

The Rail in the Trail

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The Town of Bethlehem, the Mohawk Hudson Land Conservancy and Albany County have partnered to open the Albany County Rail Trail, also known as the Helderberg Hudson Rail Trail. In Bethlehem, trailheads are located near the Firefighters Memorial Park in Slingerlands and the Veterans Memorial Park in Delmar. This article was originally written in 2012.

Beginnings

Wednesday, September 16, 1863 was a banner day for the Albany and Susquehanna Railroad. That Wednesday marked the opening of the first section of rails to be completed, stretching from Albany to Central Bridge including stops at Delmar, Slingerlands and New Scotland. One can imagine the excitement in these rural hamlets as the mighty steam engine rolled through. The hamlets haven't been the same since.

Interest in a railroad line connecting Albany and the upper Susquehanna valley goes back as early as 1844 and took off under the promotion of Albany hotel owner and businessman Edward C. Delevan in 1851. Investors saw the advantage of connecting the valley's fertile farms with the market in Albany, and more importantly, connecting the coal fields of Pennsylvania to Albany and eastern New York. Through the 1850s and 60s investors, stock holders and the board of directors wrangled over financing, inching the line along as funds were secured.

Finally, on December 31, 1868, the line's 142 miles to Binghamton were completed and a gala excursion train from Albany planned for January 12 of 1869. The line was built with 60-pound iron, and a six foot gauge enabling it to connect freely with the Erie Railroad in Binghamton. Railroad president Joseph Ramsey looked forward to business as usual with the line finally complete. Alas, Wall Street financiers Jay Gould and James Fisk had different ideas.

Gould and Fisk have been described as aggressive capitalists, robber barons and the terrors of Wall Street. The profit to be made from moving coal, the black diamonds of Pennsylvania, to eastern New York was irresistible to these two. They already controlled the Erie Railroad and set their sights on the Albany and Susquehanna. In the spring and summer of 1869, Gould and Fisk began their proxy war, buying up stock and trying to wrest control of the board of directors from Ramsey.

A highpoint, more actually a low point, happened in August of 1869 when each side, having secured judicial orders affirming their control of the railroad, boarded opposing trains and barreled along the tracks toward each other. Fisk grabbed control of A&S trains in Binghamton loaded them with Erie railroad men, and headed east taking over the stations as they went. Meanwhile, Ramsey's supporters in Albany, including superintendent J. W. Van Valkenburgh,

rounded up men from the Albany shops and headed west. The confrontation happened at the Belden Hill Tunnel. Jim Shaughnessy in his book *Delaware & Hudson: The History of an Important Railroad Whose Antecedent was a Canal Network to Transport Coal* describes it vividly:

The two locomotives met with a sickening thud on a curve just east of the tunnel and the Donnybrook was on, with hordes of shouting, cursing men spilling off the trains and lunging at each other. Shots were fired in the ensuing melee, clubs were swung, noses bloodied in the general pandemonium.”

The Fisk crowd was soon in retreat. Later that evening, another confrontation at the other end of the tunnel began, only to be halted by the arrival of the 44th Regiment of the State Militia who were called out by Broom County officials to restore law and order. Due to the violence and lawlessness, the Governor put the line under military control while the two factions continued to fight it out in the courts. Gould’s and Fisk’s financial buccaneering came to end in January 1870, with Judge E. Darwin Smith’s affirmation of Ramsey’s control of the Albany and Susquehanna.

On February 24, 1870, the weary board of the A&S leased the line in perpetuity to the Delaware & Hudson. The A&S and the D&H had been working successfully together as early as 1866 with the D&H moving their coal on A&S cars.

Transformation

The railroad’s arrival in the small towns of Bethlehem and New Scotland led to a transportation transformation in the movement of freight and people.

While there was an established network of roads (including plank roads and turnpikes), the condition of those roads was terrible. Travel by wagon or stage coach on the rutted dirt roads was a jarring, bumpy and time consuming ride. Spring rains turned them into mud, and winter snow made them impassable. While Bethlehem farmers continued to take advantage of the Hudson River for transport, the railroad (including the D&H and the West Shore Railroad) increased access to markets for their cash crops and local commodities such as molding sand. Loading up a freight car was an easy option.

People wishing to travel to Albany soon saw the advantage of the railroads regularly scheduled trips. In 1864, one could purchase a 20 cent ticket and hop on the train in Adamsville (now Delmar) at 8:45 am and arrive 15 minutes later in Albany. After business, shopping and maybe lunch, the train left Albany at 2 p.m. for the return trip. All without hitching up the horses and braving the roads. Express service for packages and mail soon made their appearance with one’s Sears and Roebuck order arriving for easy pickup at the local station. Western Union’s telegraph service made communication even faster.

Commuters began to use the D&H for daily travel between their quiet country homes in Delmar, Slingerlands (and later Elsmere) and their offices in Albany. Suburbanization had begun. Incidentally, the use of the word commuting to describe this travel activity sprang from early railroad riders getting their fares “commuted” or reduced because of how often they rode.

Stations along the way

In 1863 when the railroad came through, Elsmere was not even on the map. A scattering of farms were located on the Delaware Turnpike with a more substantial communities being located at nearby Delmar and Normansville. However, by 1891 passenger service was established here for the growing suburb. According to the D&H, the name Elsmere came from the popular novel *Robert Elsmere* which was published in 1888.

Delmar got its start as the hamlet of Adamsville, named after Nathaniel Adams who opened his hotel here in 1838. D&H records indicate that Adams Station was built in 1866 with half the cost being contributed by J.R. Adams. J. R. is John R. Adams, Nathaniel’s son. The Adams Hotel is just two blocks away from the station. By 1891, the D&H was calling the station Delmar and by 1900 the name Adamsville had dropped out of use.

Formerly known as Normanskill, Slingerlands is named after the prominent Slingerlands family who settled here in the 1790s. When the railroad came through in 1863, Slingerlands was an established hamlet with a post office, stores and school. The community soon capitalized on the station, with many railroad executives building their homes here. One was Charles Hammond who was the Director of the Northern Division of the Delaware and Hudson. He built his Victorian style home in 1876 within view of the Slingerlands station.

In the 1860s the West Shore Railroad and the Albany & Susquehanna Railroad crossed in a farmer’s field in northern New Scotland. Early A&S railroad schedules refer to the hamlet that grew up around the junction as New Scotland (not to be confused with the station on the West Shore Railroad also known as New Scotland.) By 1870 the hamlet was known as Voorheesville and formally incorporated in 1899. It was named after Alonzo B. Voorhees an Albany attorney who also established the post office there. The village spent a brief time (August 1890-92) known as Farlin after railroad agent Dudley Farlin.

Today

The last locomotives came through in the mid-1990s and the actual railroad tracks were removed in 2004. In 2010, Albany County completed the purchase of 9.1 miles of rail bed from the Canadian Pacific Railway to create the Helderberg Hudson Rail Trail. In June 2011, Albany County, the Town of Bethlehem and the Mohawk Hudson Land Conservancy partnered to open a 1.9 mile section of the trail to the public. The ultimate goal is to open the entire trail from

Albany to Voorheesville for recreation and as alternative transportation between Albany and the suburbs along the former railroad line.