

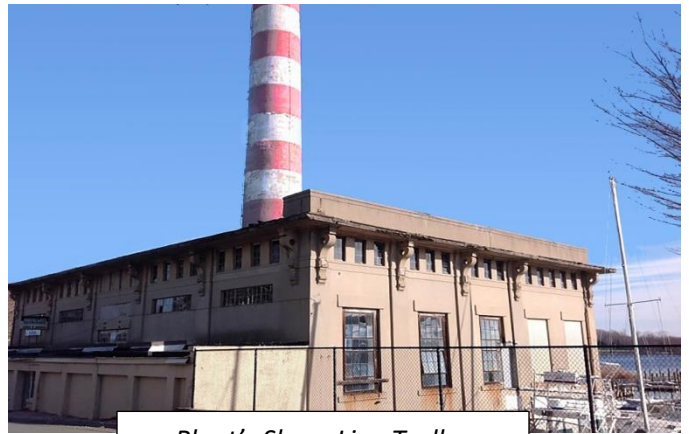
A multi-millionaire gambles on a shoreline trolley line through Old Saybrook, and loses his bet.

(By Lamar LeMonte, OSHS April, 2022)

Morton Freeman Plant's trolley venture in Old Saybrook was just one of his many business ventures, most of which had made him famously rich. But the shoreline trolley line through Old Saybrook was perhaps his worst investment. When he died in 1918 he left a mansion in Groton but in Old Saybrook he left only a power station, a trolley car-barn, trackside workforce houses and concrete viaducts.



Branford House, Plant's summer home on Avery Point in Groton



Plant's Shore Line Trolley power station on Ferry Road

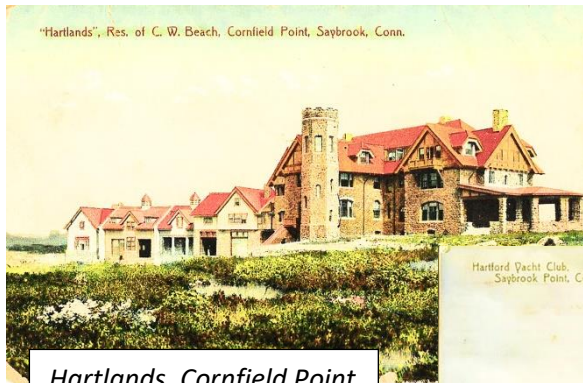
His life is well documented in numerous books and newspaper columns. One of the most colorful stories, and the one most emblematic of his wealth, is about his New York City home and a string of pearls. He decided to sell his home on 52nd Street and 5th Avenue, to build a larger home farther uptown at 86th Street and 5th Avenue, closer to his friends the Vanderbilts, and away from the growing commerce below 59th Street. At the same time his young wife had found a double string of pearls for sale by famed jeweler Pierre Cartier. The \$1 million price tag on the pearls equaled the value of his 52nd Street home. Pierre Cartier was looking for a more prestigious address for his retail store in the City. The story is that they swapped the pearls and \$100 cash for the home. Cartier New York still occupies the former home of Morton Plant. Cartier did change the store's front door to the 5th Ave side.



Cartier at 5th Ave. and 52nd St.

Old Saybrook, early 1900s

While living in New York City in 1903, Morton Plant built his 31-room, Newport-style, summer *cottage*. But unlike his peers, he built it in Groton, not Newport. At the same time, George and Elizabeth Beach were building their 40-room Hartlands mansion on Cornfield Point in Old Saybrook. Just down the shoreline in Fenwick, the grand Fenwick Hall Hotel was still in business. Former Senator Morgan Bulkeley had just established Fenwick as a borough and the building of the nine-hole golf course was completed. The Hartford Yacht Club still had its clubhouse near the Fenwick inner lighthouse, with visiting yachts of the rich and famous a common sight. The railroad from Hartford was still delivering wealthy summer residents to their Fenwick cottages. Across the South Cove at Saybrook Point, the Pease House was doing a fine business, catering to the slightly less-wealthy vacationers and yachtsmen. Life at the turn of the century in Old Saybrook looked promising and few people could notice the growing war clouds in Europe. What a lot of people did notice however was Henry Ford's 1908 introduction of the Model T automobile. Some historians claim Morton Plant's trolley line failed because he underestimated the popularity of the model T and the growth of automobiles. But other factors would prove to be fatal flaws in his trolley line's business plan, most especially fares too low and labor costs too high.



Hartlands, Cornfield Point



(Above): Branford House, Groton
(Left): The Hartford YC in Fenwick



Morton F. Plant (1852-1918, 66 yrs.)

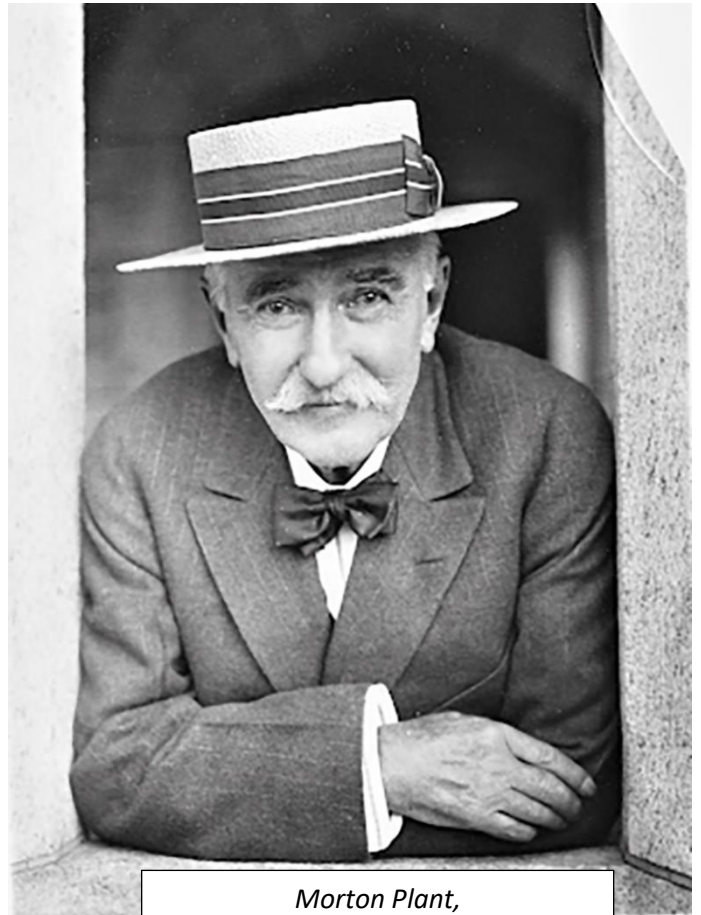
Morton Freeman Plant was born in Branford, Connecticut and he named his Avery Point summer home in Groton after his hometown. His father had built a post-Civil-War empire of railroads and steamship companies which Morton inherited and made even larger. His father and fellow railroad tycoon Henry Flagler decided not to compete with each other in Florida. Flagler chose to develop the east coast, and Plant's father chose the west coast. His father built an enormous hotel in Tampa where young Morton spent many days learning about trains delivering rich vacationers to resort hotels and beaches.

The Plant philanthropy and real estate is spread from the Tampa-Clearwater area to New York City and to Groton, Connecticut.

There is the Morton F. Plant hospital in Clearwater, FL, the Connecticut College for Women in New London, the Groton Town Hall, the East Lyme hunting preserve, his *Branford House* in Groton, now part of the University of Connecticut, and land in Groton which is now the Shennecossett Golf Club and Pfizer headquarters. But in Old Saybrook, only the remnants of his trolley line remain.

The trolley opportunity

Being a railroad man, Morton must have clearly known why the Valley Shore Railroad from Hartford to Fenwick failed to make money. Unlike more successful railroads, it connected the major city of Hartford only to small, rural towns and villages and relied too heavily on the short, seasonal summer-vacation traffic to Fenwick. There was never enough passenger or freight revenue to sustain the railroad. It operated at a financial loss in order to deliver wealthy vacationers and buyers of summer vacation building lots to the Fenwick Hall Hotel in Fenwick.



*Morton Plant,
industrialist and philanthropist*

The other railroad along the shoreline through Old Saybrook connected New York and Boston and it too barely managed to generate enough passenger and freight revenue to sustain its operations. It survived over time only through numerous mergers. Both of these railroads were steam powered, requiring extensive engine maintenance, man-power, coal depots and water stops along the rail lines.

Morton was convinced there was an opportunity to successfully compete with the New York to Boston rail line. It would not depend on freight revenue, relying instead on passenger revenue. He believed it could better serve the small-town needs of travelers and vacationers along the shoreline, and it would be electric, not steam powered. It would be an extension of the already successful intracity electric trolley line in downtown New Haven, run by The Connecticut Company, which had an existing rail line extending out to Branford. It would also be similar to New York City's Interborough Rapid Transit Company (IRT), the first private operator of the city's underground electric subway line opened in 1904. Morton Plant was one of its directors. He knew steam railroads as well as electric rail lines. He also sensed a growing market for connecting the far more numerous but less-wealthy shoreline workers, residents and vacationers to coastal resorts and beaches in Connecticut, Rhode Island and the island ferries.



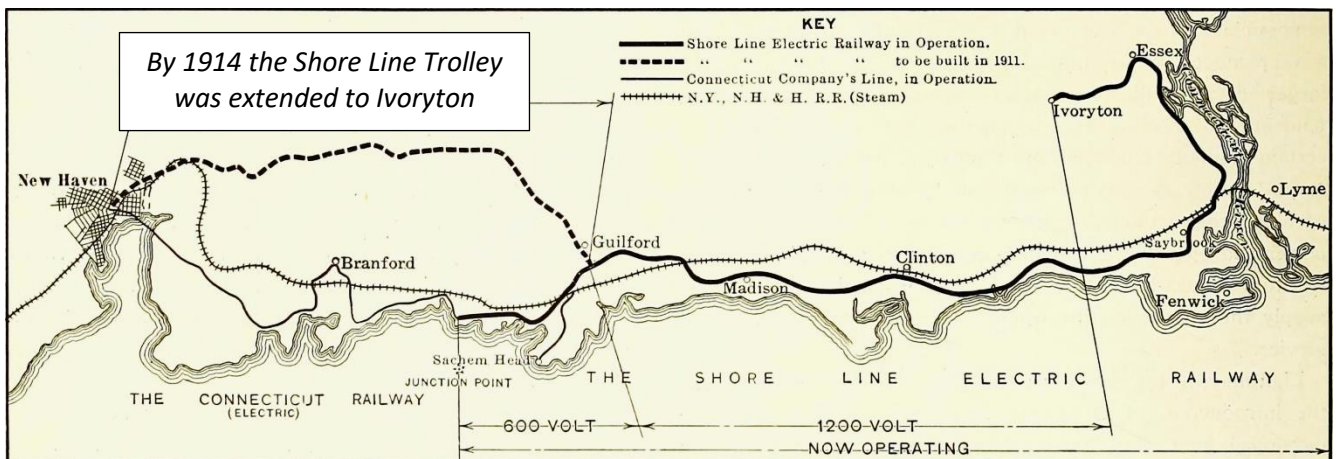
The Shore Line Electric Railway

In 1905 the Shore Line Electric Railway was chartered by the Connecticut General Assembly. It was authorized to lay tracks, build bridges, erect power poles, and to build powerhouses and trolley barns. Morton Plant was the primary financier and in a short time he took over complete control of the company including its finances. Unlike other trolley lines in New England, the Shore Line Electric was a true interurban rail line, running large railway-style cars, like the New York City IRT subways cars, largely on a private right-of-way rather than on public streets.



The line first ran from downtown New Haven to Old Saybrook. It was completed in 1910. The section north of Old Saybrook opened to Ivoryton and Deep River in 1912 and Chester in 1914.

Plant was convinced that trolley service along the shore would serve local merchants, school children, families, factory workers, church goers, and especially vacationers, connecting them to beaches, resort hotels and island ferries.



Expansion of the line grew quickly after 1914. Morton made three major acquisitions. First, he leased the New London and East Lyme Street Railway and built a branch from Flanders along Route 1 and over the Connecticut River bridge to meet the main line at Saybrook

The same year, he purchased the Norwich and Westerly Railway system, which represented 60 miles of lines including the Norwich-Westerly line; branches from Westerly to Watch Hill, Weekapaug, and Ashaway; and the Groton and Stonington Street Railway and its Old Mystic branch.

Finally, the company acquired the Connecticut Company's New London division. This gave the Shore Line control over a network of almost 300 miles of lines, representing a monopoly on trolley service in the eastern part of the state. Ironically, it was too big to make a profit. Fares were kept too low, wages kept rising, and maintenance problems and labor unrest grew worse during the war years. World War I caused material and equipment shortages and higher costs.



WAR PRICES ARE HIGH BECAUSE WAR COSTS ARE HIGH

Unless the butcher could get for his meat more money than the meat costs him, he would have to stop selling meat. His customers understand this, they know his high costs, and they pay his high prices without grudge against him, realizing that his predicament is identical with their own. The struggle with us all is to get money enough to cover our heavy bills of expense.

The street railroad rates of Eastern Connecticut are about to be increased as a matter of public necessity.

STREET RAILROAD TRANSPORTATION IS AS VITAL TO THE COMMUNITY as the railroad and the telephone. Without it business would be paralyzed.

STREET RAILROAD TRANSPORTATION CANNOT BE MAINTAINED EXCEPT AS ITS REVENUES MEET ITS COSTS.

STREET RAILROAD TRANSPORTATION COSTS HAVE BECOME PROHIBITIVE on the basis of former revenues. THIS CONDITION IS TRUE EVERYWHERE and it cannot be altered by change of ownership or management. It has created a street railroad crisis as desperate in New York, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania as it has in Connecticut. THE MOVEMENT TOWARD INCREASE OF RATES IS A UNIVERSAL ONE.

In two years the operating cost of our street railroads has increased more than 30 per cent.

The cost of supplies has doubled.

Overhead charges have increased. Taxes have increased, Labor costs have increased. Every enumerable item of costs has startlingly increased.

EXISTING REVENUES ARE HOPELESSLY INADEQUATE. STREET RAILWAY CREDIT IS SADLY IMPERILLED.

Continuation of this disparity between costs and revenues means the quick collapse of street railroad transportation. **SERVICE, ALREADY SERIOUSLY IMPAIRED BY THE TASK OF HAULING PEAK LOADS WITH INSUFFICIENT FACILITIES OF POWER AND CARS AND MEN** must come to calamitous breakdown, replacing deplorable inconvenience with downright hardship. Upon Eastern Connecticut there would be forced a ruinous decade of **BUSINESS AND SOCIAL DISADVANTAGE** out of which there could be but **SLOW, PAINFUL AND MOST COSTLY EMERGENCE** through any means of restoration imaginable.

THE TRUTH OF THESE STATEMENTS IS INCONTROVERTIBLY EVIDENCED by the books of our railways, and the figures of street railroad transportation, frankly open to any reasonable inquiry.

The Shore Line Electric Railway Company.

Ad in the New London Day, circa 1917

The demise of the Shore Line Electric Railway

Morton Plant wouldn't live to see the end of his trolley line company. A year before his death at 66 there was a terrible crash in North Branford, killing 19 people and sponsoring numerous lawsuits. The same year, labor union demands for higher wages and a strike threatened the trolley line's fragile financial viability. Then a major power outage occurred at the Old Saybrook power station adding more problems, and then there was another accident injuring passengers in Waterford. By this time Morton Plant was personally paying the bond and stockholder dividends, having no corporate profits to use to pay those obligations.

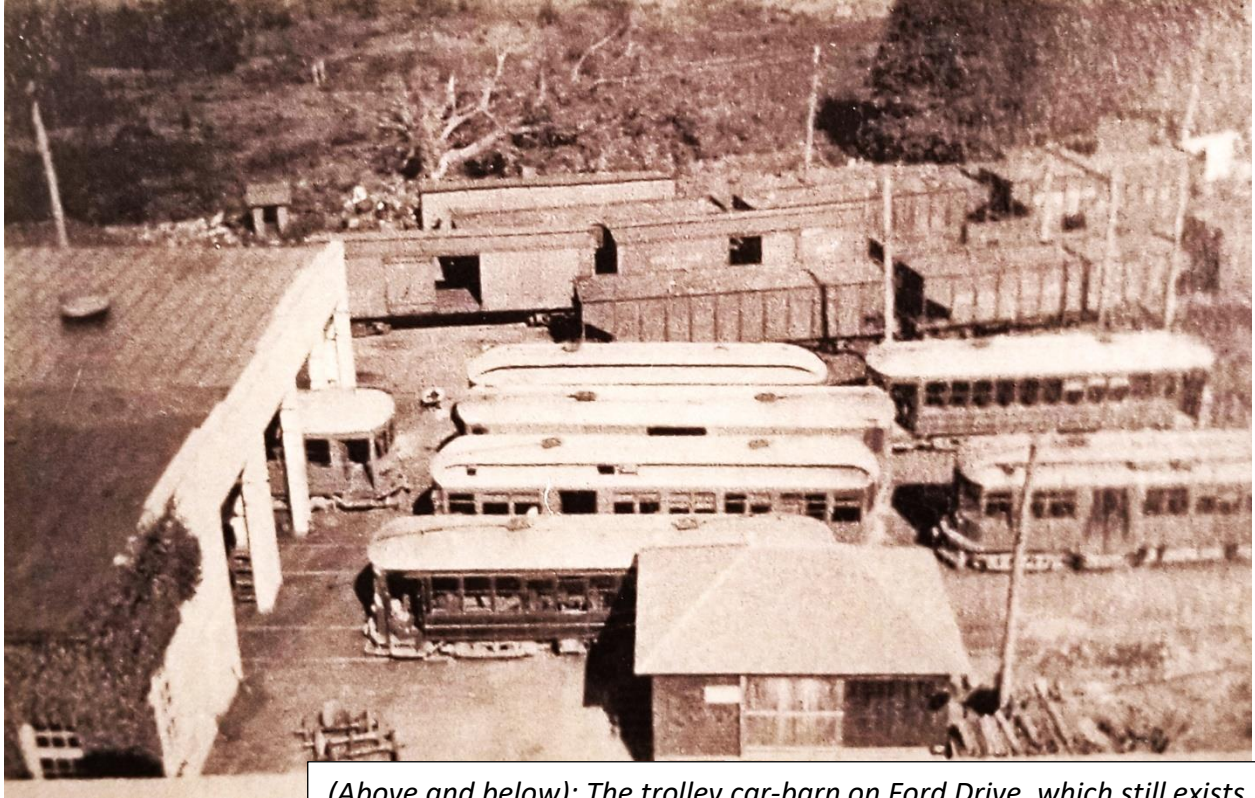


Then Morton Plant unexpectedly died at his New York City home in 1918 from the influenza epidemic. The next year his trolley workers shut down the entire line, striking again for higher wages. Without their financier, the Shore Line Electric Railway went into receivership and never recovered.

The Shore Line Railway during its tenure connected towns all along the Connecticut shoreline. In 1914 the line carried almost 20 million passengers. At that time it was one of the largest single trolley systems in the United States. But from its formation in 1910 to Plant's death in 1918, the railway never made a profit. In fact it had the distinction of being one of the country's most unprofitable trolley companies during the otherwise profitable and prosperous 1910-1924 period for electric trolley lines around the country. Most analysts agree it was due to Morton Plant's insistence on low, 5-cent fares, plus the rising maintenance and labor costs, and encroaching competition from local metro bus lines and automobiles, facilitated by improved paved roads.

Some portions of his trolley system separated and tried to survive independently but to no avail. The Shore Line Electric Railway officially shut down service completely by 1923. By 1928, metro bus lines had replaced almost all the Connecticut trolleys and Morton Plant's entire network of electric rails was abandoned by 1929.

The trolley in Old Saybrook



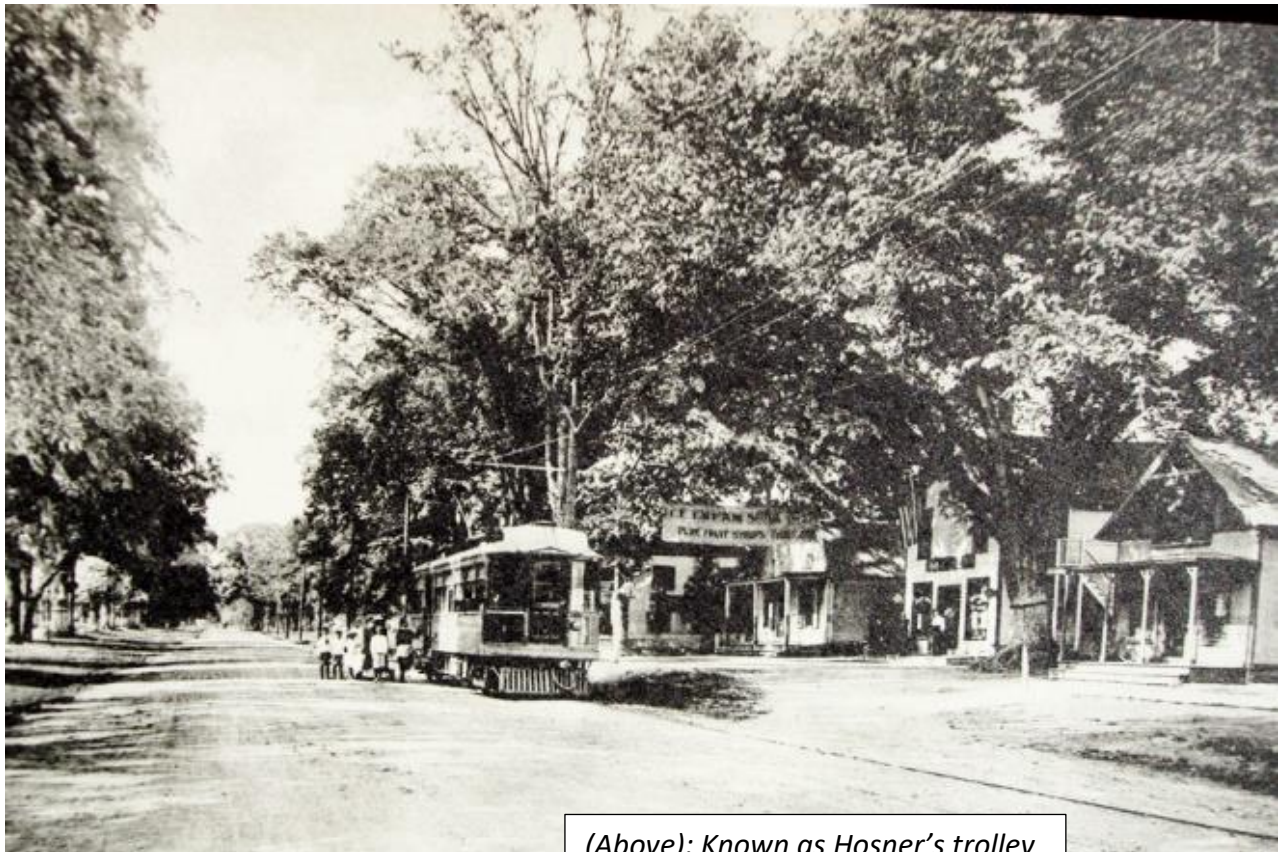
(Above and below): The trolley car-barn on Ford Drive, which still exists, photographed from the old overpass, which no longer exists.





(Above): The overpass that crossed the Valley Shore Railroad tracks to Saybrook Point and Fenwick, early 1900s. (Below) Trolley overpass, 1940s, before complete demolition in the 1950s.





*(Above): Known as Hosner's trolley stop, on Main Street, Old Saybrook.
(Below): Burns & Young's trolley station, Old Saybrook*

BURNS & YOUNG'S
TROLLEY STATION,
OLD SAY BROOK, CONN.



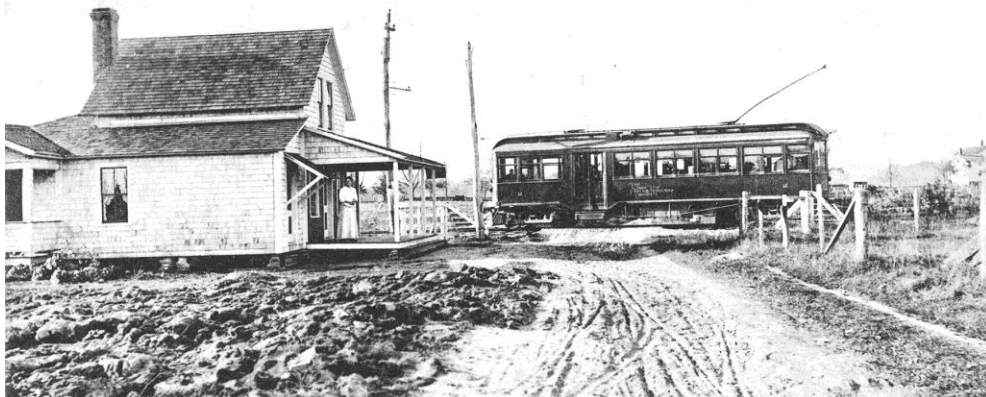


(Above): The "Trolley Houses" on Ford Drive, still existing, built as trolley workforce housing next to the car-barn. (Below): The corner of Main and West Main Street, Old Saybrook

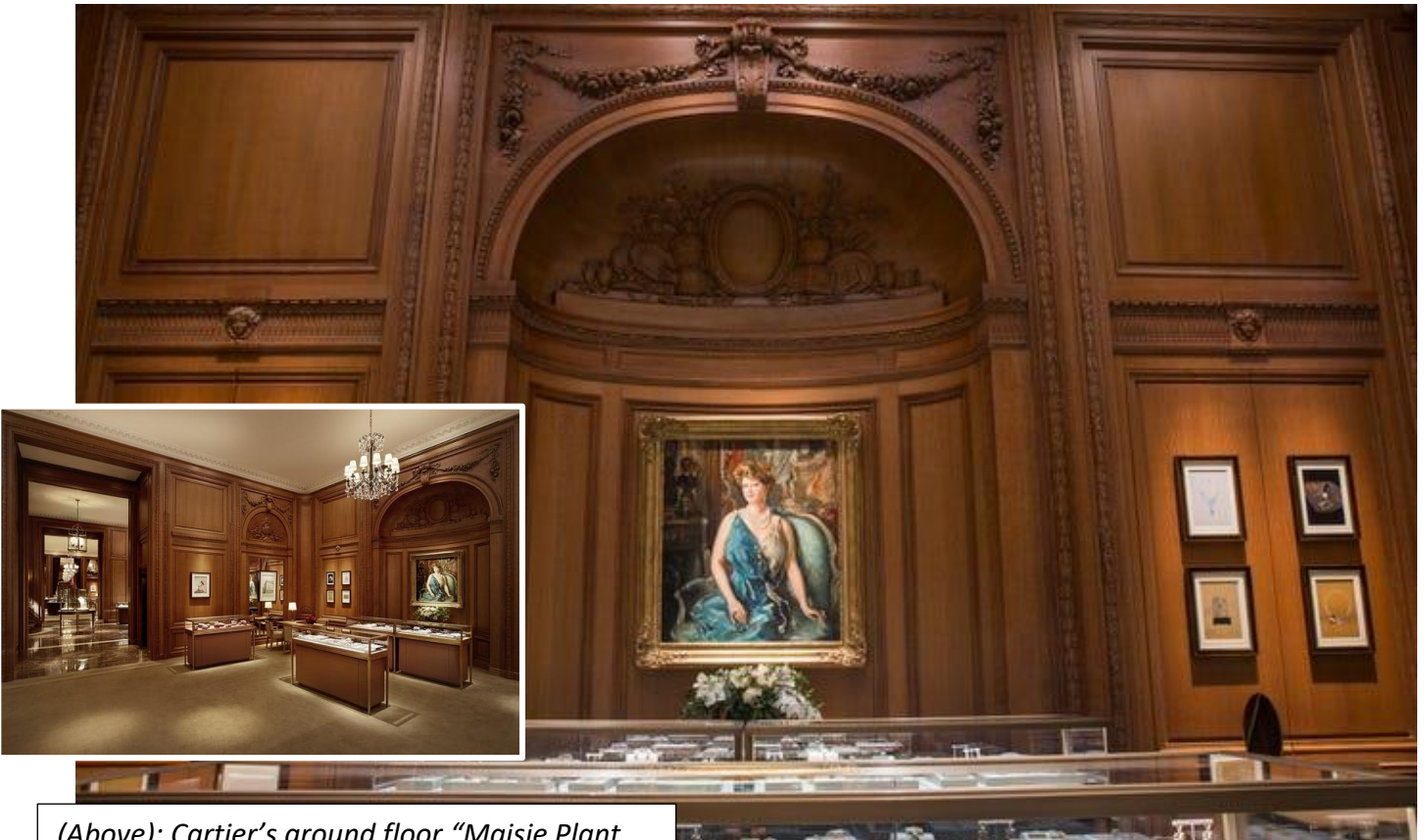


(Below): Henry Issac's Ice Cream Parlor and trolley station, Chapman Beach, Old Saybrook

HENRY ISAAC'S
ICE CREAM PARLOR
AND TROLLEY STATION,
CHAPMAN BEACH, CONN.



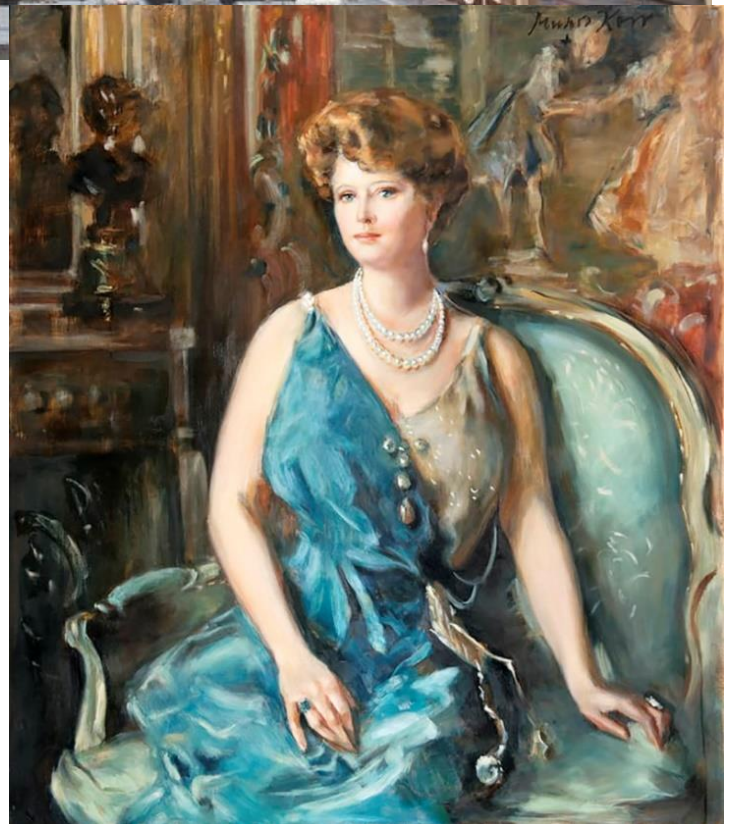
Morton Freeman Plant's legacy



(Above): Cartier's ground floor "Maisie Plant Salon" with original Plant-mansion woodwork and Mrs. Maisie Plant's portrait (Right) with her famous pearls.

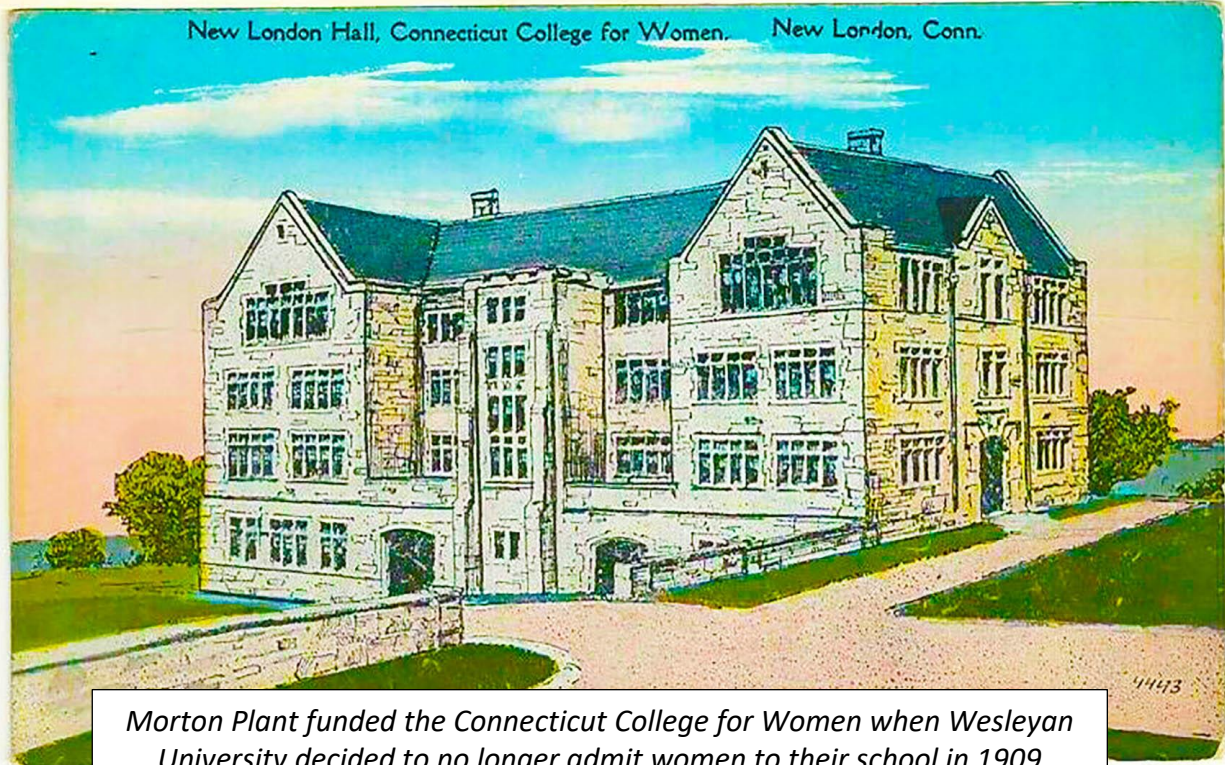


(Above) Modern 2016 replica of Maisie Plant's original double strand of South Sea pearls, reported to be worth \$1 million. They were later sold at auction in the 1950s for \$181,000 and disappeared. Their loss in value is attributed to the advent of cultured pearls, which did not exist when Cartier made the original strand, circa 1910.





THE WITT MEMORIAL BUILDING
MORTON F. PLANT HOSPITAL
CLEARWATER, FLORIDA



New London Hall, Connecticut College for Women. New London, Conn.

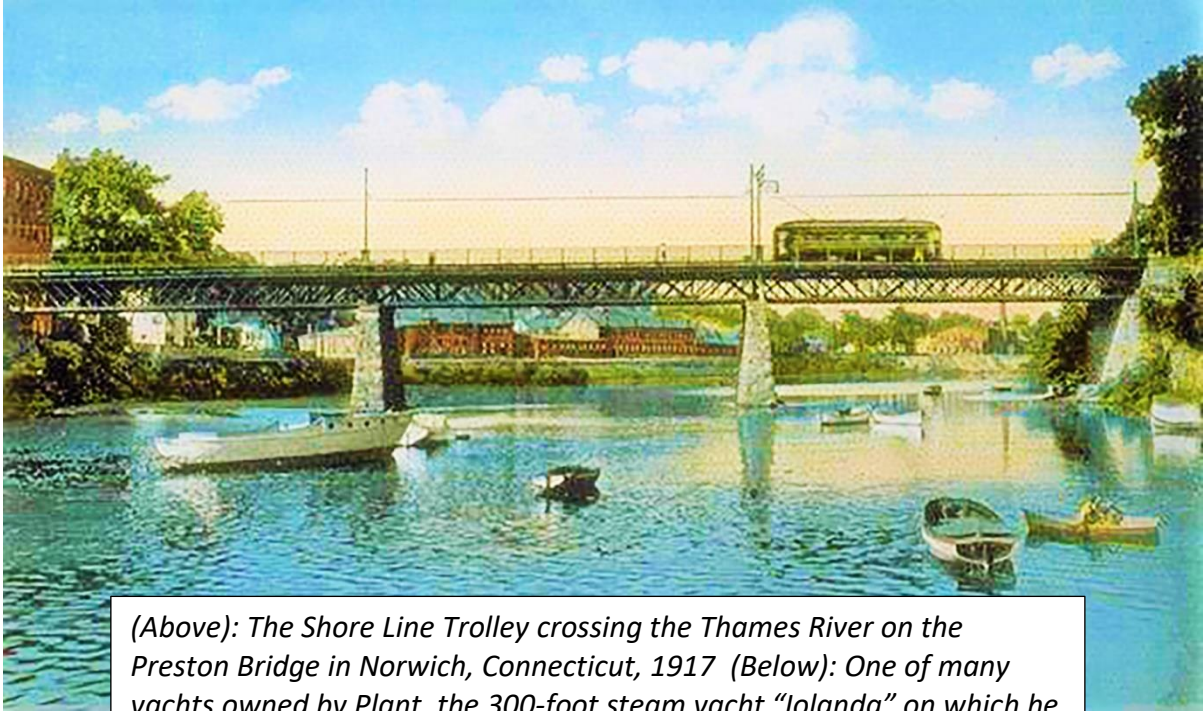
Morton Plant funded the Connecticut College for Women when Wesleyan University decided to no longer admit women to their school in 1909



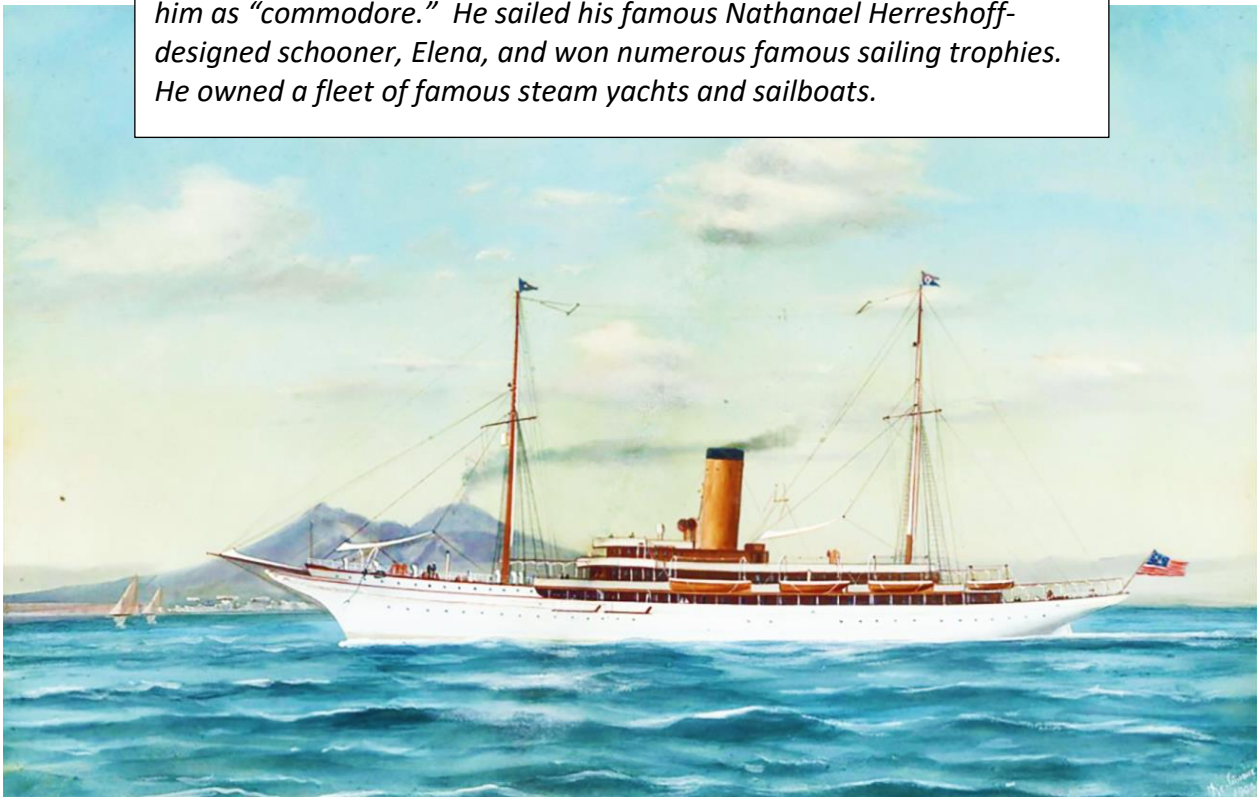
Morton Plant's Branford (summer) House on Avery Point in Groton, now part of the University of Connecticut



Morton Plant's Hunting Lodge in East Lyme Connecticut.



(Above): The Shore Line Trolley crossing the Thames River on the Preston Bridge in Norwich, Connecticut, 1917 (Below): One of many yachts owned by Plant, the 300-foot steam yacht "Iolanda" on which he sailed around the world. Plant was a member of the prestigious New York Yacht Club, along with the Vanderbilts, Astors and J.P. Morgan, and headed the club's New London station. He was also commodore of New York's Larchmont YC, a member of Indian Harbor YC in Greenwich, the St Georges YC and Seawanhaka-Corinthian. His friends referred to him as "commodore." He sailed his famous Nathanael Herreshoff-designed schooner, Elena, and won numerous famous sailing trophies. He owned a fleet of famous steam yachts and sailboats.



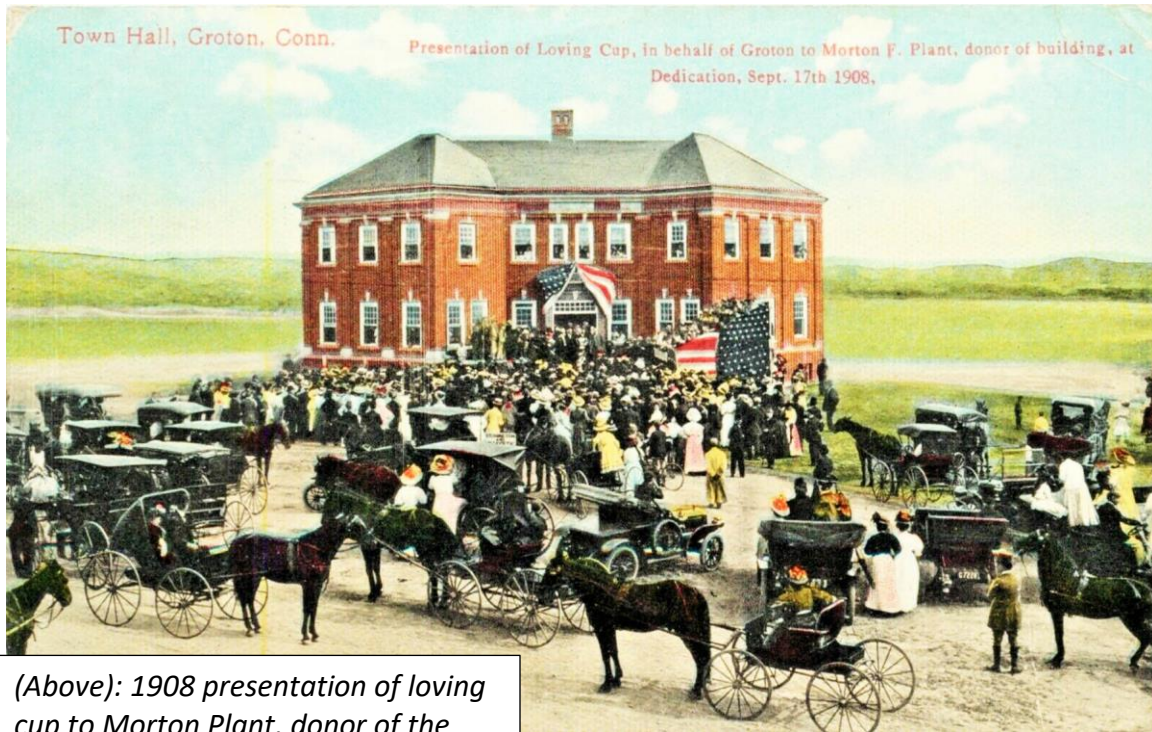


Morton Plant sold his 52nd Street home to Cartier and built this new city home on 86th and Fifth Avenue, to rejoin his former neighbors the Vanderbilts and Astors. This home was torn down in 1960 to build high rise apartments.

Plant and Bradford Dormitories, Connecticut College for Women, New London, Conn.



Plant's legacy dormitories on the Connecticut College campus



(Above): 1908 presentation of loving cup to Morton Plant, donor of the newly built Groton Town Hall

(Below): The 1905, 500-room Griswold Hotel that Plant built on Groton's Eastern Point. The land is now owned by Pfizer. The golf course adjacent to the hotel is now the Shennecossett Golf Club. His trolley line brought vacationers to the resort which was demolished prior to Pfizer's purchase. His nearby "Branford Farms" land is now the Groton-New London airport.



Morton Freeman Plant's Old Saybrook trolley legacy

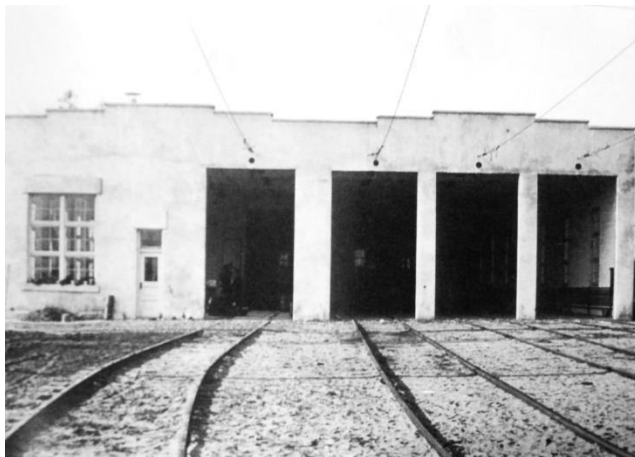


The Shore Line Electric Railway Power House in Old Saybrook was constructed from 1908 to 1910 as a coal-fueled electric powerhouse. The riverfront location provided a source of water to cool the condensing units and enabled easy access of coal deliveries by boat. At the time of its construction the Power House supplied current to the Shore Line Electric Railway and the New London and East Lyme trolleys; it also furnished power for the operation of the Connecticut River Bridge, south of the Power House. The building was listed in the

National Register of Historic Places on June 20, 2019. It now sits empty and unused.



(Above): The "Trolley Houses," still existing, on Ford Drive, built in the early 1900s as workforce housing for the trolley workers.



(Left): The Old Saybrook trolley's car barn, still existing, (without rails) on Ford Drive. Later a furniture store, now vacant and unused.

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