

History of Dequindre Cut in Detroit, Michigan

Compiled and Emailed To HistoricBridges.org in 2021 By:

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A volunteer with Detroit Historical Museum's Glancy Trains Exhibit since 1997.

Street running through towns by Class I railroads during the 1800s was common, but rapid urbanization in Detroit MI made the practice untenable. Detroit & Pontiac Railway (D&P) had been completed along the center of then-rural De Quindre Road by 1838.

Plaque marking Detroit's first railway depot



"This tablet marks the site of Detroit's first railway depot. The Detroit and Pontiac Railway, the first railway to be chartered in the West built its Detroit terminal on this site in 1836. The building served as a depot only two years because of its distance from the center of town. In 1838, the tracks of the railway were routed down Gratiot Avenue from Dequindre Street, the depot being located on Gratiot Avenue near Farmer Street. Presented to the city of Detroit in the month of September, 1926."

The above c. 1951 photograph shows a 1926 bronze tablet, which marked the site of "Detroit's first railway depot" (until the tablet was removed,

probably during Dequindre Cut excavation). The photograph survives in Detroit Public Library's Burton Historical Collection, but the actual tablet is probably long-gone. It was originally mounted near today's Dequindre Cut Greenway rail-trail, not far from the East Jefferson Avenue overpass. The rail line connecting Detroit with Pontiac was finally completed on July 4, 1843, accompanied by more-than-the-usual celebration. Forty years later, the single-track railroad still defined the eastern city limits of small-town Detroit.

Detroit & Milwaukee Railroad (D&M) was photographed in 1881, looking north from East Woodbridge Street toward the original three-bridge Dequindre Cut. Beyond the East Jefferson Avenue viaduct, overpasses carrying East Larned Street and East Congress Street traffic are visible in the distance. The photographer was standing near Google coordinates (42.335160, -83.027800).



After D&M became insolvent c. 1875, Great Western Railway of Canada (GWR) acquired D&M, which emerged from bankruptcy c. 1878 as Detroit, Grand Haven & Milwaukee Railway (DGH&M). GWR, in turn, was acquired by Grand Trunk Railway of Canada (GTR) in 1882, along with its DGH&M subsidiary.

Detroit's city limits ran along the western edge (left) of this railroad right-of-way, when the above Detroit Public Library photograph was shot.

By 1920, the intersection of Detroit's Gratiot Avenue and Dequindre Street (below) was getting busier every year, as pedestrians, cyclists, autos, trucks, streetcars, interurban trolleys, and Grand Trunk Western Railway (GTW) trains tangled at street level.

GTW's c. 1905 interlocking tower (center-right) controlled the level-crossing of the GTW tracks and Detroit United Railway's "Rapid Railway" double-track Gratiot Avenue trolley line, along with crossing gates at the intersection, including sidewalk gates (left).



A 1918 report, published by a division of Detroit's Department of Public Works, cited the Dequindre Street situation as "the worst menace in the city of Detroit".

The c. 1920 Gratiot / Dequindre photograph (above) might be from Wayne State University's Virtual Motor City Collection (I've lost track of my source). Within ten years, the railroad tracks were depressed c. 21 feet below street level, in the newly-excavated four-track Grand Trunk Dequindre Cut. The depressed four-track railroad eased traffic jams several decades before Detroit's depressed freeways opened.

About twenty new reinforced-concrete grade separation bridges carried east / west streets over the tracks. By the 1930s, Gratiot Avenue was much wider, and Dequindre Street was just a bad memory.

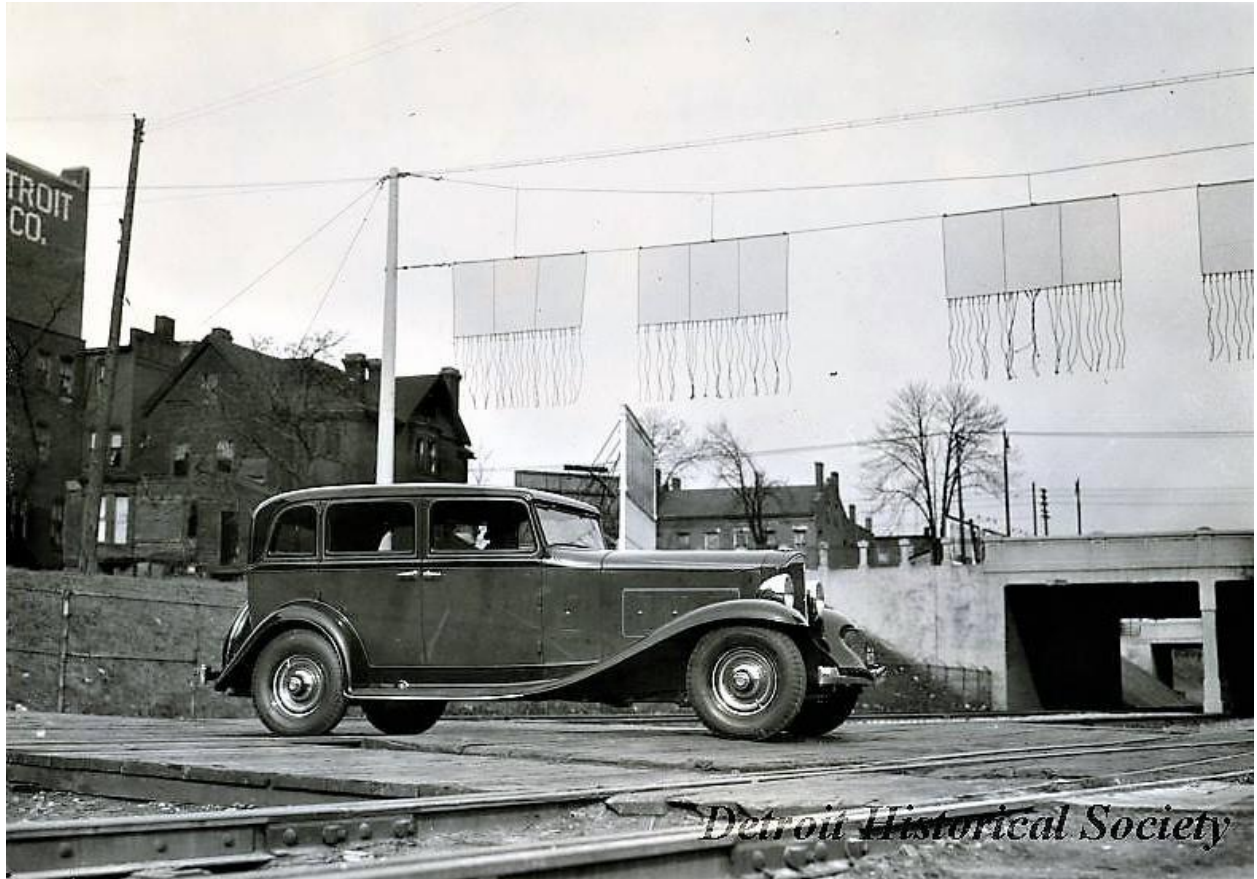
Below: A temporary wood-frame bridge provided a detour for Gratiot Avenue traffic, as a Detroit Department of Street Railways (DSR) streetcar crossed a permanent reinforced-concrete bridge nearing completion over Grand Trunk Western Railroad's newly-excavated Dequindre Cut, 1929 (photo retrieved online from Wayne State University's Virtual Motor City

Collection).



The bridge project included widening Gratiot – the photograph shows storefronts (right) east of the Cut that were removed later. Rail service running to and from Detroit's Brush Street Station (1867-1973) near the riverfront was uninterrupted during construction.

Below: A Packard "Light Eight" was shot crossing the Dequindre Cut Line at Woodbridge Street in 1932. The East Jefferson Avenue overpass is visible on the right. Note the "tell-tales" suspended over all four tracks (image retrieved from the Online Collection at www.DetroitHistorical.org).



Below: A September 27, 1951 photograph (shot from the original East Larned Street overpass, recently-replaced) shows the East Congress Street Bridge (nee Ducharme Place Bridge) crossing over the still-active four-track Dequindre Cut (Burton Historical Collection photo bh003508, retrieved online from Detroit Public Library).



Below: A six-car South East Michigan Transportation Authority (SEMTA) commuter train rounds a ninety-degree curve shortly after departing from Renaissance Center Station, as it accelerates north across Woodbridge Street toward East Jefferson Avenue and the Grand Trunk Dequindre Cut, 1982.

Funded in part by the State of Michigan, three daily SEMTA trains were discontinued when state funding ended in 1983 ([Charlie Whipp](#) photograph,

retrieved from RRHX Photo Album, www.michiganrailroads.com).



Today's Dequindre Cut Greenway preserves (?) the space once occupied by the two westernmost tracks (right) as a possible path for light-rail rapid transit.

Southwest of the former - Woodbridge Street grade crossing, the Orleans Landing residential development welcomed its first residents in 2017. The project completely blocks any future attempt to connect the southern end of the Greenway's transit easement with GM Renaissance Center's Detroit People Mover (DPM) Station via commuter rail. Light-rail rapid transit running through the Dequindre Cut (?) might still connect with the DPM, via street-running west along Woodbridge.

The last SEMTA commuter train departed from the Cut in October 1983. Long after all Dequindre Cut rail traffic ended, Phase I of the Dequindre Cut Greenway rail-trail opened to pedestrians and cyclists on May 14, 2009, running between Gratiot and Woodbridge. A second phase connected the trail to the Detroit RiverWalk. The third (and last) phase extended the trail north through Eastern Market to Mack Avenue.

Four years earlier, a proposal to convert the depressed right-of-way into a new limited-access freeway was briefly considered. The new roadway would have led to Detroit's new riverfront gambling casinos (which were never built).

Some of the old bridges have been replaced in recent years – others were closed or demolished years ago. Lots of graffiti-splattered concrete abutments remain.

The western half of the one-time four-track railroad right-of-way WAS reserved for light-rail rapid transit -- so far, there are no takers.

Unfortunately, Phase 3 of the Greenway project resulted in the paved trail crossing over to the WEST side of the four-track right-of-way, just south of Gratiot. Any future attempt to include light-rail rapid transit running through the otherwise grade-separated trail will necessitate a new grade-crossing (!) south of Gratiot. In effect, light-rail transit running through the cut will NOT happen (Google satellite view).



Dequindre Cut Greenway is a continuing project of Detroit Riverfront Conservancy:

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Published in 1918 by the Division of Grade Separation and Bridges within Detroit's Department of Public Works, the attached illustrated report about railroad grade-crossing elimination in Detroit includes plans for the fully-depressed Grand Trunk Dequindre Cut:

[Report on grade separation in the city of Detroit. Report of the progress of investigations, surveys and construction for the period January 1, 1917, to July 1, 1918 : Detroit \(Mich.\). Division of Grade Separation and Bridges : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)