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Railroad Rivalry in the Connecticut River Valley¹

Larry Lowenthal

The hoarse whistle of the steam locomotive, that characteristic sound of the nineteenth century, was the trumpet call of a new age. No one could ignore its shrill demands, and the response communities made in the dynamic period between 1830 and 1850 largely determined their fortune for the next century.

From our distance, and influenced by snapshots of Old Sturbridge Village, we tend to view the 1820s and 1830s as a settled, bucolic period in the history of New England. In reality, it was a time of disturbing upheaval. The steady emigration of the region's more ambitious youth raised questions about how New England would fare as a relatively developed region in an expanding nation. It was easy to see that a new era was emerging, but few could discern the form it would take or predict the impact it would have on their familiar, departing world.

The rapidity and extent to which change took place — which is another way of saying the rapidity and extent to which people had to adapt — was astonishing. It may well be, as scholars such as Wolfgang Schivelbusch have suggested, that railroads introduced to Western civilization an altogether different concept of time.² In 1825, railroads in New England existed only in the realm of fantasy. Even the pioneer Granite Railway in Quincy was not organized and constructed until the following year, and it relied

1. Special thanks must be given to Bob Buck, of Tucker's Hobbies, Warren, Mass., and Harvey Allen, of Amherst, Mass., for their prompt and generous response in providing illustrations for this article, on very short notice.

2. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, The Railway Journey (New York, 1979).

on animal power.³ In 1830, the merits of steam power over horses had scarcely been established; railroads were still being planned with horsepaths alongside, and bizarre technical brainstorm, such as reversing the customary arrangement by mounting the cars on rails and traveling over a rolling roadbed, were still being advanced. Yet only five years later, the rudiments of a railroad system were in place and the outline of its future importance was visible. Charles Francis Adams, Jr., who had a lifelong interest in railroads and served as a Massachusetts railroad commissioner, wrote in 1880 that

The year 1835 marked an historical dividing line. The world we now live in came into existence then, and humanly speaking, it is in almost every essential respect a different world than that lived in by the preceding six generations.⁴

Technical considerations, however poorly understood, influenced decisions about routes and power. Attitudes about the purpose, organization, and financing of this new means of transportation were conditioned by established political and economic assumptions and by earlier experiences with canals and turnpikes. New England was by no stretch of the imagination the region in which canals reached their highest development, but enough canal projects and proposals flourished there to provide a basic education in large transportation enterprises.

By the time the railroad movement had built up a head of steam, it was apparent that the federal government would not be a major participant in the popular but controversial program of "internal improvements." There was not even a railroad equivalent of Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin's 1808 plan for a national system of waterways — a plan which, while never implemented by the federal government, at least could serve as a guide. Under the Jacksonian principles that prevailed in the 1830s, it was understood that the capital requirements of the railroads — demands far greater than anything previously encountered in the young nation — would have to be met by some combination of state, municipal, and private sources.

3. Alvin F. Harlow, *Steelways of New England* (New York, 1946), p. 27.

4. Quoted in Harlow, *Ibid.*, p. 114.

In practice, the lack of any nationally formulated railroad program meant that the traditional rivalries among states and cities were transferred to the new medium. If anything, these conflicts became more acute due to the devilishly tempting potential of the railroads and the fact that the completion of the Erie Canal offered, for the first time, realistic prospects for an immense western traffic. The opening of that marvelous waterway in 1825 seemed to place New York City in such an advantageous position that the very commercial survival of the other seaboard cities would be threatened. Nowhere was this impending threat felt more acutely than in Boston, blocked from the western frontier by a barrier of hills, the one closed region of an expanding nation. It was in this portentous atmosphere that Boston's leaders took up the question of railroads, a pivotal debate about the city's future.

The acceptance of railroads, and the willingness to finance their construction, was achieved only after a difficult struggle and by the effective mobilization of strikingly modern techniques of lobbying and persuasion. The old guard cleared the tracks only grudgingly and seldom gracefully. In the early stages of the debate, one Boston editor filled his lungs with the air of bygone times and bellowed forth the memorable opinion that the proposed railroad to Albany was

. . . a project which every one knows, who knows the simplest rule in arithmetic, to be impracticable, but at an expense little less than the market value of the whole territory of Massachusetts, and which, if practicable, every person of common sense knows, would be as useless as a railroad from Boston to the moon.⁵

Some of the dire warnings about the effects of the railroad were, as later experience would show, not entirely unfounded, but by 1830 the railroad juggernaut had already become too powerful to be derailed. Despite serious misgivings, Massachusetts granted charters to three railroad companies, and by 1835, Adams' watershed year, all had been completed. One, the Boston & Worcester, pointed westward in the direction of Boston's main aspirations. An extension, the Western Railroad, had been approved two years before, and on October 1, 1839, service began

5. Boston Courier, June 27, 1827, quoted in Harlow, p. 43.

to Springfield. At the end of 1841, the railroad was completed to the Hudson River opposite Albany, forming the longest continuous railroad line in the world at that time. It was an extraordinary achievement, considering the primitive technology which was used to confront the rugged terrain of western Massachusetts. Even more remarkable is the fact that today Conrail's main freight line into New England follows almost exactly the route laid out in the 1830s by engineers such as William G. McNeill and George W. Whistler, who ten years earlier had not even seen a working railroad.



The old station at Springfield became the transportation hub of the Connecticut River Valley. It used the enclosed "train barn" design which was popular in the early days of railroading, but which fell into disuse because it captured smoke and soot and created a fire hazard. This is a view of the west portal, showing the vital junction between the Connecticut River Railroad and the Boston & Albany. From the collection of the Connecticut Valley Historical Museum, Springfield.

Springfield welcomed its new link with unreserved enthusiasm, but so did Boston. The port city's fondest ambition extended farther, to the Great Lakes, but it had compelling objectives closer to home. In those days, with the economy largely based on resources of the land, geographical determinism sat at the throttle. The produce of central and western New England drained naturally down to Long Island Sound, making the economic benefits from that trade easily accessible to New York but blocked from Boston by the hazardous projection of Cape Cod. Berkshire County, though still within the boundaries of the state, was only tenuously connected with eastern Massachusetts.

In the worst nightmares of the Boston commercial interests, the city might not only lose the western traffic, but might see its influence confined to a ring no larger than that formed by modern route I-495.

Thus the occasion of the first passenger train into Springfield was cause for celebration at both ends of the line. The weekly *Springfield Republican* rejoiced that "The greatest attraction in this town the past week has been the railroad depot. Hundreds have resorted there every day to see the cars arrive and depart. It is surprising to see the change in the number of passengers to and from this place on the Boston route."⁶ Similarly, a Charlestown paper observed that

Bostonians will not be dependent on a little area of twelve miles for vegetables, fruits, and fresh provisions. The beautiful and rich valley of the Connecticut, the garden of New England, is now spread out before our door, and we may receive articles as fresh and about as easily from there as from Concord or Lexington.⁷

The stern realities of geography, as well as ruinous squabbling between the two independent components of the railroad from Boston to Albany, determined that Boston could not finally achieve its desire of capturing the western traffic delivered by the Erie Canal.⁸ (If the New York interests had truly believed that it was possible for Massachusetts to draw traffic away from New York City, they probably would not have permitted, much less supported, the rail connection from the Massachusetts state line to the Hudson River). In a humiliating climax to decades of discontent and recrimination, in 1900 the arch-rival New York Central took control of the Boston & Albany Railroad.

6. *Springfield Republican*, October 5, 1839, quoted in Mark Mackler, "The Railroad Comes to Springfield," *Historical Journal of Western Massachusetts*, III, No. 2 (Fall 1974).

7. *Charlestown Watchman*, quoted in the *Hampshire Gazette*, November 20, 1839, quoted in Mackler, "The Railroad Comes to Springfield."

8. After years of arguing over matters that seem petty in view of the greater issues at stake, the Boston & Worcester and the Western Railroad were forced to merge in 1867, as the Boston & Albany Railroad.

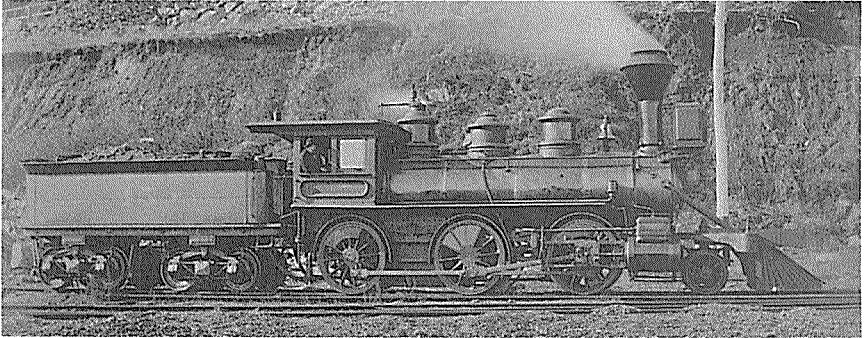
Long before that, when it became apparent that the Western Railroad could not fulfill Boston's grandest ambitions, some of Boston's financial leaders turned to other alternatives. One was a line through Vermont and the upper bulge of New York State, to tap the Great Lakes traffic at Ogdensburg, New York. Others considered a route through Canada to the American midwest, inappropriately anticipating the great circle routes of modern airlines. The vision of a Boston-controlled route to the West was both tantalizing and persistent. As late as 1910, Massachusetts residents formed an entity known as the Buffalo, Rochester & Eastern Railroad, ostensibly intended to parallel the New York Central from Buffalo to Troy, though it may have been primarily a tactical maneuver in the New Haven Railroad's battle with the New York Central.⁹ Even then, it would have been dependent on New York authorities, which, in fact, promptly squelched it.

The bells that heralded the first train to reach Springfield also proclaimed a call to arms. Now the conflicts among the major ports were transferred to the smaller inland towns. These territorial struggles were wars in every sense except that they usually did not include physical combat; otherwise, they involved the same considerations of strategy, influence, and dominance, and defeat would be catastrophic to the future economic development of the losing town. In some respects these secondary battles were even more desperate, for the smaller towns lacked sufficient financial resources to build railroads on their own, and therefore they had to compete for support on State Street, whether from the banks or the Legislature. Even Springfield, whose leaders had wholeheartedly endorsed the Western Railroad and displayed little of the intellectual carping against railroads that was seen elsewhere, could not in its wildest fantasies underwrite the actual cost of construction. In fact, the cost exceeded the capabilities of Boston, which responded only reluctantly, and in the end it was state aid that made possible the completion of the railroad to Albany. Massachusetts thus joined several other of the more prosperous states in supporting "mixed enterprise," as described in Carter Goodrich's excellent study of the role of the government in promoting transportation advances.¹⁰ Worcester's attitude

 9. Larry Lowenthal, The Titanic Railroad (unpublished manuscript), chapter 5.

10. Carter Goodrich, Government Promotion of American Canals and Railroads, 1800-1890 (New York, 1960).

exemplified and foreshadowed the unremitting competitiveness of the railroad wars: preferring to be a termination point rather than a way station, it gave only the most meager support to the Western Railroad.



Connecticut River Railroad engine number 45 waits for orders at Round Hill, Springfield, in May of 1887. From the collection of the Conn. Valley Historical Museum.

Placing Springfield on what Edward Kirkland has called "the first transectional railroad" threatened to shake up the relative position of the other towns in the Connecticut River Valley.¹¹ Northampton, which had commercial pretensions of its own and lay at the head of a singularly unsuccessful inland canal, the Farmington, by which New Haven had sought to outflank Hartford, became worried. A Northampton newspaper declared, "If the people of Northampton and vicinity are wise touching their own interests, they will do all in their power. Now, strike while the iron is hot! See what a railroad has done for Springfield."¹² This feeling promptly translated itself into the formation of the Northampton & Springfield Railroad, in 1842. Despite its enthusiastic beginnings, this project languished for a time, and it was only the prospect of a railroad extension from Fitchburg to Greenfield that revived it. This event threatened to make the Massachusetts Valley, as was said of New Jersey, "a barrel tapped

11. Edward C. Kirkland, Men, Cities and Transportation (Cambridge, 1948).

12. Northampton Courier, March 8, 1842, quoted in Mackler, "The Railroad Comes to Springfield."

at both ends," so that the only question for a place like Northampton would be through which opening would its vitality be drained. Northampton's response pointed up the fact that railroad mania was based not only on the desire to get ahead, but the fear of being left behind. Then as now, insecurity was a constant feature of the capitalist system.

The perceived menace emerging from Fitchburg was itself a product of Boston's westward thrust, as well as regional jealousies within Massachusetts. Creation of the first generation of railroads, reaching Providence, Lowell, and Worcester, respectively, had left the northern part of the state off the track and resentful at being left behind. The Fitchburg Railroad, completed from Boston to that destination in 1845, might have confined itself to local business, but modesty of purpose among pioneer railroadmen was as scarce as an accurate estimate of construction costs. It was hoped that the Fitchburg might serve as a springboard for expansion to the Great Lakes, and it was for this purpose that Alvah Crocker, its dynamic and combative head, began making contacts in the Greenfield area.

The combination of overwrought sensitivities and the characteristic hyperbole of public expression created what seems now to have been a sort of civic hysteria. A correspondent of the *Northampton Courier* foresaw nothing short of disaster:

In no mean sense it has become a question whether we will arouse and secure a railway up the Valley of the Connecticut or by having our public travel removed from us, lose our trade and manufacturing, suffer a depreciation in our real estate — in fact whether we shall have tenantless homes, stores, shops, and factories while the flower and enterprise of our young men shall seek some other field for their operations.¹³

Even if we regard this feverish rhetoric as excessive, there remains a positive, constructive core. Concerns such as these, however extravagantly voiced, show a basic recognition that a new

13. December 26, 1843, quoted in Thelma M. Kistler, The Rise of Railroads in the Connecticut River Valley (Northampton: Smith College Studies in History, XXIII, nos. 1-4, October 1937 to July 1938).

era was arriving and that even an old and proud town like Northampton would have to find ways to adjust.

If the inflamed language was intended to act as a goad, it soon succeeded. Stock subscriptions, the most effective and incontrovertible method of displaying support for a railroad enterprise, increased dramatically. In the next issue of the *Courier* an editorial noted that

The enterprise of building a Rail Road through the Valley is eliciting the energies of our best and best able citizens — able in influence, able in purse. The cloud which like the shadow of death has rested on the towns and villages of this vicinity is, we believe, about to lift itself and pass off.¹⁴

At a point in May of 1844, 3,500 shares had been subscribed, at one hundred dollars apiece, and the occasion was celebrated by the firing of cannons and the ringing of church bells.¹⁵ This demonstration resembled the commemoration of the Fourth of July, which at that time was still a sacred day in New England, and the similarity implies that the two events were of similar importance. In December of 1845, the railroad was completed to Northampton, so that the town was again in step with the march of progress. Springfield itself had been connected by rail with Hartford in the previous year, so that a continuous line of railroads up the Connecticut Valley was taking shape, although the lack of unified management would continue to pose problems. By 1849, through passenger service from Boston to New York was possible via the "Inland Route" through Springfield, a route still followed by several daily Amtrak trains. (A continuous rail line along the "Shore Route" was blocked by the wide estuaries of the Connecticut and Thames Rivers.)

With Northampton breathing a collective sigh of relief, the railroad competition took a temporary detour. Alvah Crocker was still lured by the western traffic, but had decided to follow a route through Vermont to reach the prize; he pulled back from his

14. January 2, 1844; quoted in Kistler, The Rise of Railroads in the Connecticut River Valley, p. 59.

15. Northampton Courier, May 21, 1844, quoted in Kistler, The Rise of Railroads in the Connecticut River Valley, p. 61.

earlier flirtation with Greenfield. Since New Hampshire, recoiling from previous excesses, was going through an antirailroad phase in the early 1840s, boosters of the Fitchburg extension chose to ignore that state. They incorporated the Vermont & Massachusetts Railroad in 1844 and began construction in the following year. This road, heading west from Fitchburg, reached the Connecticut River at Grout's Corners (now known as Millers Falls in the town of Montague), and then it turned north toward Brattleboro, Vermont.

As a result, Greenfield found itself in much the same position that Northampton had been in a few years earlier. At best it would be on a branch, a prospect that any self-respecting town considered undignified; at worst it would be altogether isolated. This proved to be only a brief interlude, for Greenfield soon was caught up in grander schemes, but in this critical period the town fathers turned their gaze southward, with lasting consequences. Supported by intervening towns such as Deerfield, they chartered the Greenfield & Northampton Railroad in January of 1845, while the Northampton to Springfield line was still under construction.

This railroad, with defined objectives and running through hospitable country, received more prompt and more enthusiastic backing than had its predecessors. As one would expect, it won the support of the nascent industries along the route. Thelma Kistler listed numerous small manufacturers, not only in Greenfield, but also in Shelburne, Colrain, and Deerfield, who signed up for three, five, or ten shares — often a substantial commitment for these shaky ventures.¹⁶ Moreover, the Greenfield & Northampton is noted as the first Massachusetts railroad to receive significant support from the local farmers.¹⁷ This represented a marked contrast to the hostility with which Franklin County, fearing that the western counties would be burdened for the benefit of Boston's commercial interests, greeted the early railroad proposals of the 1820s.¹⁸ This dramatic shift was visible even before the Greenfield & Northampton was formally

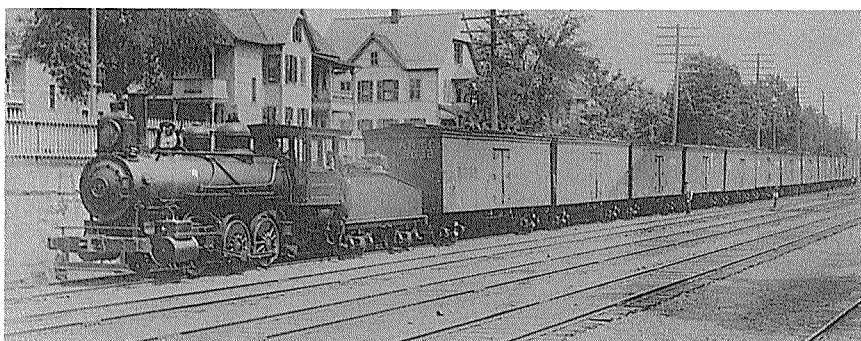
 16. Kistler, The Rise of Railroads in the Connecticut River Valley p. 114.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

18. Christopher L. McNulty, "Deerfield and the Railroad: The Rhetoric and Agents of Change, 1829-1846" (Deerfield: Historic Deerfield Summer Fellowship Program, 1990).

organized, as the *Greenfield Gazette & Courier* observed in January of 1844:

Upon conversing with the farmers from different sections of the country, we are gratified to see the interest manifested in the contemplated railroad. They seem to feel that they have a deep interest at stake, and in order, as they observe, "to enable us to compete with other sections of the State and country for a market . . . this road must be built, and through our county."¹⁹

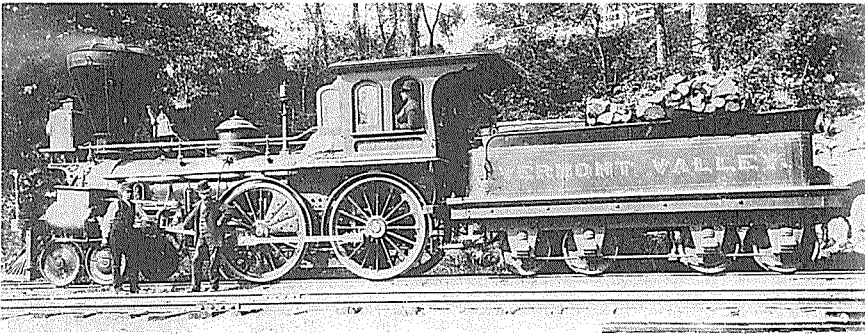


This photo, taken c. 1900, focus on the fact that the thirteen carloads of eggs for George H. Fretts & Company, in Springfield, was the largest single shipment of eggs made to that date. From the collection of the Conn. Valley Historical Museum.

In Deerfield, Christopher McNulty's analysis shows that the agricultural sector made up seventy percent of those with discernible occupations, and furnished fifty-four percent of the total subscribers to the *Greenfield & Northampton*. On the Western Railroad, where Boston held approximately three-fourths of the shares and business interests were responsible for most of Springfield's investment, the farmers had seemed indifferent, if not hostile. By the mid-1840s, at least the more enlightened segments of the agricultural population were beginning to conclude that railroads were not the calamity they had originally expected them to be.

19. January 2, 1844, quoted in McNulty, "Deerfield and the Railroad."

The farmers who had instinctively resisted the coming of the railroad were more than the backwoods reactionaries that they have sometimes been portrayed. Traditionally, they were credited with a shrewd awareness of their self-interest, and they recognized that, while they might not comprehend the full dimensions of the change it would bring, the railroad was opening a door. Through that door, traffic could flow in both directions: the markets that would become more accessible to New England's hill farmers would also come within reach of farmers in the richer lands of upstate New York and further west.



This photo, showing the "Westminster" belonging to the Vermont Valley Railroad, which completed trackage between Brattleboro and Bellows Falls in 1851, suggests the huge consumption of wood, which helped sustain local farmers. The enormous stack was designed to arrest sparks and thereby to help prevent brush fires which could cost the railroad a great deal of money. From the Robert A. Buck collection, from Lewis R. Brown, Brattleboro, Vermont.

Even after the completion of the Erie Canal, New England agriculture had remained largely shielded behind the Berkshires, but the Western Railroad broke down the barrier. Over the next few decades, fundamental changes took place in New England agriculture. Wheat growing, which was already in decline, was doomed. Gradually, competition facilitated by the railroad served to eliminate the hog-raising and cattle-fattening that had been mainstays of the Deerfield area.²⁰ But in time the railroad

 20. McNulty, "Deerfield and the Railroad."

substituted entirely new markets, notably for dairy products, which could scarcely have been foreseen. By 1850, the Fitchburg Railroad was delivering 14,400 quarts of milk daily to Boston, and by 1864 the Worcester, Fitchburg, and Lowell railroads together were carrying to Boston more than twenty-four million quarts a year.²¹ Shipments of butter likewise grew rapidly.

The tremendous consumption of wood by railroads, first for ties and bridges and then for fuel, is often neglected. Prior to the Civil War, locomotives in New England were almost exclusively woodburners, and in the off-season this produced a valuable income for marginal farms. It is no accident that the period of railroad growth coincided with the period of maximum deforestation in southern New England. The railroads also encouraged local specialty crops like broomcorn, which was prominent in the upper portions of the valley.

The manufacturers who had promoted the railroad found that, at least for a generation or two, it rewarded them, as Kistler summarizes:

The coming of railroads likewise stimulated industry at the smaller water-power sites in the Valley. The Mill River region near Northampton and similar areas in and around Greenfield were given a new lease on life by the cheaper, speedier, and more regular means of communication. Handicapped formerly by costly and relatively inferior transportation facilities, these areas now developed industrially to the fullest extent permitted by the streams. Later when steam supplanted water as the source of power, the industry of these regions expanded further. . . .²²

Nor was the queasy anxiety about the consequences of being left off the track unfounded. In his remarkable semi-autobiographical, semi-fictional account of "Quabbin" (his pseudonym for the lost town of Enfield, Massachusetts), Francis Underwood described the result of even a belated arrival of the steam-powered herald of progress:

21. Howard S. Russell, A Long, Deep Furrow (Hanover, N.H., 1976), pp. 356 and 424.

22. Kistler The Rise of Railroads in the Connecticut River Valley, p. 240.

In the part of the village near the dam there were formerly mills and shops that have mostly disappeared, though some dozed into forgetfulness and became storehouses for rubbish. . . . In a dull yellow building there were, sixty years ago, dozens of bright, clicking machines, complex as watches, which set wire teeth in leather for carding, and acted as if with human intelligence. . . . While all these mills and shops were flourishing, the stores were prosperous, new dwellings were built, and new faces appeared on Sunday in the meeting house. . . . The deterioration began when the State's trunk line of railroad passed a dozen miles on one side. A great many years later a railroad [what became known as the Athol Branch of the Boston & Albany] was built through Quabbin, but it was too late; its business had been tapped and drawn off, never to flow back. Railroads are sometimes feeders and sometimes drains.²³

Springfield, which had exhibited only mild interest in the earlier Northampton & Springfield, backed the extension to Greenfield much more actively. Fear is a compelling motivation and facing the prospect that the Fitchburg extension would intercept the traffic of the upper valley, Springfield responded vigorously. The town invested two and a half times as much in the Greenfield & Northampton as in the closer Northampton & Springfield.²⁴ Compared to other early railroads, the Greenfield & Northampton, secure in its support and easy to build, was fortune's favorite. The first locomotive puffed sedately into Greenfield on November 23, 1846. In the previous year the two predecessor companies, their brief pupation period complete, had combined to form the Connecticut River Railroad. The new entity, avoiding the period of painful maturation that afflicted most railroads, soon developed expansionist ideas of its own. Building north, it reached the Vermont border by 1850, and in

 23. Francis H. Underwood, Quabbin (reprint of the 1893 edition, Boston, 1986), pp. 194-195.

24. Kistler, Rise of Railroads in the Connecticut River Valley, p. 106.

later years it attempted to control the line of railroads in the northern Valley.

Amherst, which seemed like the model of a serene, self-contained Puritan town, was next to be gripped by the railroad frenzy. Displaying the same stark terror at being left behind, it initially sought to bring the Northampton & Springfield Railroad up the east side of the river as far as possible. Amherst and its allies on that side then secured a charter for the Hampshire & Franklin Railroad in February of 1845, planning to join the Vermont & Massachusetts in Montague or Erving.²⁵ Presumably learning of this scheme, the Northampton & Springfield altered its plans and crossed the Connecticut considerably farther south, at Willimansett. The luckless Hampshire & Franklin was left with insurmountable gaps of both geography and money, and it joined the long list of stillborn railroads whose bones litter the pages of New England transportation history.²⁶ Such was the ruthless nature of railroad competition, even between towns of similar background.

Frustrated and ready to grasp at any strand of iron that dangled before it, Amherst turned its attention to a railroad that was working its way northward from Long Island Sound. There, New London, prosperous from whaling and commerce but recognizing the unpromising outlook at least for whaling, decided to preserve its position by tapping the inland markets with a railroad. After a false start toward Springfield, in 1850 it completed the New London, Willimantic & Palmer Railroad, to Palmer, Massachusetts, a junction point with the Western Railroad. This was not the line Amherst had hoped for, but with the increasing panic that community's businessmen must have felt, they could not afford to miss an opportunity.

Led by Edward Dickinson, who differed from his reclusive daughter Emily as the sun from the moon, in 1851 Amherst secured a charter for the modestly-named Amherst & Belchertown. Two years later, Amherst found itself on the high iron at last, but not nearly as satisfactorily as Northampton. It had been intended, as with the Hampshire & Franklin, to reach

25. *Ibid.*, p. 134.

26. L. Peter Cornwall and Carol A. Smith, *Names First — Rails Later* (Stamford, Conn., 1989) provides an excellent compilation of railroad incorporations, both real and "paper" in New England.

the Vermont & Massachusetts, but the financial resources of the area were strained to the utmost to build the flimsy line to Amherst. As a result, Amherst dangled for more than a decade at the end of a precarious and relatively unproductive branch, experiencing all the uncertainty and irritation that standstill situation brought. Finally, in 1864, the reorganized New London Northern took over the bankrupt Amherst branch, and extended it to Grout's Corners in 1866. Amherst had its outlet at last, but by then it was twenty years behind Northampton, and railroad traffic, like the oxcarts before it, followed well-worn paths. The New London Northern was eventually absorbed by the Central Vermont, which in turn came under the control of the modern giant, the Canadian National Railways. Largely due to the Canadian influence, this line was rebuilt after the disastrous Vermont flood of 1927, and it remains in service today.

Amherst's experience could have served as a warning that, as with the hill farms, the best locations were taken first, consigning the latecomers to a marginal existence. This lesson was overshadowed by the belief that if one business is making a profit, there is no reason why others cannot enter the field and do the same ("the gas station on every corner" syndrome). As a result, there are several more names on the list of Connecticut Valley railroads.

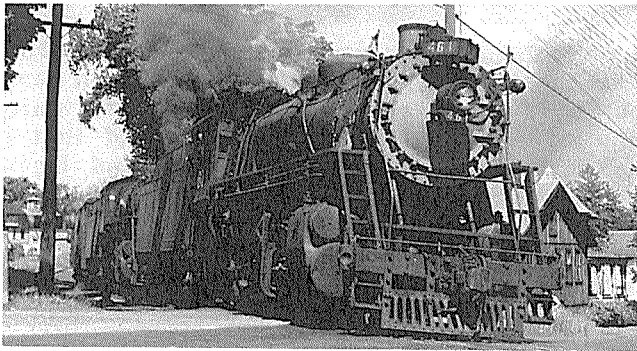


Waves of nostalgia emanate from this view of the Boston and Maine Amherst station area in 1903, during the years of railroad dominance. The station grounds and surrounding countryside were clean and respectfully maintained. City and country ways were still separate and distinctive, and each could be complete and fulfilling on its own terms. The railroad depot linked the two and often provided much of what little excitement rippled

across the placid rural surface. From the Robert A. Buck collection.

The Farmington Canal, mentioned earlier as extending from New Haven to Northampton, was so conspicuously unsuccessful that its owners decided that the best use for it would be to lay railroad tracks on its towpath. Once again it became the instrument of bitter internal rivalry, as the immemorial competition between New Haven and Hartford, which had provoked the building of the canal in the first place, was transferred to another medium. For several years, neighboring railroads in Massachusetts succeeded in keeping the interloper out of the state, but in 1852 they permitted the "Canal Line" to reach Northampton. Already largely redundant when it was completed in 1855, it nevertheless experienced further growth.

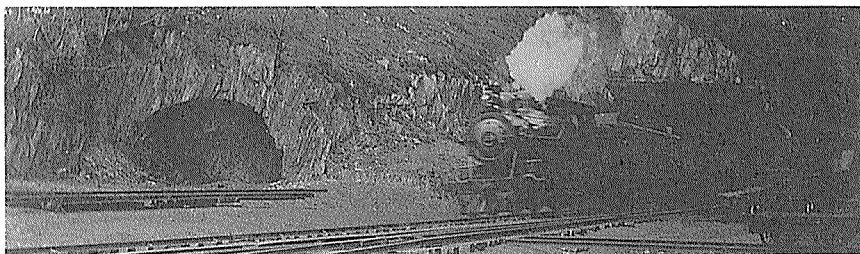
In its later stages, the railroad competition in the Connecticut Valley was strongly influenced by the Hoosac Tunnel, an astonishing project which so dominated Massachusetts politics during the middle four decades of the nineteenth century that even the Civil War may be seen as something of an intrusion. Contemporaries who referred to it as "The Great Bore" were fully aware of the obvious pun that occurs to us.



Heavy CV power rumbles through the streets of Amherst in this 1954 photograph by Robert A. Buck.

The proposal for such a tunnel can be traced back to the canal era of the 1820s, when otherwise sensible men such as Henry Knox contemplated a canal from the Charles River to the Hudson River. Subsequently Alvah Crocker adopted the idea as a means of pushing the Fitchburg Railroad to the west and forming

another east-west trunk line in Massachusetts. After the customary political persuasion had been applied, the Troy & Greenfield Railroad was organized in 1848. As a result, the new line to Brattleboro was already considered to be a branch by the time of its completion in 1850, while the former branch to Greenfield that would provide a connection with the Hoosac Tunnel route became the mainline of the Vermont & Massachusetts.²⁷ If this had occurred a few years earlier, Northampton's nightmare of being left between parallel bands of iron across the state might have come to pass. As it was, the brief interval of Greenfield's discontent, when it turned its attention southward, was sufficient to complete the Connecticut River Railroad and save the Hampshire County seat from a melancholy fate.



The east portal of the Hoosac Tunnel, a magnet for railroad schemers and dreamers for much of the nineteenth century. The opening on the left is the remnant of a costly false start made by a tunnel-boring machine. After the failure of that promising short-cut, conventional methods of drilling and blasting were resumed. From the Robert A. Buck Collection.

After nearly twenty-five years of extraordinary struggle — both physically and politically — the Hoosac Tunnel was put into service in 1875. It had cost an amount that can never be satisfactorily calculated, as well as a substantial toll in lives, to bore through almost five miles of the Hoosac Mountain. Because the Commonwealth had borne the enormous financial burden, it retained ownership of the tunnel and the connecting Troy & Greenfield Railroad. During this period the tunnel route was

27. George P. Baker, The Formation of the New England Railroad Systems (Cambridge, 1937).

considered to be a public highway, available to any railroad company that could reach its portals. This gold ring of temptation was held aloft during the Grant administration, at the climax of fifty years of merciless railroad competition, and to no one's surprise cupidity and ambition responded.

A company like the so-called "Canal Line," officially known as the New Haven & Northampton, had little to lose by taking a fling at a richer prize.²⁸ In 1881, it completed an extension that ran from Northampton to South Deerfield and then swung northwest to join the Troy & Greenfield near Shelburne Falls. Much of this trackage was laid within sight of the existing Connecticut River Railroad. With so much of its track already redundant, the New Haven & Northampton added more duplication by building a branch into Turners Falls.

Another contender was the unfortunate Central Massachusetts Railroad, itself perhaps a successor to an even more extravagant scheme (with an even more extravagant name), to divert the western traffic, the Boston, Hoosac Tunnel & Western Railroad.²⁹ The Central, as its name implies, ran through the state approximately midway between the established lines of the Boston & Albany and the Fitchburg, reaching an assortment of towns that were either inconsequential or which were served by earlier railroads. As the excellent history of this railroad shows, the largest town on the line not already served by another railroad was Wayland, which in 1875 had a population of 1,766.³⁰ But for a number of years the Central Mass was able to attract a certain amount of interest, investment, and even respect, because of its proclaimed intention of reaching the Hoosac Tunnel.

After several setbacks, both physical and financial, the Central Mass labored into Northampton in December of 1887. By then the lure of the Hoosac had vanished, for the Commonwealth had thought better of its venture into railroad ownership and had sold both the tunnel and the Troy & Greenfield Railroad to the Fitchburg Railroad. Similarly, the New Haven & Northampton Railroad had reason to regret its avarice, for the Fitchburg was under no obligation to route traffic over the Canal Line, and no

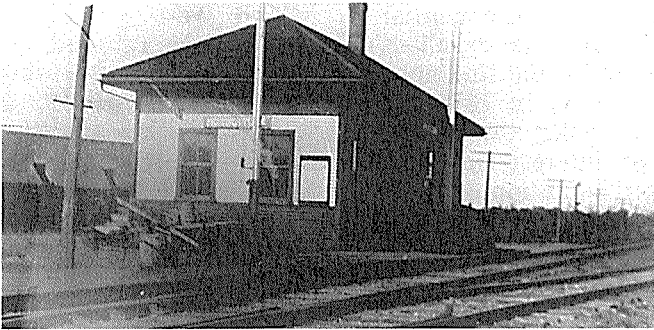
28. Carl R. Byron, A Pinprick of Light (Brattleboro, Vermont, 1974).

29. Kirkland, Men, Cities, and Transportation, I: 421-422.

30. Boston & Maine Railroad Historical Society, The Central Mass (Reading, 1975), p. vii.

railroad company survived by depending on the generosity of another.

The belated entry into Northampton of the Central Mass, nearly twenty years after its formation, marked the end of an era. Though the concept of railroad overbuilding was not yet widely accepted, it was difficult to argue that more railroads were needed in Massachusetts. Railroad efficiency had increased to a point at which the number of separate companies, with resulting time-consuming interchanges, had become a handicap. A long-overdue period of consolidation set it. By 1900, the New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad, popularly known as the New Haven, had become dominant in southern New England, while the Boston & Maine occupied a similar position in the northern region. Each was composed of more than two hundred underlying corporations (not all of which had been operating companies). In the region emphasized in this paper, the Boston and Maine won control of the Connecticut River Railroad, the Fitchburg Railroad, and the Central Mass, while the New Haven gained control over the economically struggling Canal Line.



Norwottuck (South Amherst) on the Central Mass. was one of the smaller stations on a line that reached many inconsequential places. This structure, the second in the location, burned in 1923. The previous station had burned in 1895 when fireworks stored for the Fourth of July caught fire. From the Harvey Allen Collection.

In its original, bizarre, routing, the Central Mass would have passed through Enfield, creating a railroad crossing near the business center of the once-secluded town. This paper —

necessarily in view of its sprawling topic — has concentrated on "macro" social and economic trends and has not been able to venture to the level of individual experience and anecdote. Francis Underwood has touched on some of these personal themes in describing the prolonged outward drift of what appeared to be the more active part of the population of "Quabbin":

This slow exodus began with the completion of the trunk railroad. It was no longer a difficult thing to traverse the State, or even to pay a visit to friends in Illinois. People were no longer rooted to natal soil, but moved about with a light-heartedness or indifference, strangely in contrast with old custom. . . . It was strange, too, to see, after this general movement began, how easily occupations were changed. . . . A youth when he set forth generally believed that Fortune was waiting for him in some guise, if he could only recognize her. . . . Quabbin became a part of the great world, and felt the universal pulsations of humanity. It could never be solitary again. Many influences contributed to its enlightenment, but the railroad and the daily newspaper were the chief.³¹

With the last spasmodic thrust of expansion represented by railroads like the Central Mass, there was virtually no person in the state beyond reach of the sound of the steam whistle, whether from locomotive or factory. This represents the embodiment of what Lewis Mumford has simplistically but provocatively termed the "Paleotechnic Era." Heavy and ponderous, with its massive reliance on steel and steam and its systematic concentration of humanity, it seemed to reach its symbolic culmination in the immense mobilization and waste of human and material resources during World War I. The mighty German gun, which rested on a railway car, hurled masses of metal at distant Paris, and required a new barrel after a few rounds, probably expressed the essence of that era — an age which, paradoxically, was capable of creating works of great beauty and refinement.

As Francis Underwood noted, a trip to Boston, which in former times had provided "the talk of a lifetime," became

31. Underwood, Quabbin, pp. 270-271.

routine. However, the new freedom of movement and opportunity contained an element of compulsion. The concentration of physical power and its accompanying centralization of economic power that characterized the paleotechnic era often required one to leave a small town like "Quabbin." Underwood did not follow the lives of the individuals who were part of the exodus from their ancestral villages, but it is reasonable to suppose that for many the opportunity to escape led only to absorption in a vast, impersonal industrial agglomeration. Many of the local industries that had flourished for a time with the encouragement of the railroad fell by the wayside as economic consolidation continued to take place.



Beginning in the 1920s, railroads used various types of gas-electric cars to maintain a passenger service that was dwindling due to competition with the automobile. These self-propelled cars were cheaper to operate than steam locomotives, but were often unreliable, so that it was common to see them being pulled by, or rescued by, steam power. This photograph was taken on the CV at Montpelier Junction, Vermont, but similar equipment ran on the railroad's Southern Division (Brattleboro through Palmer to New London) into 1945. The Boston and Maine operated similar cars on its Central Mass route, from Northampton to Boston. Photo by Charles A. Brown, from the collection of Robert A. Buck.

The story of the Central Mass seems to recapitulate the later history of railroad development in Massachusetts and leads directly into modern times, in which the importance and visibility of railroads has declined drastically. The Central began with exaggerated and unrealistic expectations, planning in large measure

to raid existing traffic, rather than creating new business. The communities for which it would have served a genuine need were not strong enough to build the railroad. As a result, it was completed only with the aid of an established railroad, which eventually took control. For a number of years it seemed moderately successful, at a time when the major railroads operated under the assumption that branches were vital to the overall health of the system, regardless of whether they showed a measurable financial profit.



Struggling for survival, the Boston & Maine turned to diesels like this "44 tonner" to take up the burdens of the more expensive steam power. But their 380 horsepower was not sufficient to handle the loads, resulting in delays that probably contributed to customer dissatisfaction. In this photo, number 118, built in 1947, is working in Northampton yard on September 26, 1956. Photo by Harvey Allen.

The milk traffic, mentioned earlier in abstract terms, was the lifeblood of rural lines like the Central Mass. Unable to rise to the expectations that engendered it, the Central was one of those railroads that seemed to cling close to the land. It was thus, as the familiar milk cans glistening with morning dew on the rough platform boards testified, a reminder of an economy based on the land. For a while longer, the rustic milk train chugged its leisurely way to Boston, linking two ages, as did Calvin Coolidge, who often rode the line during its fleeting silver age. In the 1920s and 1930s, the proliferation of automobiles and the general decline of the rural economy blurred the former distinctions and made the position of roads like the Central Mass precarious. Efforts to economize by sharing trackage with adjacent lines only

postponed the inevitable, as did the adoption of diesel power in the 1950s.

Today only isolated segments of the former Central Mass remain in service. The earlier arrivals — the Boston & Albany, the Connecticut River Railroad, and the Central Vermont — have remained essentially intact in a world in which their existence counts for less, and the conflicts that once swirled around those and other railroads have been transferred to other arenas or dissolved in larger struggles for survival.



The Central Mass remained picturesque in its decline, as this shot of a train crossing the Fort River in Amherst on August 1, 1957 demonstrates. The Alco S-1s, represented by number 1163, were the heaviest equipment permitted to cross the bridge, which is an uncommon inverted warren truss design. Photo by Harvey Allen.