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# **Edward Dickinson and the Amherst and Belchertown Railroad: A Lost Letter**

Daniel J. Lombardo

One of the most significant early signs of Emily Dickinson's growing withdrawal from the world occurred on June 9, 1853, during New London Day—a day celebrating the opening of the Amherst and Belchertown Railroad. Edward Dickinson played a preeminent role in bringing that railroad to Amherst, and a critical letter, written by Edward Dickinson at a time when the fate of the A & B was uncertain, has been found. The letter, dated July 28, 1851, and sent to Thomas W. Williams, the president of the New London, Willimantic and Palmer Railroad, is now in the Dickinson Collection of the Jones Library in Amherst, Massachusetts.

Edward Dickinson was one of the leading men of Amherst at a time when Amherst was declining as a manufacturing town. Between 1830 and 1860, the growth of Amherst's population lagged behind other manufacturing towns in the county. By 1855, the value of Amherst's manufactures was only slightly above what it had been in 1837, and the level of capital investment had also failed to grow at the rate of other Hampshire County towns.<sup>1</sup> The river towns, like Hadley and Hatfield, were able to take advantage of the industrial growth of nearby Northampton and Springfield, by supplying their increasing need for country produce. Amherst, however, had neither their fertile, alluvial soil, nor their proximity to industrial centers to likewise prosper. In what amounted to somewhat of a crusade, Edward Dickinson and other town leaders hoped to advance Amherst into the prosperous industrial age by placing the town on a major north-south railroad route.

After 1840, the railroads had gradually supplanted canals and all other modes of transportation in America. Though in 1840 water transportation was still cheaper than the railroad (1½ cents per mile by canal, for example, and 2½ cents per mile by rail), the railroad could move goods in about half the time. Between 1850 and 1860, the amount of trackage in the country tripled, with the Northeast having about twice as much track per square mile as the West and four times as much as the South.<sup>2</sup>

Most of the construction in this period was in an east-west direction. After two attempts at bringing a railroad through Amherst had failed, a third opportunity arose, this time one along a north-south route. On September 20, 1850, the New London, Willimantic and Palmer Railroad completed its tracks to Palmer. This company, chartered by the Connecticut Legislature in 1847, found this route to be profitable, and hoped to extend it northward. Within six months Amherst had a petition before the Massachusetts General Court to create a link from Palmer to the Vermont and Massachusetts Railroad in Montague. On March 7, 1851, the *Hampshire and Franklin Express* came out strongly in favor of the road, as it would continue to do in a series of notices:

#### A Railroad Through Amherst

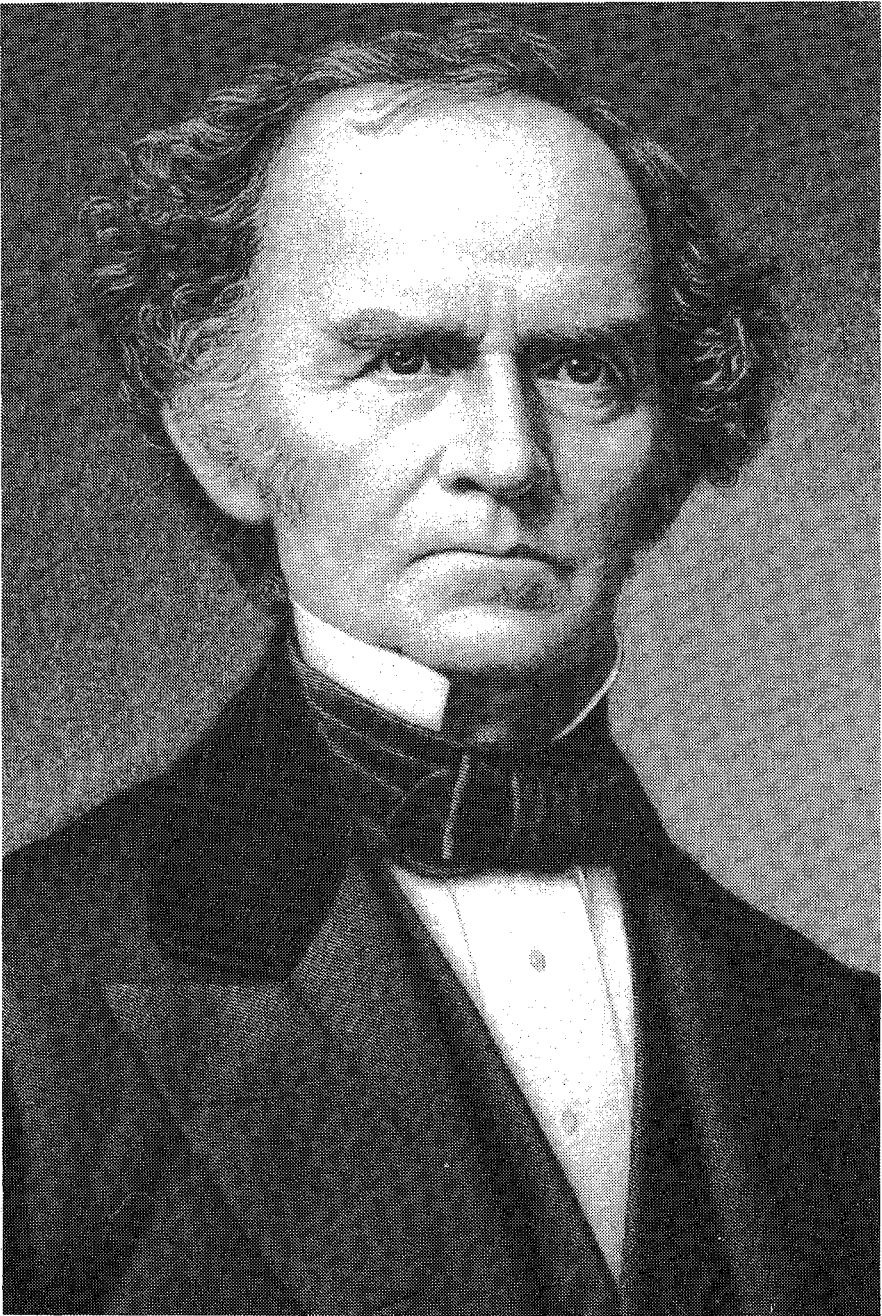
The particular benefits of a railroad to this place, all are aware of, as the strenuous efforts to obtain one abundantly prove. Situated as we are, somewhat apart from the great central arteries of railroad travel, the attempts hitherto, have been mainly for a connecting link, that should unite us with one of the main trunks. These having failed, principally, perhaps, from the fact of their being distinct branches, or running too nearly parallel to other roads, it is not at all strange that persons should look with distrust upon any new project, fearful that it might lead to a similar result.

The line of the contemplated road from Palmer to Montague, possesses, we think, many advantages over any other yet proposed. In the first place it opens a direct and easy communication between the principal centers of business throughout the State and the country. . . . For the purposes of travel . . . we shall have a continuous line of road, and for purposes of freight, New London presents a better and cheaper point of shipment than could possibly be obtained on any of our proposed routes. Towards the North, we shall have an unbroken line of road that places us in direct connection with the great lakes and Canada, and affording an easy transit for Western Produce, and without doubt a portion of the travel also.

The construction of this link, which will thus complete another great railroad chain across New England, will open a new traffic, not exclusively the property of this road, but of great benefit to all that tend in the same direction. . . .

It remains for those on the route most interested in its accomplishment, to take hold of it. The work is ours and we must do it.

This third attempt at establishing a railroad through Amherst could easily have failed. By May of 1851, the General Court had already granted two charters for a northward route: one via Enfield to Athol, and another via Ware, Barre, and Templeton to the New Hampshire state line.<sup>3</sup> On May 24, 1851, the General Court incorporated the A & B Railroad, empowering it to construct a railroad from the NLW & P depot in Palmer northerly through Belchertown, Amherst, Leverett, and Sunderland to Montague, where connections could be made with the Vermont and Massachusetts Railroad.<sup>4</sup>



“Edward Dickinson,” from *History of the Town of Amherst* (1896)

On June 30, 1851, the A & B was formally organized under its charter. Edward Dickinson, Luke Sweetser, Ithamar Conkey, Myron Lawrence, and Joseph Brown were chosen directors, with Sweetser as president and John S. Adams as clerk and treasurer.<sup>5</sup> Before construction could begin, however, the directors had to file evidence with the state that at least twenty percent of the capital had been paid into the treasury. The grand promotion of the railroad was begun: subscription books were opened, and stock agents were brought in to spur on investment by all those along the proposed line. The directors had to contend with a natural reluctance on the part of the townspeople. The past failure at similar enterprises and the competition of other proposed routes created a cautious atmosphere, which gave the company a slow start in filling its subscription books. Something more concrete than promises of rising land values and new markets from Canada to the Atlantic was needed.

In July, the NLW & P Railroad received a proposal from the A & B that "this Company should agree to hire said road when built, or run it on shares, or pay interest on the cost thereof as may be agreed and to run our cars over said road for a term of years in order to encourage the building of the road, which is considered as virtually to be an extension of ours."<sup>6</sup> The directors of the A & B knew that with such a contract in hand their stock selling drive would turn a corner and funds for the first half of the line could be raised. At this critical juncture, Edward Dickinson wrote the letter to Thomas Williams which has been recently discovered. Thomas W. Williams (1789-1874) had been a pioneer whaling fleet owner with the whaling firm of Williams and Haven, and a member of Congress (1839-1843) before becoming the president of the New London, Willimantic and Palmer Railroad Company (1848-1851, 1855-1859).<sup>7</sup> Edward Dickinson's letter had been written on July 28, 1851, and was received by Williams while the NLW & P was considering the contract proposed by the A & B.

Until this time, the emphasis had been placed on *local* investment, on building the road without outside help. When the A & B Corporation was organized, Williams himself was present. His message, as reported by the local newspaper, was that "it depended wholly upon us—upon the people along the line and in its immediate vicinity, whether the road was built or not. He was happy to see so many farmers—the bone and sinew of society—present at the meeting. To them in great measure must we look for the carrying out of this work."<sup>8</sup> By late July, Dickinson was aware that rhetoric alone was not going to convince the townspeople to invest. The proposed contract between the two companies was an urgent necessity. In his letter to Williams, he implored him to "see what is necessary, & give us the benefit of your wealth & energy, at this crisis." Dickinson urged Williams and his Board to view the A & B line, not as a local enterprise, but one benefitting the NLW & P as well: "If you can look at this work as in fact, *your own*, and at us, as aiding you, in our desire to benefit investors, I am quite sure that you will be willing to act in view of it." Dickinson emphasized that "it is for our Mutual interest *to have immediate action*" on the proposed contract. The last lines of the letter convey such a degree of fervor that the seriousness of the A & B's situation cannot be doubted:

I write plainly & earnestly—as friends having a common interest to promote a common purpose.

All we do aids you—All you do aids us.

Excuse my plainness. A desire to impress upon you the importance of *this note* and the great advantage of the *immediate* and *active & energetic* cooperation of our Board, & then of the N.L.W. & P in doing what shall secure an object so indispensable to the highest interest of all concerned.

Dickinson's letter had the desired effect: On August 6 a contract was drawn and on August 20 the Board of the NLW & P voted to approve it. The *Hampshire and Franklin Express* described the meeting of the A & B at which the agreement between the companies was announced. After the announcement, "The stock books were opened, and many gentlemen present came forward and made a beginning, which we hope to see liberally carried out."<sup>9</sup>

Millicent Todd Bingham described Edward Dickinson in this way: "... if one word were needed to describe the chief ardor of his life it would be 'railroads.'<sup>10</sup> While this may be somewhat of an exaggeration, the railroad did become for Edward what the founding of Amherst College had been for his father—a challenge of potentially great benefit to the town, and a civic project with personal, non-financial benefits. The differences here were that Samuel Fowler Dickinson exhausted his fortune and his health in his passion for a college which succeeded, while Edward kept his passion in check, and lost neither his fortune nor his health, in an enterprise which was not quite a success.

On February 4, 1852, the *Hampshire and Franklin Express* announced that the stock for the first half of the railroad had been subscribed. Within two weeks construction of the section from Palmer to Amherst was begun at Logtown, southeast of Amherst. On February 6, Emily Dickinson wrote to her brother, Austin, that "the grand Rail Road decision is made, and there is great rejoicing throughout this town and the neighboring." Her description of Edward attests to his importance in the matter: "Father is really *sober* from excessive satisfaction, and bears his honors with a most becoming air. Nobody *believes* it yet, it seems like a fairy tale, a most *miraculous* event in the lives of us all."<sup>11</sup>

In a note to Austin enclosed in the above letter, Edward shows decidedly *unsober* satisfaction at his accomplishment:

Austin. You will see by the Editor's glorification article in to-day's 'Express,' that the Am. & Bel. r. road is "a fixed fact." The contract is made—the workmen will be digging, in "Logtown," next week—& we shall see those animating shanties, smoking through an old flour barrel, for a chimney, before many days. The boys fired a few guns—old folks looked on approvingly—and the whole thing seems as much like a dream, as if we had waked up in the "Mariposa tract," of Col. Fremont, surrounded by the pure "rocks."

The two great eras of the history of Amherst, are

1. The founding of the College
  2. The building of the rail road.
- We here "set up our Ebenezer."  
HaHaa!!!<sup>12</sup>

The "two great eras of the history of Amherst," as Dickinson saw them, were of course two "great" eras in the Dickinson family, for Samuel and Edward, father and son, had been instrumental in giving birth to each respective era.

On May 3, 1853, the first locomotive made a run from Palmer to Amherst, in fifty-five minutes. The first passenger train arrived on May 14, and a month later, on June 9, 325 New Londoners were invited to Amherst for a grand celebration.<sup>13</sup> New London Day, as it was called, was a highly significant day for the Dickinsons. Edward described it rather dryly to Austin two days later: "We had a very good time with the N.L. party. About 325 came up. The N.L. papers & Willimantic papers are full of the matter. We shall probably return the visit, before long."<sup>14</sup>

Emily's letter to Austin on June 13, however, reveals two important themes, Edward's central position in the establishment of the A & B, and overt signs of the changes that were to come for Emily:

The New London Day passed off grandly—so all the people said—it was pretty hot and dusty, but nobody cared for that. Father was his usual Chief Marshal of the day, and went marching around the town with New London at his heels like some old Roman General, upon a Triumph Day. Mrs. Howe got a capital dinner, and was very much praised. Carriages flew like sparks, hither, and thither and yon, and they all said t'was fine. I spose it was—I sat in Prof Tyler's woods and saw the train move off, and then ran home again for fear somebody would see me, or ask me how I did.<sup>15</sup>

Emily's withdrawal from the world had no single beginning point and no single cause. As early as October, 1851, when she was not yet twenty-one, Austin wrote that "Emily became confirmed in her opinion of the hollowness & awfulness of the *world*."<sup>16</sup> Yet the New London Day episode—many years before Emily could be called a recluse—was the most extreme of the early, overt expressions of Emily's gradual withdrawal. It has become the focal point for all discussion of the origins of Emily's reclusiveness. Millicent Todd Bingham claimed that Emily merely "wanted time"; she wanted to evade the "incessant demands of commonplace talk" and escape into her "real life" of poetic thought.<sup>17</sup> Richard Sewall suggested that Emily's taking to the woods could be seen as "a neurotic escape, a portent of stranger behavior to come," but then rationalized her behavior in less severe terms.<sup>18</sup> John Cody, however, didn't hesitate to characterize Emily's behavior as neurotic, a "phobic avoidance of others."<sup>19</sup>

The railroad appeared several times in Emily's letters, and became an important image in her poetry. Her first mention of the A & B is in a letter to Austin dated June 29, 1851, one month before Edward's letter to Williams. In it, she simply says "The railroad is a 'workin' . . ."<sup>20</sup> Of the poems in which railroad imagery is used, perhaps the most significant is "I like to hear it lap the Miles—"

(#585). Sewall believes this poem and the more obvious New London Day letter both show Emily's growing distance from the community.<sup>21</sup>

Edward Dickinson's great hopes for the A & B were never fully realized. The important north-south connection was a long time coming: The second half of the road, from Amherst to Grout's Corner where it met the Vermont and Massachusetts Railroad, was not completed until 1866. While the railroad did provide freight services for the declining local manufacturers, it also brought in competing goods from elsewhere. The agreement with the NLW & P, which Dickinson's letter to Williams was so instrumental in obtaining, proved less than profitable. The road was operated by the NLW & P for less than six months. In early November 1853, the A & B resumed control. In January 1858, after yearly losses, the road passed into the hands of the trustees who were chosen by the bond holders to represent their interest. In October of that year, acting for the bond holders, Samuel F. Cutler and Charles Adams bought the road, changing the company's name to the Amherst, Belchertown and Palmer Railroad Company.<sup>22</sup> Six years later the General Court authorized the leasing of the road to the New London Northern Railroad, and on October 8, 1866, after the road was extended, the first trains began to run from New London through Amherst to Brattleboro.

The Amherst and Belchertown Railroad, while a personal triumph for Edward Dickinson, was a financial failure. Nearly all of its \$290,000 cost was generated locally; thus it served as a further drain on the local economy. The \$195,000 invested by local stockholders was lost, and the bond holders fared little better.<sup>23</sup> The A & B was more than a financial matter for Edward Dickinson, and certainly a complex psychological matter for Emily. Dickinson's letter to Thomas Williams of July 28, 1851, came at a critical turning point in the fate of the A & B. Without the letter it is possible that the A & B would have been delayed, or would not have been completed.

The letter itself is a single leaf, written on both sides and signed by Dickinson. Another leaf containing the opening of the letter is lacking. Dr. Walter Powell, an historian from Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, purchased the letter from a dealer who was unaware of its significance, and uncertain where he had obtained it. The Jones Library acquired the letter from Dr. Powell, and has now made it available to scholars.

#### NOTES

1. George R. Taylor, "The Rise and Decline of Manufactures and Other Matters," *Essays on Amherst's History* (Amherst, 1978), pp. 72-73.
2. Richard N. Current, T. Harry Williams, and Frank Friedel, *American History: A Survey* (New York, 1971), I:286.
3. Edward W. Carpenter and Charles F. Morehouse, *The History of the Town of Amherst, Massachusetts* (Amherst, 1896), p. 315.



4. David W. Sargent, Jr., "The Railroad Mania in Amherst," *Railway and Locomotive Historical Society Bulletin*, No. 47 (1938), p. 20.
5. Carpenter and Morehouse, p. 315.
6. Charles G. Woodward, *The New London, Willimantic & Palmer Railroad Co.* (Hartford, 1941), pp. 42-43.
7. *Ibid.*, opposite p. 8.
8. *Hampshire and Franklin Express*, July 4, 1851.
9. *Hampshire and Franklin Express*, August 15, 1851.
10. Millicent Todd Bingham, *Emily Dickinson's Home* (New York, 1955), p. 215.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 217.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 219.
13. Carpenter and Morehouse, p. 316.
14. Bingham, p. 294.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 295.
16. Richard B. Sewall, *The Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York, 1974), p. 435.
17. Bingham, p. 294.
18. Sewall, p. 437.
19. John Cody, *After Great Pain, The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, 1971), p. 277.
20. Thomas H. Johnson, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, 1958), letter #45, vol. 1, p. 119. Dickinson also mentions the railroad in letters to Austin dated May 16 and November 10, 1853.
21. Sewall, p. 437.
22. Carpenter and Morehouse, p. 318.
23. Taylor, p. 77.