin, which roughly encompasses LA County. In 1895, two entrepreneurs named Sherman and Clark opened up an electric interurban railroad between Los Angeles and Pasadena 10 miles to the northeast. An interurban railroad is essentially a railroad where large trolley cars travel between two cities in most cases on private roadbeds. The schedules were hourly, as opposed to perhaps twice a day on a steam railroad (if one existed) between the same places. Since it would be 20 years before the mass auto age, the interurban created a sensation. In 1896, Sherman and Clark opened another interurban between Los Angeles and Santa Monica, 15 miles to the west on the sea. Property values rose along these routes and at their endpoints. The model of Southern California growth was established: build the interurban to a destination, and the population of homeowners would follow. However, Sherman and Clark were unable to pay their bondholders and their properties were foreclosed, to be taken over by other owners.^v

Here's where Henry Huntington enters the picture. By 1900 he had acceded to the post of vice president of the Southern Pacific. In that same year, the SP president, Uncle Collis died. The main part of his estate was shared between Henry and Collis' wife Arabella. (Arabella was much younger than Collis, she and Henry hit it off, and she became his second wife in 1913). To get an idea of their

mutual worth, when they sold their inherited SP stock to E.H. Harriman in 1901 they received proceeds of \$22.3 million.^{vi} Now Harriman had enough other interests in the SP that he essentially gained control of it, and Henry lost his dream of becoming the SP president. He was ready for his new career as a builder of Southern California.



Group of young women pose with Pacific Electric streetcar, Santa Monica, 1913.

photCL_555_01_1592, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California

The Business Triad

Huntington's three main businesses became interurbans, real estate development, and electrical power generation. As the latter served the former enterprises, we will emphasize the first two. In 1898 his syndicate purchased the downtown-oriented Los Angeles street railway. They incorporated the interurban

Pacific Electric (PE) Railway in 1901.^{vii} Huntington possessed the wealth and power to build on speculation on interurban line to any terminal city in the LA Basin, buy the land there, and wait for homeowners to purchase the plots. Freidricks gives examples of this that spanned the homeowners range of wealth.^{viii} The Oak Knoll subdivision between Pasadena and San Marino was opened in 1906 with 1 to 10 acre plots costing from \$5000 to \$20000 and minimum construction costs arrayed from \$6000 to \$15000 and with a luxury hotel anchoring Oak Knoll to a PE branch. Oneonta Park, now an upper middle-class section of South Pasadena, was connected to downtown LA by the PE and offered one-third to one-half acre lots where homes had to have a minimum worth of \$3500.^{ix} Finally Dolgeville (now part of Alhambra) was a model industrial town built around a felt factory (unsuccessful but eventually followed by more solid industries) offering modest single-family lots at \$300 to \$400.



Oneonta Park and South Pasadena, California.1910.

184920, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California

That Huntington's model was successful is reflected in the growth of Southern California from 1900 to 1920, during which the population of the City of LA went from 102,479 to 576,673 and the county from 170,298 to 936,455. ^x Clearly, another entrepreneur from Oneonta, NY had scored big on the national stage.

Henry Huntington's Lasting Legacy

Huntington began building a palace-like home in San Marino after divorcing his first wife Mary in 1906.^{xi} At its completion in 1910 he announced his retirement. Into this home he moved his collection of rare books, including a first folio of Shakespeare's plays and Gainesborough's painting "Blue Boy".^{xii} In 1919 Huntington announced his intention to turn his estate and precious artifacts into a non-profit foundation open to scholars and the public. After his death in 1927, the estate was transformed to the Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery which is open to this day and remains a perennial favorite site for a casual art tour and a relaxing conversation over coffee in its garden. Meanwhile the PE eventually achieved a peak size of 1164 miles.^{xiii}

To Oneonta, NY Henry contributed his boyhood house as a public library. Behind the large grey painted wooden building there is a park and a plaque containing this inscription: Huntington Memorial Library and Park (HMLP) for Public Education and Recreation, Oneonta, NY "On the 9th day of July 1920 the HMLP were opened as a perpetual memorial to Solon Huntington and his wife Harriet Saunders Huntington for the use of the people of Oneonta by their son Henry Edwards Huntington."^{xiv}

Conclusions

Of all the Oneonta entrepreneurs, the most accessible final monument today is the grave site of the Fairchild family. On June 1, 2017, I viewed it after a strenuous climb to the top of Glenwood Cemetery in Oneonta. It is appropriate that the headstones of George Winthrop and Sherman Mills Fairchild lie at the top of the steep site. They dominated 20th century innovation emanating from Oneonta just as the Ford's, Bundy's, and the Huntington's loomed over that of the 19th.

What all these men had in common was the desire to risk building machines to conquer distance, height, time, and complexity. They took chances, faced challenges, but always went back for more. They pioneered the world we live in today from the smallest cell phone to the gigantic megajets which dominate air travel and much of the world's GDP. As we struggle to overcome the problems of the 21st century let us do so with the heart, daring, and sense of community that let Oneonta's entrepreneurs do so much for so many with such wide generosity of spirit.

ⁱ Crump, Spencer, *Ride the Big Red Cars: How Trolleys Helped build Southern California*, Los Angeles, CA (1977), p.39.

ⁱⁱ Crump, p. 42.

ⁱⁱⁱ Crump, p. 21.

^{iv} Friedrichs, William B., *A Metropolitan Entrepreneur Par Excellence: Henry E. Huntington and the Growth of Southern California, 1898-1927*, in *The Business History Review*, Vol 63, No. 2 (Summer, 1989), p. 331-332.

^v Crump, p. 38.

^{vi} Friedrichs, p. 334.

^{vii} Friedrichs, p. 336.

^{viii} Friedrichs, pp. 346-348.

^{ix} Henry Huntington never forgot the upstate NY town where he was born.

^x Friedrichs, p. 338.

^{xi} Crump, p. 85, p. 145.

^{xii} Crump, p. 185.

^{xiii} Crump, p. 15.

^{xiv} Milener, Eugene M., *Oneonta-The Development of a Railroad Town*, Oneonta, NY (1997), p. 315.