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The Railroad Comes to Springfield

Mark Mackler

Early in the nineteenth century, the first movement for better communication and transportation westward from Boston was initiated by General Henry Knox who, in 1791, proposed a canal across Massachusetts to the Connecticut River. Later, plans were made to extend this canal across the Berkshires by way of the Deerfield River to the Hudson and finally to the Erie Canal.¹

Boston had always been an important center for foreign trade, but “early in the century, during and after the War of 1812,” Boston’s future was “seriously impaired by the triple calamity of embargo, blockade, and tariff.” The port was virtually closed.²

In 1825, Governor Eustis appointed three commissioners to study the feasibility of linking Boston Harbor with the Connecticut River. About this time word began to come across the Atlantic about the successful operation of railways in England. The early railroads were not steam-driven, because technology was not sufficiently advanced. Instead, the typical railroad in the 1820’s was a horse-drawn vehicle moving on iron rails. Although the idea of horse-drawn cars was basically sound, in practice it was limited by the amount of weight the horses were able to pull. Regardless of the limitations, in 1826 petitions were sent to the Massachusetts General Court asking for permission to build a railroad to the Hudson River.³

In 1828, the United States sent a young team of engineers to England to study railways and equipment, and there they came in contact with the first of the new breed of locomotives. The engineers were William Gibbs McNeill and George Washington Whistler, both of whom were later to play an important part in the construction of the Western Railroad in Massachusetts.

The Boston and Worcester Railroad Corporation was chartered by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in 1831 to build a railroad between the two cities with the use of private capital. Attempts to secure state funds had failed primarily for two reasons. First, many citizens believed that it was improper for the Commonwealth to expend state funds for this particular purpose. Second, the very idea of locomotives appeared to have scared away a good number of people. A letter to the *Boston Courier* exclaimed:

I am contemptuous of wagons contrived to go by themselves. What will become of the stage drivers? What will become of the horses? They will have to be killed. There will soon after be no market for oats and hay. The loss of life by accident will be enormous. They will cause insanity. There will be constant fires from the sparks of the engines. Hens will not lay on account of the noise. The wool will be burned from the backs of the sheep in the fields.⁴

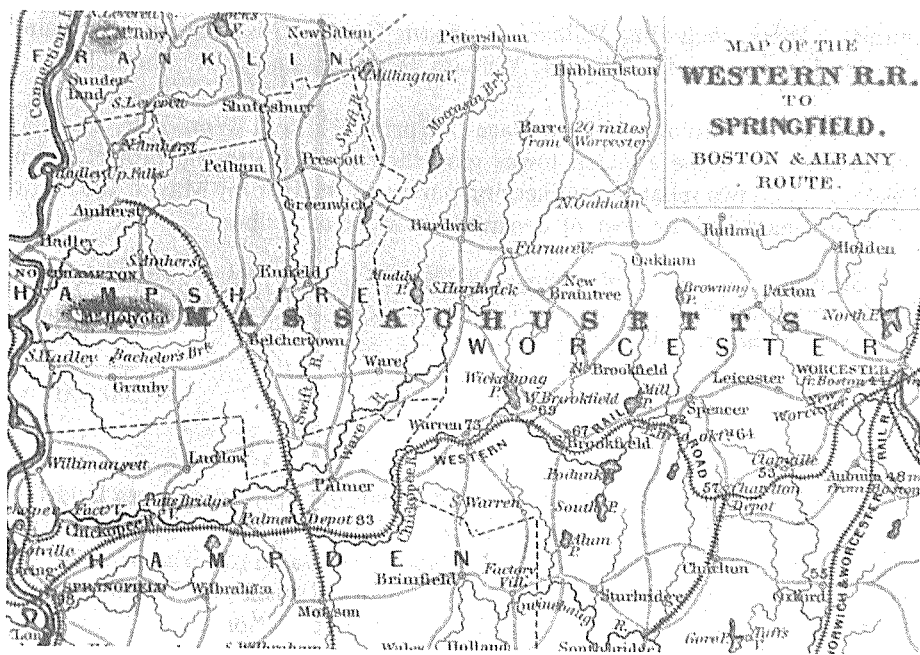
Nevertheless, capital stock of 10,000 shares at \$100 each was entirely subscribed by May 1, 1832. With John M. Fessenden as engineer, construction was pushed until the road was opened to Westboro in November of 1834, and to Worcester in July of the following year.

By this time it was clear that the locomotive had defeated the horse as the source of power on the iron road. But the first trains from Boston to Worcester found the going difficult. Top speed was about nineteen miles per hour and the passengers had to get out and push on the steep hills. A. T. Lowe, President of the First National Bank of Boston, provided an excellent description of the situation.

All went well until reaching Westboro. There the grade was steep, and it was only "puff, puff". The train simply refused to go any further. Here was a dilemma. What could be done? It was suggested to get out and push. This all the passengers did, and the train, locomotive and all, was thus carried over the summit, when all went well again.⁵

While the Boston and Worcester line was being constructed, a western extension was being considered. The need was obvious. Prior to the extension, coach connections had to be made with the railroad's terminal in Worcester. It was announced in the *Springfield Weekly Republican*:

We are pleased to learn that the proprietors of the stage line between Worcester and Springfield, with commendable promptness and enterprise, have this week commenced running their stages in connection with the Railroad which is now in operation between Westboro and Boston.⁶



"All illustrations in this article are from the picture collection, Springfield City Library."

In May of 1833, the directors of the Boston and Worcester were incorporated as the Western Railroad with authority to construct a line from Worcester to the Connecticut River at Springfield and across the River to the western boundary of the state. The editor of the *Weekly Republican* was excited by the possibility of a railroad coming into western Massachusetts and expressed himself in these words:

It would be a waste of words to dwell upon the advantages of such a line of travel. The Railroad, as a means of inter-communication, has placed itself immeasurably ahead of all other sources of transportation. It is the most certain, most direct, most rapid, and most economical means of getting over the ground... Is not some movement upon the subject warranted by the character and amount of our business, the extent and variety of our resources, and the general enterprise and activity of our population?⁷

Capital for this westward extension was not to be less than 10,000 nor more than 20,000 shares at \$100 each, which were open to general public subscription. Participation by residents of communities along the route was anticipated, and meetings were held to explain the advantages to the public. At a meeting in Springfield on March 14, 1835, a committee was established to keep the public

informed. The committee consisted of many of Springfield's outstanding community leaders, including William Calhoun, George Bliss, George Ashmun, Charles Stearns, Justice Willard, William Bowdoin, and J. R. Sheffield.⁸

Meetings continued to take place in Springfield and Worcester, and the representatives of the affected towns gave their approval to the project. John Fessenden had two separate engineering parties in the field by May of 1835. His initial estimates of the cost of construction were as follows:

Grading, masonry, engineering	\$589,000
Superstructure	428,000
Land damages, rolling stock, etc.	183,000
	\$1,200,000 ⁹

Around this time, the city of Hartford began to apply pressure to land the railroad for itself. Instead of running the road between Worcester and Springfield, why not run it between Worcester and Hartford? The competition began to grow quite intense. A convention took place in Hartford, and subsequently, the Connecticut General Assembly authorized a gentleman named Henry Hudson to build a railroad from Hartford towards the general direction of Worcester. The Assembly also appointed a committee to consider a proposed road between Hartford and Albany. In essence, the plan was to develop a Boston to Worcester, Hartford, and Albany Railroad, with Hartford as the transfer point for a line south to New Haven and New York. If this had come to fruition, Springfield might very likely have remained a village much longer than she did. Luckily for Springfield, in the years to come

...she would sustain only one defeat...a failure to lure into Springfield the new route between New Haven and Northampton being built along the line of the old canal directly connecting those towns. When finally built after years of controversy, the Canal Road avoided Springfield and the other river towns, intersecting the Western at Westfield.¹⁰

In spite of the competition from Hartford, financing proved to be very difficult. Only 13,000 shares had been taken by the public. A meeting was held on October 7 at Fanueil Hall, Boston, where more pressure was applied on the public, but support was still lagging far behind expectations. It was not until December 5, 1835, that the needed amount of money had been raised. Why had financing been so difficult? George Bliss, one of the primary leaders of the railroad movement in the Massachusetts area, speculated that "...the stock of the Western Railroad was taken with a certainty of no direct profits to the subscribers. Intelligent and sagacious men regarded it as a most forlorn and unpromising venture."¹¹

One of the first moves of the board of directors was to appoint engineers to make a detailed survey of the line between Worcester and Springfield. Major William Gibbs McNeill was engaged as resident engineer of the company with his friend and associate Major George W. Whistler, who incidentally, was the father of James McNeill Whistler, the artist. The citizens of Springfield voted to pay the bulk of the survey costs, as reported in an article in the *Weekly Republican*: The resolution was passed unanimously at the town meeting. \$1,500 was appropriated, in view of the vast benefits that will accrue to all our citizens from the construction of the railway.¹²

The stockholders instructed the board of directors of the railroad to appeal to the Legislature for supplemental aid in completing the railroad into the town. It was apparent that the initial subscription funds were not sufficient. In fact, the average subscription was so small that the rail line was probably on very shaky ground.

Thelma Kistler, an early railroad historian, suspected that it reflected a general desire to get rid of the canvasser at the lowest price possible, short of refusal to subscribe at all.¹³ Only 46 stockholders held more than 50 shares each and eighty-five percent had fewer than ten shares.¹⁴ Furthermore, the railroad was being built with Bay State money. It was surely not a speculative venture of some out-of-state consortium of investors. Of the stockholders, 98%, holding 96% of the shares, resided in Massachusetts. Rather significantly, 95% of the stockholders resided on the route of the road itself.¹⁵

There must have been money to be made during this age of speculation, because New York City interests tried to wrest control of the road from the people of Massachusetts. The New York Stock Exchange did all it could to pump capital into the railroad, but the offers were respectfully declined.¹⁶ George Bliss later wrote that New York, jealous of Boston, feared that the railroad would divert trade from New York, and "...that they didn't want Boston people 'to come Yankee' over them".¹⁷

Apparently, the necessity of helping the middle class, the merchants, farmers, and mechanics, was finally recognized by the General Court; a select committee of the House of Representatives carefully considered the question of state aid to the railroad. In February of 1838, its report was issued to the entire House. In the report, four basic questions were asked. First, is such a loan necessary? Second, if so, to what extent is a loan necessary? Third, could a loan to the necessary extent be made and the Commonwealth be rendered secure from loss? And finally, is it expedient to the Commonwealth that the loan be granted?¹⁸ All of the questions were answered in the affirmative, but the answer to the last one was most significant. It said:

Massachusetts cannot afford to be without this work. It is of first import to the Commonwealth. Our future well-being, progress, and prosperity

depend upon this. The entire community, including agriculture, manufacturing, and the mechanic arts, all need the railroad.¹⁹

In March, the Legislature granted a loan of \$1,200,000. Aggressive building followed, and the rail line into Springfield was formally opened on October 1, 1839. It was an exciting event, not only because Massachusetts was nearly connected from border to border, but also because the city of Hartford was defeated. This fact seemed to have added a special zest to the happy occasion.²⁰ A parade was formed, and the participants marched along Main Street. At the newly-constructed round-house, a special dinner was held, with Governor Edward Everett as main speaker. To add a special flair to the event, the tables were arranged like the spokes of a wheel.²¹

The Springfield *Republican*, reflecting the pride which town residents showed in their achievement in gaining the route, noted on October 5, 1839:

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. Before the opening of the railroad, we presume that the two stage coaches leaving here in the morning and arriving here at night, were on an average more than sufficient for the passengers. Now the cars arrive and depart twice a day, and we do not believe that six stages would hold the average number who arrived and leave here at each time. In other words, the amount of travel has more than trebled since the railroad opened. About 50 passengers left here yesterday morning, and about 100 arrived here at 2 P.M. the same day.²²

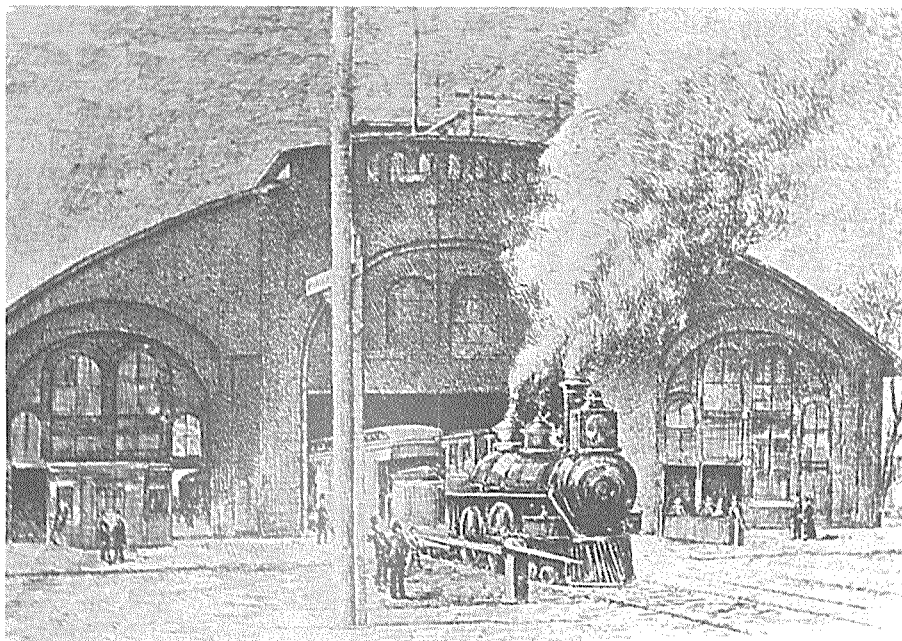
Not only was Springfield happy about the railroad's effects, but Boston was too. The *Hampshire Gazette*, quoting the Charlestown *Watchman*, said:

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 doors, and we may receive articles as fresh and about as easily from there as from Concord or Lexington.²³

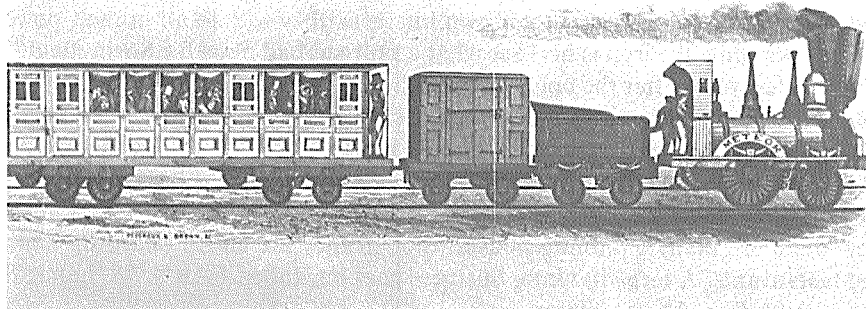
Boston now could try to recapture and retain the lost trade of western New England. Railroads would, it was hoped, open up a market for agricultural products which otherwise were too expensive due to the cost of transportation. Boston could become, for the first time, an important factor in the economy of the lower Connecticut Valley.

Two daily trains to Boston began on the first day of service. The trains carried fifty passengers, mainly to Worcester, and the afternoon trains brought back one hundred people. One of the trains left Springfield at 9a.m., the other at 11a.m. Including the stopover time in Worcester, the trip took approximately four hours. At the end of October, the Western Railroad began to move freight.²⁴

Rates for merchandise were established according to the type of goods being transported. Class I included silk, tea, spices, hats, and shoes. Class II had butter, cheese, and ham. Class III included lumber, salt, and grain, and Class IV was set aside for flour. Heavy discounts were available to those merchants, manufacturers, and farmers who shipped their products over the longest distances.²⁵



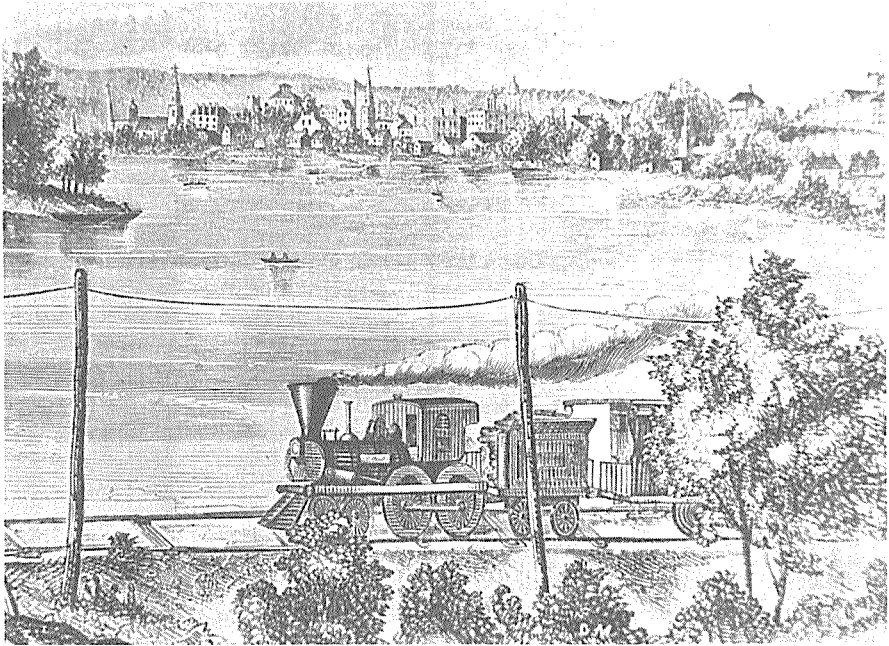
To add interest in pleasure travel, guidebooks were published which the compilers assumed would provide further allure and excitement to the railroad-ing public. One such guidebook was *Bradbury and Guild's Railroad Charts*, which the publisher asserted "constituted a novel and complete companion for the railway carriage." It was claimed that the chief object of the book was to



“increase the pleasure of travelers, by directing attention to the great variety of natural and artificial objects by which our railroads are skirted. In these pages will be found much knowledge of the peculiarities, cost, and construction of the Western Railroad.”²⁶

The *Railroad Charts* described the Springfield depot as follows:

At Springfield, the railroads from the North, South, East, and West terminate at one station. The noise and clatter, on the arrival of various trains, surpasses all descriptions. Here, also, New York passengers change cars, and proceed down the eastern bank of the Connecticut River.²⁷



For the three months prior to January 1, 1840, receipts exceeded expenditures by \$3,228.²⁸ All of Western Massachusetts was touched by the railroad craze. The Northampton *Courier* editorialized: “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 had done for Springfield!”²⁹ Within a few years after the opening of the line, it was clear that the railroad was going to be a thriving enterprise. Passenger and freight receipts were steadily growing, as was the acceptance of the railroad by most of the population. However, with the increase in size came growing pains, not the least of which was the situation in the neighborhood surrounding the train depot. “On Railroad Row there are many gambling houses, though they are called boarding houses and restaurants. A large banking business goes on, called FARO.”³⁰ Later, the Springfield *Republican* wrote:

The officials of the Western Railroad in this city ought to receive due credit for using the great powers of that corporation — for the perpetuation of the reign of rum and rowdyism. They have held the balance of power...and they have used it to the injury and disgrace of the city.³¹

It is difficult to ascertain the exact impact of the Western Railroad upon Springfield, and the subsequent lines to Albany and New York City. For one thing, the population of Springfield jumped to almost 11,000 by 1845, an increase of 4,000 in just five years.³² New industries began to develop, and they depended upon rail transportation between Springfield and Boston. Among these industries were the Dwight Manufacturing Company for cotton goods, the Springfield Car Company, which later became the T. W. Wason Company, and Smith and Wesson. By 1850, Springfield could boast of thirty-four industries.³³ Springfield, once a small village, but now bolstered by excellent rail service and the Springfield Armory, was on her way to becoming a major city. Unfortunately, it took the coming of the Civil War to solidify her position.

EXPRESS TRAIN ON WESTERN RAILROAD.

From a Daguerreotype, made in 1842.



AFTERNOON TRAIN BETWEEN ALBANY AND SPRINGFIELD.

STILLMAN WITT, Superintendent at Albany.

THOMAS W. ALLEN, Master Mechanic.
D S WOOD, Engineer.

JOHN B. ADAMS, Conductor.
HORACE H. BABCOCK, Ticket Agent.

NOTES

1. Springfield *Union and Sunday Republican*, September 24, 1939, p.1, col. 3.
2. Thelma Kistler, *Rise of Railroads in the Connecticut River Valley*. (Northampton, 1938), p. 47.
3. Alfred Copeland, *A History of Hampden County*. (Springfield, 1902), p. 177.
4. Letter from unknown author, as quoted in "The Beginning of the Boston and Worcester Railroad", *Proceedings of the Worcester Society of Antiquity*. (Worcester, 1901), p. 543.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 556-557.
6. Springfield *Weekly Republican*, November 22, 1834, p.2, col. 2.
7. Springfield *Weekly Republican*, December 27, 1834, p.2, col. 6.
8. Springfield *Weekly Republican*, March 14, 1835, p.2, col. 7.
9. Springfield *Union*, September 6, 1889, p.1, col. 1.
10. Michael Frisch, *Town into City*. (Cambridge, 1972), p. 19.
11. George Bliss, *Historical Memoir of the Western Railroad*. (Springfield, 1863), p. 28.
12. Springfield *Weekly Republican*, January 9, 1837, p.3, col. 7.
13. Kistler, p. 99.
14. *Senate Document 35*, Massachusetts General Court (Boston, 1841), p. 21.
15. *Senate Document 28*, Massachusetts General Court (Boston, 1838), p. 8.
16. Mason A. Green, *Springfield 1636-1886* (Boston, 1938), p. 413.
17. Bliss, pp. 22-23.
18. Committee of the House of Representatives to Study Aid to the Western Railroad, *Report*. (Boston, 1838), p. 5.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
20. *Union*, September 6, 1889, as cited.
21. *Ibid.*, as cited.
22. Springfield *Republican*, October 5, 1839, p.1, col. 1.
23. Charlestown *Watchman*, as quoted by the *Hampshire Gazette*, November 30, 1839.
24. Advertisement for the Western Railroad, appearing in the *Springfield Republican*, October 14, 1839.
25. Kistler, p. 194.
26. Harry Andrew Wright, *Story of Western Massachusetts, Volume Two*. (New York, 1949), p. 518.
27. Bradbury and Guild, *Rail-Road Charts, Number Two*. (Boston, no date).
28. Kistler, p. 33, quoting from the *Annual Report of the Western Railroad* (Springfield, 1840).
29. Northampton *Courier*, March 8, 1842, p.1, col. 1.
30. Springfield *Union*, July 10, 1852.
31. Springfield *Republican*, August 9, 1853.
32. *Census of Massachusetts*, U.S. Department of Commerce, (Washington, 1940).
33. *Report*, Associated Industries of Massachusetts, (Boston, 1928), p. 41.