

Triumph and Tragedy

A Streamliner's Debut on the Day of Infamy

By JOHN C. DAHL

Seventy-five years ago, on the first Sunday in December of 1941, two all-new *Empire State Express* trains made their debut trips. Tragically, those inaugural runs coincided with the “day that will live in infamy.” On December 7 the United States was attacked at Pearl Harbor by the Empire of Japan, and war would be declared by Congress on the very next day. In recognition of the 75th anniversary of the *Empire's* first streamlined appearance, this article will summarize the events that led to that occasion, will describe some of the features of the 1941 *Empire State Express*, and will review some aspects of the train's operation.

In 1941 railroads were still our primary means of long-distance travel on land. Aviation, while modern, exciting, and even exotic, was still more of a “fair weather” service and was far from the network we know today. Personal motor cars and intercity busses were increasingly taking a bite out of revenues

on local railroad services as well as that of what remained of electric interurban trains. Local city and suburban trolley lines still had fairly extensive networks in many cities where they had survived the deepest, dark days of the Great Depression. But these were still the days before every family had an automobile. The interstate highway system of limited access roads and expressways that would come to dominate (and eventually, decimate) railroad passenger service, and cities with urban sprawl and the gutting of central downtowns, were still years into the future.

The United States of 1941 was increasingly pre-occupied with the news of international events. The war in Europe and the Far East brought daily reports of new horrors. At home, the country was officially neutral and to some it seemed like an oasis in the storm. The war was certainly helping business, not the least of which was that of the railroad.



Still gloriously attired after the trying years of World War II, J-3a 5426 lays down a magnificent trail of winter exhaust as she leads Train 50, the eastbound *Empire State Express* at Hudson, New York on March 3, 1947. Collection of Harold K. Vollrath.

The New York Central Railroad had, for the past few years, been upgrading several of its passenger trains. Streamlining had caught the public's attention. It was an era of speed, of glamorous people riding modern trains, of good manners and good taste. Style and civilized travel went together. The New York Central of 1941 was a proud and glamorous railroad, and by year's end it would unveil a complete makeover of one of its old standbys, the *Empire State Express*. But to tell the story, we need to start a few years earlier.

February of 1934 saw the debut of Union Pacific's *M10000*, widely acclaimed as the first, lightweight, internal combustion engine train built in the United States. Central's management took note of the outstanding public interest in updated rail travel, but a cautious mood continued to dominate the company. Then the headline-garnering travels of the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy's *Pioneer Zephyr* in May 1934 really got the Central's attention. Streamlining had definitely caught on, and over the next few years dozens of railroads would roll out new or refurbished locomotives and equipment in an attempt to reignite interest in passenger travel.

Starting with the in-house streamlining of J-1e

5344 as the *Commodore Vanderbilt* in 1934, the company a year later asked for proposals for a complete streamlined train to operate from Cleveland to Detroit. The cost estimates were high, and the project was cancelled. But industrial designer Henry Dreyfuss offered an alternative. By suggesting the use of rebuilt surplus commuter coaches he had seen at Mott Haven, he convinced the Central to proceed. The new train, *The Mercury*, would be a resounding success after its debut on July 13, 1936. Two more *Mercury* trains would soon follow: the *Chicago Mercury* and then the *Cincinnati Mercury*. For relatively nominal capital, the railroad had placed into service three trains that represented the latest innovations in rail passenger service.

The all-new *20th Century Limited* of 1938 achieved a new high-water mark for New York Central's already famous train. By design, its inaugural trips coincided with that of the Pennsylvania Railroad's top train, *The Broadway Limited*. The *Century* and the *Broadway* would then enter into a competition for the New York to Chicago traffic the likes of which has not been seen again.

(Continued on following page)



Headed by Dreyfuss-streamlined K-5b Pacific 4917, *The Mercury* was photographed in 1936 or 1937 near Cleveland by Melvin Stahley, a Cleveland policeman who enjoyed photography. Clearly he was good at what he enjoyed. It is unclear if the train is eastbound or westbound, perhaps one of our readers can enlighten us. Collection of Jim Semon.

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Budd had completed two new stainless-steel coaches (NYC Lot 2132) in 1938 for service on Central's *James Whitcomb Riley* and had even submitted a proposal for the *Century*. But the new cars for Central's flagship train were ordered from the consortium of Pullman-Standard/Pullman Company. Central wanted to avoid a potential issue with Pullman's reluctance to staff Budd-built sleeping cars – such was the power of Pullman. With the success of the newly re-equipped *Century*, the railroad gave the green light to another magnificent project, an all-new, all-streamlined, *Empire State Express*. Since, as a daylight train, the *Empire* carried no sleepers, there were no concerns about Pullman objections. The debut of the train marked a new standard in gracious passenger service on the Water Level Route.

Of course, the name itself was not new. As the Nineteenth Century entered its last decade, Central's marketing genius, George Henry Daniels, promoted passenger service like no one else. The

New York Central & Hudson River Railroad inaugurated the *Empire State Express* in 1891. From the start, it was conceived as a flyer, a limited-stop, deluxe accommodation. On September 14, 1891, the train covered the 436 miles between New York City and Buffalo in seven hours and six minutes (including stops), averaging 61.4 miles-per-hour, with a top speed of 82 mph. Less than two years later, on May 10, 1893, the *Empire*, behind a specially-designed, 86-inch-drivered 4-4-0 carrying the unforgettable road number 999, was said to have hit a record-breaking 112.5 mph between Batavia and Buffalo. Speed and luxury had become synonymous on the *Empire State Express*.

During the years following World War I, the *Empire State Express* remained as one of the railroad's top trains. The train's long heavyweight consisted of the typical brass-railed observation car at the rear, displaying a rectangular "Empire State Express" tail sign. As the premier daylight trains between New York and Buffalo, Nos. 50 and 51 figured in many important railroad events. The opening of the new Buffalo Central Terminal on June 22, 1929 saw the eastbound train make a ceremonial "first train" pause at the platforms of the station on that bright, sunlit afternoon.

But shortly thereafter, Wall Street had its biggest debacle, and soon the country and the world were in the throes of the greatest economic downturn in history. The hard times of the Great Depression took hold and devastated the country's economy. Seemingly overnight, the fortunes of the New York Central and all railroads plummeted. By the early 1930's, survival became the watchword. But to its credit, the railroad maintained high standards on its top trains, and the *Empire State Express* remained the premier daylight train between New York City and upstate New York.

The long depression years of the 1930s wore on, and as the lean economic depression slowly began to yield to FDR's New Deal, a revival of passenger service was considered. Although optimism was in the air, it would still take some convincing of Central's management to offer new trains to the travelling public. But by the middle 1930s, streamlining was everywhere – in art, in the architecture of the New Deal, on motor vehicles, on ships and aircraft, and even on household appliances. Stories of new materials of construction, including lightweight alloys and stainless steel, along with mechanical improvements in steam locomotive and car design and construction filled the trade journals. Air conditioning became a "must," eliminating the smoke and dust inherent with open-window cars led by a coal-fired steam locomotive.



Ed May photographed the heavyweights observation car Hudson River carrying the markers as well as the tail sign of the westbound *Empire State Express* at Utica, New York on May 10, 1940. Edward L. May Memorial Collection.

The firm of Coverdale & Colpitts, Consulting Engineers, with offices located at 120 Wall Street in the heart of New York City's financial district, prepared an interesting document, "Report on Streamlined, Lightweight, High-Speed Passenger Trains" in 1939, and updated it again in June of 1941. In the report's foreword, the authors stated, "The extraordinarily favorable results attending the operation of streamline, light-weight, high-speed passenger trains have been the feature of greatest interest in our several reports on this subject."¹ The report includes a now fascinating list of streamlined trains, see Table 1. With the headlines these trains were making, it was time for the New York Central to get the spotlight again. When it did, an all-new *Empire State Express* would be seen as one of the finest streamlined trains in America. In a promotional brochure issued in late 1941 by NYC, the reasons for the revamped train were simply explained:

Golden Jubilee of the Empire State Express

To celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Empire State Express, which startled the world by making a mile-a-minute run in the days when the horse was still the only other means

of land transportation, the New York Central is placing in operation a new train. Although it bears the title of its predecessor, this latest contribution to modern railroading has little resemblance to famous old locomotive "999" and the four coaches which once flashed over a track at 112.5 miles per hour, a world's record which stood for many years, and reached fame by being publicized on a United States postage stamp.

In contrast to this illustrious record-breaker is today's new carrier, which is as epoch-making as was its forerunner and so outstanding in the perfection of its detail that it is hailed by builders and designers as "the world's finest daytime train." Instead of four cars, each of the present Empire State Expresses consists of sixteen, accommodating 567 passengers in assigned seats, and drawn by huge super-Hudson type locomotives, streamlined in a new pattern and handsomely designed to match the shining stainless steel cars of the train. Altogether, the new Empire State Express is the climax in train design and execution – a train to admire and to select whenever traveling between New York and Cleveland or Detroit as well as between intermediate points.²

Thus was born "the Finest Daytime Train in the World." The new train, with its strikingly beautiful exterior, was complemented by interior beauty as well. As the promotional brochure rhapsodized, "Inside, [the cars] are dreamlands of luxurious furnishings and beautiful color schemes designed by Paul Cret, master craftsman of decorative art, in collaboration with New York Central engineers and those of the Budd Manufacturing Company, builder of the trains."³

Each train (two complete sets of equipment) consisted of sixteen cars. The order for each train included a mail-baggage car, a tavern-lounge-baggage car, three parlor cars, eight coaches, two dining cars, and a unique rounded-end tavern-lounge-observation car. The train was air conditioned to provide even temperatures in summer and winter. Further, the air was "continually washed" to remove dust and dirt, and refreshed every few minutes.

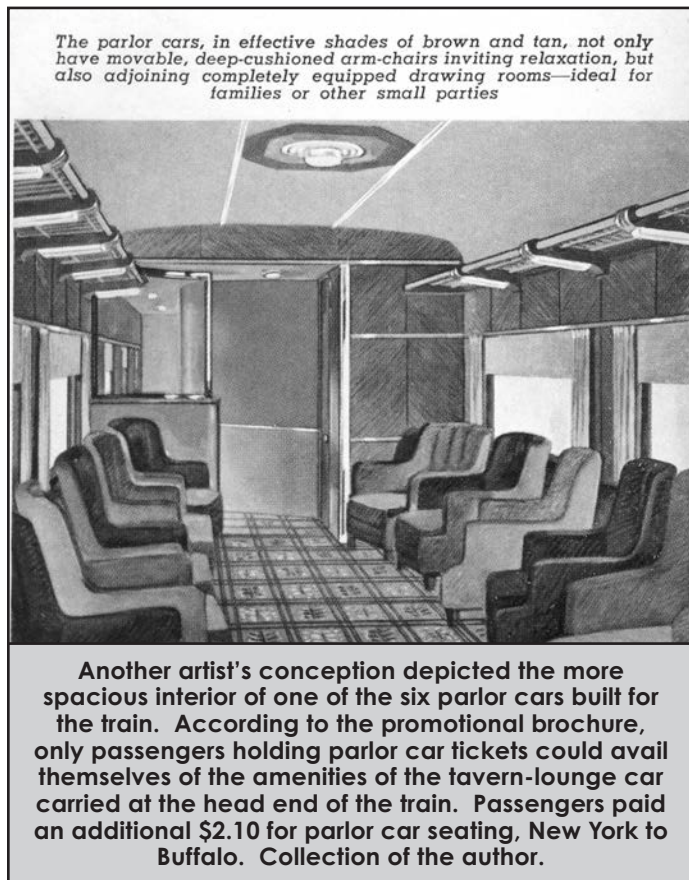
(Continued on following page)

Railroad	Train Name	Year Inaugurated
Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe	<i>Super Chief</i>	1937
Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe	<i>Chicagoan, The Tulsan</i>	1939
Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe	<i>Kansas Cityan</i>	1940
Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe	<i>San Diegan, El Capitan,</i>	1941
Atlantic Coast Line and Florida East Coast	<i>The Champion</i>	1939
Boston & Maine and Maine Central	<i>Flying Yankee</i>	1935
Chicago, Burlington & Quincy	<i>Texas Zephyr</i>	1940
Chicago, Burlington & Quincy	<i>Zephyr-Rocket</i>	1941
Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific	<i>Rocky Mountain Rocket</i>	1939
Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific	<i>Choctaw Rockets</i>	1940
Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific	<i>Arizona Limited, Zephyr-Rocket</i>	1941
Florida East Coast	<i>Henry M. Flagler</i> (later renamed <i>Dixie Flagler</i> and route changed)	1939 & 1940
Illinois Central, Central of Georgia and Florida East Coast	<i>City of Miami</i>	1940
Missouri Pacific	<i>Missouri River Eagle</i>	1940
Pennsylvania, Louisville and Nashville, Atlantic Coast Line, and Florida East Coast	<i>South Wind</i>	1940
Reading Railroad	<i>Crusader</i>	1937
Seaboard Air Line	<i>Silver Meteor</i>	1939
Southern	<i>Southerner, Tennessean</i>	1941

Table 1. By no means complete, this listing recalls some of the streamlined trains put into service between 1935 and 1941. Table by the author.

Triumph... (Continued from page 15)

Noise was reduced by insulating the cars. Jarring actions upon stopping and starting were greatly reduced by the use of tight-lock couplers. Roller bearings on the trucks and twin-cushion, rubber draft gear also



contributed to the train's smoothness of operation. Cars were lighted using fluorescent fixtures, which the company noted "prevent eyestrain and add to the pleasure of every journey."⁴

Wide car windows of non-frosting glass opened up scenic views of some of the railroad's greatest assets in New York State – the Hudson and Mohawk River valleys, the verdant rolling farmlands and forests of upstate and western New York, and the beautiful Lake Erie shore west of Buffalo. In 1941, the cities and small towns of upstate New York were busy centers of manufacturing and agriculture, a landscape then unmarred by ugly urban sprawl and the post industrial ruins so common today. Coaches featured reclining-back seating "that may be adjusted to any angle by touching a disk under the chair-arm."⁵ Similarly adjustable footrests complemented each coach seat. Parlor cars with movable armchairs invited relaxation.

Regarding accommodations, the promotional brochure noted that the rest rooms for men and women were "unusually spacious." Further, it reported, "Two smart dining cars on each train, serving food of the finest quality and the greatest variety obtainable, attract passengers from the three parlor cars and eight reclining-seat coaches. The tavern-club car is reserved for use by parlor car passengers; the observation lounge car is intended for both parlor car and coach passengers."⁶ The dining cars, the brochure stated, "each [seat] 44 persons, [and] are unusually attractive with their padded leather ceilings and walls which harmonize delightfully with furniture and window drapes."⁷

Decoration details of the train's signature tail-end cars were likewise described in glowing terms. "The spacious Tavern-Observation-Lounge is decorated in delicately blended pastel shades, with chairs in restful tones of tan and brown, and fixed seats of satiny walnut—a perfect spot to read or view the scenery." The tavern-lounge-observation cars (NYC Lot 2148) were named for two former New York State governors who went on to become United States presidents: Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin D. Roosevelt. The train's famous name was spelled out in block letters on permanently mounted tail signs of three lines, each enclosed by stainless ribbing on a stainless steel plate curved to match the contour of the carbody.

The four dining cars (NYC Lot 2146) were named *John Jay*, *Horatio Seymour*, *George Clinton*, and *DeWitt Clinton*. The two mail-baggage cars (NYC Lot 2143) were named *Alonzo B. Cornell* and *John A. Dix*. The two tavern-lounge-baggage cars (NYC Lot 2144) carried the names of two more American presi-



One of two 85-foot mail-baggage cars built by Budd in 1941 for service on the *Empire State Express*, *Alonzo B. Cornell* was named for the 27th governor of New York State. Elected in 1879 and serving as governor from 1880 to 1882, Cornell was known for his fight against the Tammany Hall political machine in New York City. May Collection.



The 85-foot tavern-lounge-baggage car *Grover Cleveland* was named for the 28th governor of New York State. Cleveland was also the 22nd and 24th president of the United States, the only American president to serve two non-consecutive terms of office. May Collection.



John Jay was one of four diners built by Budd for service on the 1941 *Empire*. All were named for former governors of New York State. Jay is considered to be one of the "founding fathers" of the United States. He was the first U.S. Chief Justice and the second governor of New York State. May Collection.



The 85-foot tavern-lounge-observation car *Franklin D. Roosevelt* tailed eastbound No. 50 as the *Empire State Express* passed through Utica, New York sometime in the early 1950s. NYC Negative 9990-1, NYCSHS Collection.



Gotcha! The mail hook on *John A. Dix* snags a mailbag at Hudson, New York as No. 51, the westbound *Empire State Express*, cants around a curve at Hudson, New York on April 30, 1946. Obviously, steam was immediately ahead. NYC Negative 7276, NYCSHS Collection.

dents: Grover Cleveland and Martin Van Buren. The six parlor cars (NYC Lot 2145) were named *Alfred E. Smith*, *Herbert H. Lehman*, *Samuel J. Tilden*, *Levi P. Morton*, *Nathaniel L. Miller*, and *Charles E. Hughes*. Ten of the sixteen coaches (NYC Lot 2147) carried names: *William L. Marcy*, *William H. Seward*, *Silas Wright*, *Hamilton Fish*, *David B. Hill*, *Morgan Lewis*, *Daniel D. Tompkins*, *Edwin D. Morgan*, *Reuben E. Fenton*, and *Charles S. Whitman*. The remaining six were numbered NYC 2564-2569.⁸

Murals in each of the cars featured historic scenes by artists Leslie Ragan (of Central's annual calendar artwork fame), Miriam Tindall Smith, and Mary Louise Lawser. The scenes were based on events in the state's history, such as "Legend of Sleepy Hollow," "Duel between Hamilton and Burr," and "Hudson's Half-Moon above the Palisades." In all, there were 36 colorful representations of a colorful past that, according to the brochure, "brightens the cars, stirs the imagination, and send one's mind back to the days when drums actually sounded along the Mohawk."⁹

Throughout the summer and early autumn of 1941, the new train's handsome stainless steel cars rolled off the shop floor of the Budd Company, and it became the locomotives' turn to receive streamlining. The *Empire State Express* engines were unique among the Central's fleet. Two existing class J-3a locomotives, NYC 5426 and 5429, were selected to receive a special jacketing of fluted stainless steel to match the *Empire's* consists. The distinctive and graceful bullet-shaped boiler front and stainless steel skirting were a departure from the Dreyfuss streamlining already applied to ten J-3a locomotives

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Triumph... (Continued from page 17)

to match the livery of the *20th Century Limited*. The drivers were silver metallic Scullin discs, and the stainless fluted sheathing on the sides of the tenders matched the rolling stock. Unlike the Century-styled tenders, the coal bunkers of the *Empire Hudsons* did not include cover doors. The corporate title, NEW YORK CENTRAL, in bold, black, block letters, was centered on the tender flanks on flat, stainless steel panels. A casting of the distinctive New York Central oval, with lettering and bordering in a stainless steel color on a bright red background, appeared above each locomotive's pilot. Above it, in a font recalling the fancy script lettering that decades before had appeared on the sides of the 999's tender, the train's legendary name was proclaimed. NYC shop forces in West Albany did the makeovers, and the effect was stunning. The streamlining of the two locomotives was completed in October of 1941.

Rogers E.M. Whitaker, best known to readers of the *New Yorker* magazine by his railfan moniker, "E. M. Frimbo, World's Greatest Railroad Buff," described the new train this way:

The new Empire State Express unveiled in 1941 exceeded in handsomeness anything the New York Central had ever invented. If something had to replace the old Empire State Express, this was it. Even steady customers – the politicians, the legislators, the lobbyists who traveled in it to and from the capital at Albany – had to concede that the new parlor cars, even though they were placed ignominiously up at the head end, were more than acceptable. The slightly solemn interiors of the old Pullmans – Pullman decorators were extraordinarily fond of dark greens – had given way to interiors in sunnier hues; the wall-to-wall carpeting was similarly cheerful; in place of the earlier seats



It's early in October of 1941, and J-3a Hudson 5429 is being prepared for *Empire* service in the company shops at West Albany, New York. The manner by which the locomotive's smokebox door could be accessed is evident. It appears that the engine's tender is on the adjacent track. NYC Negative 5978-17, NYCSHS Collection.



By October 10, 1941, when this photograph was taken at West Albany, the streamlining of the 5429 was complete, and the locomotive posed for a series of company photographs. This front-end view clearly shows the wider jacketing around the lower half of the smokebox. The distinctive NYC oval featured a red background; this was the first instance of a red oval being applied to the front of a New York Central locomotive, a feature that would become a tradition on New York Central diesels. NYC Negative 5978-2, NYCSHS Collection.

that swiveled about with such ease that many a small boy had turned his into a merry-go-round when his parents weren't looking were armchairs of a vastness and comfort that would have made them quite at home beside a picture window in the Union League Club.

A trifle astern of the parlor car and its delights was the dining car, in which, though times were no longer so grand as they had been,

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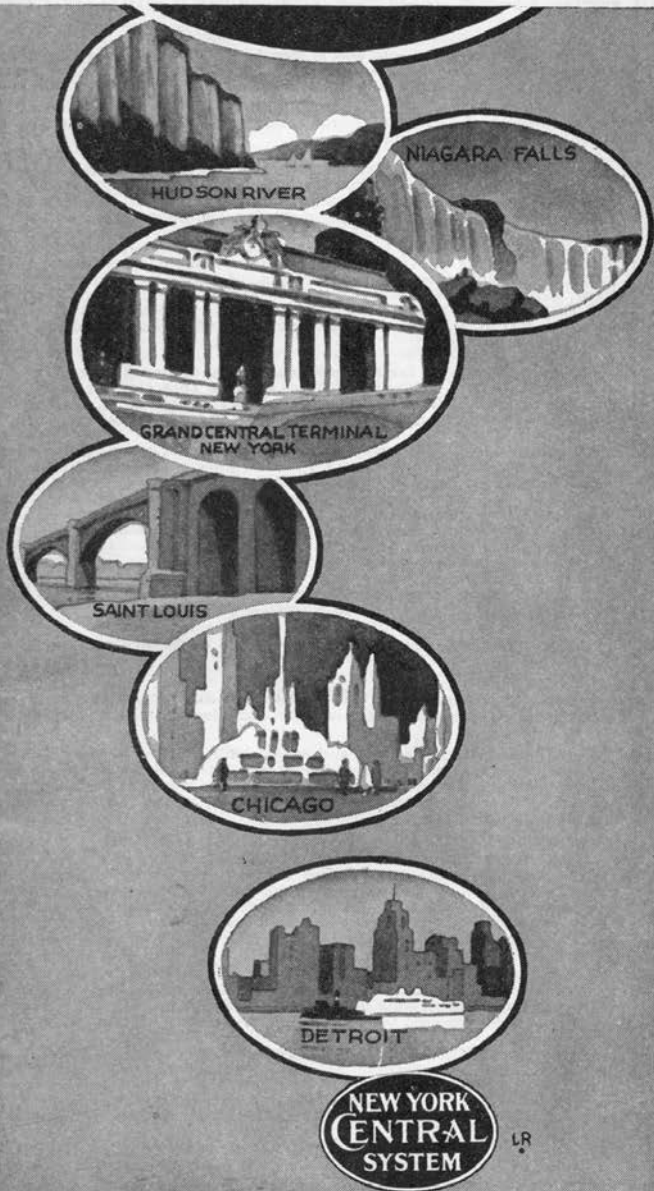
The details of the extended shrouding of the 5429's tender are depicted nicely in this second company photograph of the streamlined locomotive, taken on the same October 10 day. NYC Negative 5978-1, NYCSHS Collection.



Disc drivers, covered boiler feed pipes and check valves, bullet nose, and straight-through horizontal sheathing rearward of the back drivers, gave the two *Empire* locomotives a distinctive appearance. The 5429 would travel west to haul the first eastward trip of the new streamlined train. NYC Negative 5978-3, NYCSHS Collection.

NEW YORK CENTRAL

THE WATER LEVEL ROUTE ... YOU CAN SLEEP



EFFECTIVE DECEMBER 7, 1941
FORM 1001

Oval images of memorable locations served by the New York Central System mimicked the proportions of the famous NYC oval on the front of the December 7, 1941 issue of Form 1001, the system-wide public timetable. Six additional locations were similarly depicted on the rear. May Collection.

WEST-BOUND		Empire State Express	The Mohawk	North Shore Limited	The Knickerbocker
		51 Daily	5 Daily	39 Daily	41 Daily
N. Y. Central		AM	AM	PM	PM
Lv	New York (G.C.T.)	9 00	9 30	12 30	2 30
"	New York (125th St.)	h 9 10	h 9 40	h 12 40	
"	Yonkers		h 9 57	h 12 56	
"	Harmon	h 9 50	10 20	h 1 18	h 3 16
"	Poughkeepsie		11 20	2 19	4 10
B. & A.		AM			Noon
Lv	Boston (So. Sta.)	†4u05			12 00
"	Newtonville				12 15
"	Worcester	†5u45			1 06
"	Springfield	†7u45			2 27
"	Pittsfield	†9u48			4 07
"	Chatham	†10u37			4 48
Ar	Albany	†11u18			5 23
N. Y. Central		AM	PM	PM	PM
Lv	Albany	11 42	12 58	3 50	5 43
"	Schenectady	12 11	1 27	4 20	6 11
"	Utica	1 25	3 18	5 56	7 26
"	Syracuse	2 19	4 38	7 04	8 27
"	Rochester	3 41	6 27	8 36	9 59
Ar	Buffalo (C. Ter.)	4 50	7 43	9 50	11 10
Mich. Central		PM		PM	
Lv	Buffalo (C. Ter.)	5 06		10 07	
"	Niagara Falls			u 8 22	
Ar	St. Thomas	7 45		12 30	
Ar	London (L. & P.S. Ry.)	8 28		2 12	
Ar	Windsor	9 38		2 27	
"	Detroit	9 55		2 44	
Ar	Saginaw	1u55			
"	Bay City	2u30			
Ar	Ann Arbor				
"	Jackson			4 23	
Ar	Lansing				
Ar	Grand Rapids	5u05			
Ar	Albion				
"	Battle Creek			5 20	
"	Kalamazoo			5 52	
"	Niles (E. T.)			6 53	
"	Michigan City (C.T.)			C 6 33	
"	Gary			C 7 01	
"	Hammond			C 7 12	
"	63rd St. (Woodl'n)			7 29	
Ar	Chicago (Cent. Sta.)			7 45	
N. Y. Central		PM	PM		PM
Lv	Buffalo (C. Ter.)	5 05	8 04		11 50
Ar	Dunkirk		8 57		
"	Westfield	6 07	9 22		
"	Erie	6 39	10 05		
"	Ashtabula		10 50		
"	East Cleveland	h 8 15	12 05		
"	Cleveland (U. Ter.)	8 30	12 20		3 03
Ar	Linndale		1 25		
"	Sandusky		2 35		
"	Toledo (E. T.)		3 35		
"	Elkhart (C. T.)		5 13		
"	South Bend		5 42		
"	Gary		6 56		
"	Englewood		7 26		
Ar	Chicago (La. Sa. Sta.)		7 40		
		PM	AM	AM	AM

This reproduced portion of Condensed Table No. 1 from page 23 of the December 7, 1941 Form 1001 shows the first four trains listed: Nos. 51, 5, 39, and 41. The "u" in times shown for B&A stations as well as stations north of Detroit indicates that these locations were serviced "by connecting train."

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the masterpiece of the breakfast table was still sole – not fillet of sole from the deep freeze, but whole sole from the Fulton Fish Market. According to a dining-car steward of the 1940s, on the opening day of legislative sessions in Albany more than forty soles met a glorious doom in the dining car on the way from Grand Central Terminal to Albany. The day coaches that lay ahead [*sic*] of the dining-car pleasure dome offered their guests a generous portion of leg room, a generous portion of properly stuffed upholstery; the observation car afforded not merely commonplaces as packets of salted peanuts, but during the hours when they were legal, fortified liquids.¹⁰

By November of 1941 all was almost ready. A publicity tour was arranged with one of the new trains (photos show it as a shorter consist, not the full sixteen-car train) making stops in several upstate New York cities. Public inspections were arranged, and the press was suitably impressed. Reporters glowingly remarked on the new train's features and modernity. New York Central management was certain that the reequipped trains would be a new and glorious addition to an already impressive fleet.

Westfield, New York, in the heart of the state's beautiful grape-growing region bordering Lake Erie, was among the stops made by the publicity tour train. In its November 26, 1941 issue, the *Westfield Republican* reported that the new streamliner had departed from Grand Central Terminal with a party of 200 newsmen, running to Albany with a return to New York City. The train then began working its way west again to other upstate cities. It was displayed in Westfield with the 5426 on the morning of December 4 from 8:30 to 9:30 a.m. A large crowd looked it over, even in the short time frame of one hour. The next stop would be Erie, Pennsylvania later that same day.

In preparation for the day of the streamliners' first revenue trips, New York Central issued a revised Form 1001 system timetable, to go into effect on December 7, 1941. There were only minor changes to the traditional schedules of Train 51, the westbound *Empire*, and Train 50, the eastbound *Empire*, and it is fairly safe to assume that the departures and arrivals of the first runs of the new trains followed those posted on the new public timetable.

If so, the westbound train left Grand Central Terminal, in the care of a T-3 electric locomotive of course, at 9 a.m. Fifty minutes later, with J-3a 5426 on the head end, it departed Harmon, New York. The

train was carded to depart Albany at 11:42 a.m. and, if on time, arrived at Buffalo Central Terminal at 4:50 p.m. After coaches and a diner for the Detroit section were switched out, #51 headed for Cleveland, probably no longer led by the Empire-styled Hudson, but with her tavern-lounge-baggage and tavern-lounge-observation cars remaining in the consist. The Cleveland section departed Buffalo at 5:05 p.m., and arrived at Cleveland Union Terminal at 8:30 p.m. The Detroit section, probably headed by a Michigan Central J-1 Hudson, departed Buffalo at 5:06 p.m., just one minute after the Cleveland section had departed, and arrived at Detroit at 9:55 p.m.

Again, if the Form 1001 effective December 7, 1941 was adhered to, the eastbound Detroit section of the *Empire* departed Detroit at 8:30 a.m., arriving at Buffalo Central Terminal at 1:15 p.m. The eastbound Cleveland section departed Cleveland Union Terminal at 9:55 a.m., arriving at Buffalo Central Terminal at 1:10 p.m. The reassembled train departed Buffalo at 1:30 p.m., arriving at Grand Central Terminal at 9:30 p.m. It seems that the Detroit and Cleveland sections of No. 50 still carried standard equipment on December 7, and that the first run of the train with new equipment commenced at Buffalo. If that is true, passengers would have had to transfer to the new cars at Buffalo Central Terminal. In *Decade of the Trains*, authors Ball and Whitaker note that the eastbound run of the inaugural train originated in Buffalo on December 7, and that a slower train from Cleveland sufficed that day.¹¹ J-3a 5429 was on the head end from Buffalo per photo evidence. One may assume that a similar arrangement was made for the Detroit section.

The attack on Pearl Harbor began at 7:48 a.m. Hawaii time, which equates to 1:48 p.m. eastern time. So it is unlikely that passengers on No. 51, the westbound *Empire*, would have learned of the attack before the train's arrival in Buffalo. Those detraining there and those continuing on to Cleveland or Detroit would surely have heard the terrible news shortly thereafter. If on schedule, Train 50, the eastbound *Empire*, would have been racing toward Rochester when the attack came. Then, as the train headed eastward, it has been said that passengers noticed a decreasing number of persons hailing the new streamliner from station platforms. As news reports began to flash back, many citizens were at home, listening to their radios for news updates. All must have paused for a good many minutes to ponder the gravity of the situation. The United States Pacific Fleet based at Pearl Harbor in the far-off Hawaiian Islands had been attacked by Japan! In effect

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As the traveling public of the 1960s abandoned trains for automobiles on super highways and as air travel entered the jet age, the famous train name would be dropped in favor of re-branded “Empire Service” trains. The Penn Central years saw further deterioration, with Amtrak assuming the responsibility for intercity passenger train operations on May 1, 1971. The name would be briefly resurrected by Amtrak as the carrier strove to improve and stabilize

the few trains that remained. Indeed improvements to passenger service were made, at least between New York and Buffalo, but the name was again dropped in favor of “Empire Service” during a similar Amtrak re-branding of most of the trains on the historic route between New York and Buffalo/Niagara Falls.

A few of the once beautiful cars of the 1941 *Empire State Express* have survived, and reside in a museum near Rochester, New York where each is being slowly restored. After Nos. 50 and 51 were dieselized, the two *Empire Hudsons* went west where for a short while the 5426 hauled *The Detroit Mercury*. The 5426 was destreamlined in 1950 and retired from service in February 1956; the 5429 was de-streamlined in 1949, retired in December 1955, and sold for scrap in February of 1956. Ultimately the diesel age sent every New York Central Hudson to the scrap line, and the glory and drama of all NYC steam would completely vanish by 1957.

We will never see the likes of the 1941 *Empire State Express* again. But, I, for one, will always hold the belief that as long as passenger trains run over the Water Level Route, the spirit of that glorious streamliner will remain alive whenever one has the pleasure of making the extraordinary journey by rail across New York State.

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- 1 *Report on Streamline, Lightweight, High-Speed Passenger Trains*. June 30, 1941, Coverdale & Colpitts, Consulting Engineers, 120 Wall Street, New York.
- 2 *The New Empire State Express*. New York Central System, undated promotional brochure issued with the 1941 debut of the train.
- 3 Ibid
- 4 Ibid
- 5 Ibid
- 6 Ibid
- 7 Ibid
- 8 *Lot Numbers and General Description Pass. Equip't Cars*. NYC Equipment Engineering Department.
- 9 Promotional brochure, op. cit.
- 10 Ball, Don Jr. and Whitaker, Rogers E.M. *Decade of the Trains, the 1940s*. New York Graphic Society, 1977, p. 17.
- 11 Ibid, p. 13. 



Partially hidden by clouds of her own steam in sunny but cold Buffalo on December 7, 1941, J-3a 5429 prepared to lead the first eastward run of the streamlined *Empire State Express* out of Buffalo Central Terminal. Contrary to the public timetable in effect, passengers from Cleveland and Detroit had to transfer from standard, heavyweight accommodations on this first day of the new train's operation. Collection of Robert Scheib.



By 1947, as the transition from steam to diesel power was in full swing on the New York Central, engine crews had to be prepared for whatever type of power might be entrusted to them. In the upper photo, J-3a 5429, now lacking some of her sheathing and lugging a huge, 46-ton pedestal base tender, leads a seventeen-car No. 51 at Roa Hook, New York on April 20. By contrast, the lower photo depicts the same train under E7 power passing Ware Cut between Garrison and Cold Spring, New York just three days later. Although many would mourn the passing of steam, few would deny that the *Empire State Express* continued into the diesel era to be one of New York Central's classiest trains. NYC Negatives 7694 and 7672, NYCSHS Collection.