

A berkshire-style steam locomotive used by the Erie Railroad steams through Central Valley, NY (Woodbury Historical Society).



Trackside Memories

A look at Orange County, New York's Railroads

It would have been impossible for Orange County's agricultural and manufacturing industries to blossom without the meticulous aid of its now-largely forgotten railroad network. Today, only a fraction of Orange County's railroads remain in service and many of the region's railroad marvels now sit abandoned. The first railroad to come to Orange County, the New York and Erie, was constructed in the late 1830s and opened for service in 1841. This railroad, later known famously as the Erie Railroad, gained recognition in 1842 when Thaddeus Selleck, the station agent of Chester, NY, successfully shipped milk by rail from Orange County to New York City. Selleck's idea sparked New York's fluid milk market—one of the state's most lucrative businesses for the next century. With the rise of milk came the need for more routes of steel to transport this valuable commodity. Soon, railroads extended in every direction across Orange County. The Erie built numerous branchlines to connect villages and cities such as Newburgh, Pine Bush, and Montgomery to the greater railroad network. However, the Erie would not remain as Orange County's only railroad. By 1900, the New York, Ontario and Western, Lehigh and Hudson River, Middletown and Unionville, and the New York Central all developed footholds in this region of New York State. It was arguably possible to travel anywhere in the county by train.

Among the many railroads came numerous engineering marvels to Orange County. One that still serves the region is the 3,200 foot-long Moodna Viaduct spanning the Moodna Creek valley in Salisbury Mills, NY. Constructed between 1906 and 1909, the viaduct was built as a part of the Erie Railroad's ambitious project known as the Graham Line. A great majority of the Erie's tracks, especially between Harriman and Middletown, consisted of steep grades, tight curves, and numerous railroad crossings. This was not favorable for freight trains designed to move at fast speeds, so the Graham Line was constructed as a freight bypass that featured few grades, gentle curves, and, most importantly, no grade crossings. The Moodna Viaduct was arguably

the most labor-intensive aspect of this new line and, with its highest point reaching 193 feet, it remains the highest and longest railroad trestle east of the Mississippi River.

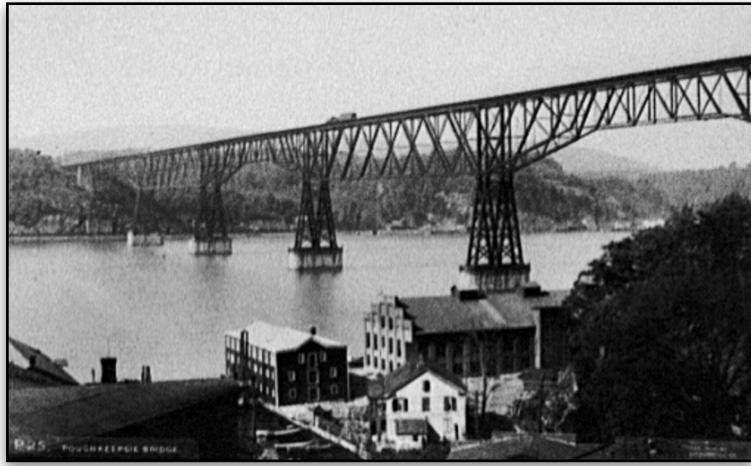


The Moodna Viaduct attracts railfans from across the country, with its highest point reaching 193 feet, it remains the highest and longest railroad trestle east of the Mississippi River (Library of Congress).

While the Moodna Viaduct is in active service, one railroad marvel that has been forgotten is the Maybrook Classification Yard. When the Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge opened for service in 1889, it was the only Hudson River crossing between Albany and New York City

until the Bear Mountain Bridge opened in 1924. The bridge allowed trains from New England to travel across Dutchess County, the Hudson River, and then interchange goods with railroads operating west of the Hudson River. This interchange occurred at Maybrook which, at its height, possessed 177 tracks that extended 71 miles. In addition to the miles of trackage used to classify and sort railroad cars, the yard also featured a massive twenty-five stall roundhouse used to store locomotives, a substantial engine machine shop, and a large ice-house used to provide ice for cars carrying refrigerated goods. Maybrook suffered with the decline of regional railroads and ended service abruptly in 1974 when the Poughkeepsie Bridge suffered a catastrophic fire. Today, one track remains in Maybrook and few signs of the yard are visible today.

The demise of Maybrook was echoed across Orange County in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, as automobiles and airplanes triumphed over railroads. One by one, busy railroad lines were abandoned and removed—leaving some unrecognizable today. Having been



fascinated with geography from a young age, these old railroad lines fascinated me and, now, I have spent years collecting, writing, and sharing their history.

When it burned in 1974, the loss of the Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge dealt a major blow to Orange County's remaining railroads. The bridge is now used as the Walkway Over The Hudson (Library of Congress).

The Erie's Newburgh Shortcut Then and Now

In 2013, I gave my first historical program on the Erie Railroad's Newburgh Shortcut which once operated between Harriman, NY and Vails Gate, NY. The line was intended to aid Newburgh's busy coal traffic but soon fell out of service and was largely abandoned around 1937. It was one of Orange County's first railroads to be abandoned and, as a result, little remains regarding its history. This has proven to be one of my most successful lectures having been presented to numerous groups in the tri-state region.



In September of 2013, I gave my first program on the Erie's Newburgh Shortcut. It remains as one of my most successful events with over 100 people attending!

E. H. Harriman's Incline Railroad

Debuted in 2015 to the Orange County Historical Society, my program “Stone Arches, Rock Cuts, And a Trip to the Summit: The Story of E. H. Harriman’s Incline Railroad” is arguably one of the most intriguing to new audiences. Unlike conventional railroads in Orange County, the Harriman Incline Railroad was opened in 1904 to aid in the construction of railroad tycoon Edward H. Harriman’s home “Arden House.” After Harriman passed in 1909, the small railroad fell into disuse and was scrapped during the early 1940s.



Here is a look at me presenting “Stone Arches, Rock Cuts, And a Trip to the Summit: The Story of E. H. Harriman’s Incline Railroad” to the Robeling Chapter of the Society of Industrial Archaeology at Paterson, NJ in 2019.

Other Group Involvement and Railroad Memorabilia

I have spent a great deal of the past ten years collecting and sharing railroad memorabilia from Orange County. Below is a documentation of many of the other lectures I have given to the community as well as related events where I have displayed related railroad memorabilia from the region.



Myself along with Middletown Historian Marv H. Cohen and related railroad memorabilia from the region at the 2015 Middletown Railroad Day festival hosted by the Ontario and Western Railroad Historical Society.



A display covering the history of local railroad lanterns and their glass globes. This display was used in a lecture given to the Hudson Valley Bottle Club in 2017 by myself and fellow historian David Lewis.



Items from the New York, Ontario and Western Railroad, including "Summer Homes" guides that advertised vacation destinations in the Catskill Mountains of New York State, on display at the 2017 Ontario and Western Railroad Historical Society convention.

Writing About Orange County, NY's Railroads

To date, I have written one article on this topic:

Prizgintas, Alex. "The Erie Railroad's Race for a Shortcut: The Story of Woodbury's Three Sister Railroad Stations." *Orange County Historical Society* 49 (November 2020).

Links leading to these articles can be found on the “news and notes” page.