

## **RIDING THE DUBUQUE, IOWA, FENELON PLACE ELEVATOR**

by  
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A chance to serve as an observer at a Hazmat exercise in Des Moines, Iowa, saw Mary Ann and me driving west. Our (my) plan was to mix work and railfanning so I laid out an agenda of places to visit on the way out and back. Among the cities I had on the list to visit was Dubuque, Iowa, where an incline was still in use. This passenger-carrying incline, The Fenelon Place Elevator, was constructed in 1882. Dubuque, like Cincinnati, is a city built on a flood plain surrounded by high hills. The easiest way to conquer the hills was an incline. Unlike Cincinnati which built five trolley-carrying inclines, Dubuque built only one and it carried only passengers.

The Fenelon Place Elevator was conceived by J. K. Graves in 1882. Mr. Graves, a banker and mine speculator, had built his house on the top of the hill overlooking downtown Dubuque. While his home and office were but a quarter mile apart, it was a 60-minute buggy ride between these two points. His solution to this problem was building an incline that would carry him in a minute from the top of the hill to the bottom. Built for Mr. Graves' own private use, the incline went into service on 25 July 1884, only to burn a month later on 19 July 1884. The incline was rebuilt and continued to operate until 1893 when it burnt again. During this second period of operation, Mr. Graves charged \$.05 for anyone to ride the incline. Use of the incline increased as others built on top of the hill. After the second burning of the incline, Mr. Graves was not disposed to rebuild the incline so neighbors who had been using the incline banded together to rebuild it.

The new incline was 296 feet in length and ascended 189 feet from Fourth Street to Fenelon Place. It consisted of two cars, each having five seats to each side, and ran on three tracks. The cars passed each other at midpoint where the track spread to four tracks to allow passing. Unlike the previous incline, the cars were carried up and down the hill by wire cable, not rope. By 1912, C. B. Trewin had bought out all of the other investors in the incline company and took over sole ownership. In 1962, the line suffered another fire but was again rebuilt. Then in 1977 the line was completely rebuilt. Today the Fenelon Place Elevator operates from 1 April through 30 November. Cost is \$1.50 one way and \$3.00 round trip.

On the day we rode the incline, the majority of the people riding were tourists or locals having an outing. However, we did encounter two people who said they ride the incline every day in season to go from their residence to their place of work. I need to mention that the view from the head house is superb with great views of the Mississippi River and the rail lines running through town.



View from Fourth Street looking up at the head house. The house to the left of the incline is the residence of the owners of the incline.



A view from the head house down toward the lower level boarding platform. Note that while the downhill side of the car has a door closing the car, the uphill side has only an opening.