

Roundhouse

It was the railroad that helped to change the surrounding area from farmland to a city. The first train rumbled through the fields and pastures of the Bronx in 1842. People found it easier and faster to travel here and villages soon sprang up.

By 1851 a railroad branch was built to Port Morris along the Harlem River, near where you are now standing. Further west, the Hudson Line of the New York Central Railroad was opened in 1871 along the banks of the Hudson River. Some sections of the Bronx became part of the City of New York in 1874 and all other areas were added in 1895. In 1898 the Borough of the Bronx was officially annexed into the City of New York. Trolley lines and elevated trains, or “els,” crossed the Harlem River, providing even more families with a cheap and easy way to reach the Bronx Neighborhoods quickly grew.



This section of the Bronx became a center for railroad activities, and a large train yard was built at Mott Haven for the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad. Protected and massive indoor spaces were also needed for the constant maintenance and repairs of railroad engines. A roundhouse, a service shop for train engines, stood in this neighborhood from 1873 to 1890. The roundhouse gets its name from its shape—it was usually built to look like a bicycle wheel, or half a wheel, laid flat on the ground. It is divided into sections that spread out from the center, like the spokes of the wheel. At the center is a turntable that rotates so that engines can be directed into a service bay, or stall. Here they could be washed or oiled and repaired. The local brick roundhouse was taken down by 1891 when it was no longer needed so that a larger train storage yard could be constructed.



The New York, New Haven, and Hartford Railroad transported people and goods from Manhattan and the Bronx to Connecticut, with connections throughout New England.

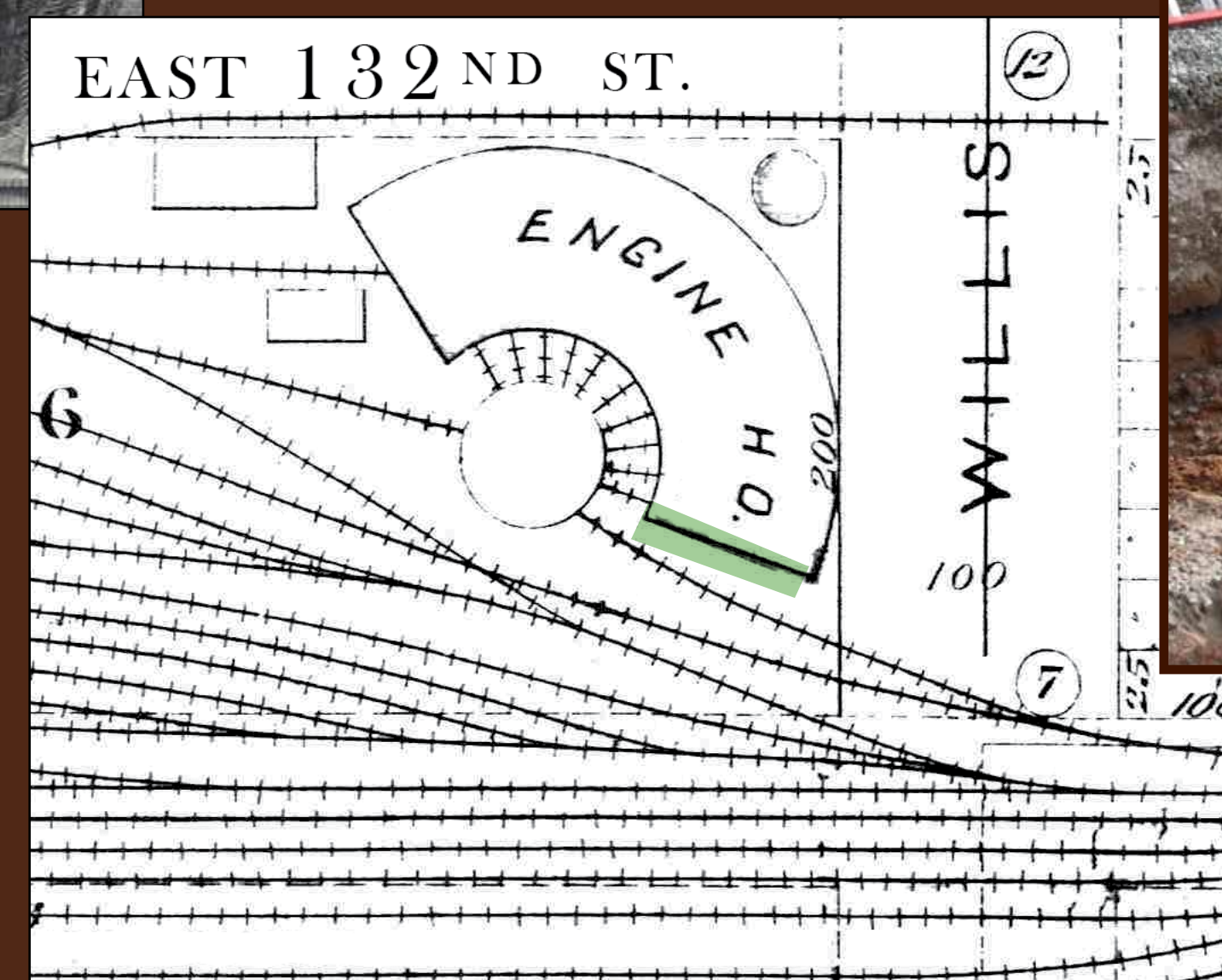
Inside the roundhouse people cleaned, repaired, and oiled the engines. Lots of windows in the walls and roof let in natural sunlight to make work easier. There was even a long, narrow opening beneath each set of tracks—a pit—that allowed workers to get underneath the engine to work on hard to reach places.

(From Historic American Engineering Record, IL8-81)



This is the relatively standard roundhouse construction of the late 19th century. It shows what the roundhouse here next to Willis Avenue might have looked like, although this one is much larger. The turntable at the center would have rotated to direct engines into the different bays.

(Adapted from Central Georgia Railroad Shop Complex, Savannah, GA)



As part of the Willis Avenue Bridge reconstruction, archaeological testing was completed, identifying the exterior wall of the roundhouse under later layers of soil and pavement. A portion of the 19th century stone foundation was uncovered, measured, and photographed.

This is what the semi-circular roundhouse looked like on an 1887 atlas. Here it is called an Engine House. Location of roundhouse foundation wall (shown here in green) identified through archaeological testing.

