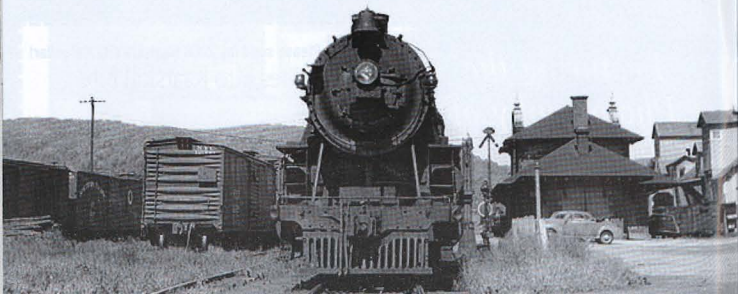


Remembering the O & W

Excerpts from *When the Railroad Leaves Town: American Communities in the Age of Rail Line Abandonment, Eastern United States*, vol. 1 by Joseph P. Schwietzman, Truman State University Press, Kirksville, MO



ONTARIO & WESTERN



Among the hundreds of abandoned

routes in the eastern United States,

few are as revered by railroad enthu-

siasts as the former New York,

Ontario & Western Railway (O&W)

main line from Cornwall-on-Hudson

to Oswego, New York. The residents

of Roscoe commemorate this bygone

mountain railroad through museum

exhibits, the display of vintage equip-

ment, and an annual festival.

Historical Perspective

In the middle of the [southern] Catskill Mountains, the wilderness area once known as Big Beaverkill Flats at the confluence of the Willowemoc River and Big Beaverkill remained largely undisturbed by col-

onization before the Revolutionary War. The region's primeval character slowly gave way to Anglo-American customs after the family of Jehiel Stewart and his brother Luther arrived from Connecticut in 1779. These pioneers built a log cabin on a plot



opposite page: An O & W steam train at Walton Station.
this page, top: A northbound O & W steam train leaving Liberty.
above: The Beerston Depot in the foreground with a local creamery in the background.

purchased from an influential area landowner, John R. Livingston, and constructed a sawmill near the spot where the waterways converged. As others followed the Stewarts' example, additional houses, sawmills, and a new school came to the Flats, creating a small community.

The citizens of this emerging village, called Westfield (and later, Westfield Flats), received the benefits of its first store around 1820. The community's remote and mountainous



expansions to the regional lumber and sandstone (commercially called blue stone) industries. During the Civil War, tanneries in Westfield Flats produced large quantities of boots for the Union Army, allowing the community to grow to twenty-eight homes by 1866, rendering local railroad service an overriding municipal priority.

top: The O & W station at the end of the Middletown to Monticello branch line.
above: An old postcard of the O & W station at Kerhonkson on the Summitville to Kingston branch line.
below: A northbound O & W freight train possibly near Cadosia.



location afforded them a seemingly inexhaustible supply of natural resources, but it prevented the establishment of efficient transportation service. The Callicoon Depot & Rockland Turnpike partially alleviated this problem by forging a mountainous link suitable for horse-drawn carriages traveling to the New York & Erie Railroad in Callicoon, a prominent long-distance route through southern New York that entered service as far west as Binghamton [sic] in 1851. Although the desire for direct rail service remained unfulfilled, the community prospered from

The New York & Oswego Midland Railroad adroitly capitalized on the sense of urgency felt by area residents for faster and more efficient transportation, selling stock to local governments before initiating service through Westfield Flats in 1873. Reorganized as the New York Ontario & Western Railway (O&W) in 1880, the steam railroad helped transform the isolated mountain settlement into a prominent gateway to the

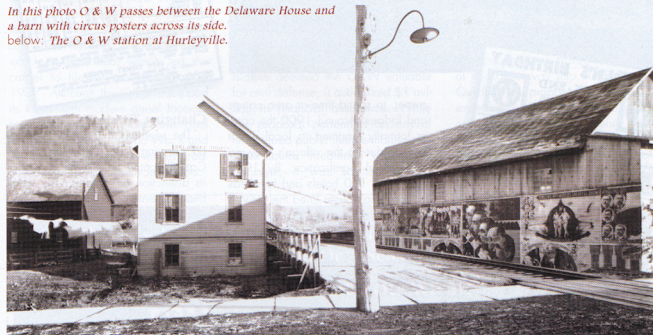
Hudson River to Weehawken, New Jersey, an arrangement providing the carrier access to the enormously important New York City market.

The O&W...became best known for its role of carrying seasonal tourists, especially sportsmen, to the Catskills...the carrier aggressively promoted the amenities of Roscoe, formerly known as Westfield Flats, and its twin village of Rockland, as well as other destinations along its route.

Roscoe's appeal to sportsmen rose markedly after the carrier began stocking the Beaverkill with hundreds of thousands of brook and lake trout annually, hauling them in milk cans aboard freight trains.

This practice transformed the waterway into one of the world's most celebrated trout streams, and paid commercial dividends to such an extent that the New York Fishery Commission arranged for a special

In this photo O & W passes between the Delaware House and a barn with circus posters across its side.
below: The O & W station at Hurleyville.



Catskills. In 1884 O&W renamed its Westfield Flats station Rockland on account of its importance to the town of Rockland, an area encompassing the Flats and several other villages.

The O&W crossed the undulating and sparsely inhabited hinterland between Cornwall-on-Hudson, New York and the Lake Ontario port of Oswego...Beyond its southern terminus at Cornwall, the carrier exercised trackage rights over the New York Central (formerly New York, West Shore & Buffalo Railroad) main line astride the western bank of the



At the head end are two sets of diesel-powered engines pulling freight cars.



• PASSOVER •

**1940
REDUCED RATES
AND SPECIAL
TRAIN SERVICE
(EFFECTIVE MONDAY APRIL 22ND, 1940)**

**EFFECTIVE MONDAY, APRIL 22ND, 1940
CITY OF NEW YORK**

New York, Ontario and Western Ry.

Train No.	From	To	Days	Time	Rate
1	New York	Albany	Mon, Wed, Fri	1:15	1.00
2	Albany	New York	Tue, Thu, Sat	1:15	1.00
3	New York	Albany	Mon, Wed, Fri	1:15	1.00
4	Albany	New York	Tue, Thu, Sat	1:15	1.00
5	New York	Albany	Mon, Wed, Fri	1:15	1.00
6	Albany	New York	Tue, Thu, Sat	1:15	1.00
7	New York	Albany	Mon, Wed, Fri	1:15	1.00
8	Albany	New York	Tue, Thu, Sat	1:15	1.00
9	New York	Albany	Mon, Wed, Fri	1:15	1.00
10	Albany	New York	Tue, Thu, Sat	1:15	1.00
11	New York	Albany	Mon, Wed, Fri	1:15	1.00
12	Albany	New York	Tue, Thu, Sat	1:15	1.00
13	New York	Albany	Mon, Wed, Fri	1:15	1.00
14	Albany	New York	Tue, Thu, Sat	1:15	1.00
15	New York	Albany	Mon, Wed, Fri	1:15	1.00
16	Albany	New York	Tue, Thu, Sat	1:15	1.00
17	New York	Albany	Mon, Wed, Fri	1:15	1.00
18	Albany	New York	Tue, Thu, Sat	1:15	1.00
19	New York	Albany	Mon, Wed, Fri	1:15	1.00
20	Albany	New York	Tue, Thu, Sat	1:15	1.00

CITY TICKET OFFICES
NEW YORK: 123 W. 42nd St. (Grand Central Station)
ALBANY: 100 N. Pearl St. (Albany Station)
ROSCOE: 100 N. Pearl St. (Roscoe Station)
CORNWALL: 100 N. Pearl St. (Cornwall Station)
HUDSON: 100 N. Pearl St. (Hudson Station)

Changing Times

The revenues that O&W generated carrying leisure travelers to the Catskills could not rid the carrier of its distinction as a notoriously weak financial enterprise. Its lengthy route reached few large cities, rendering it highly dependent on seasonal tourism and low-yielding bridge traffic at the behest of larger and better capitalized carriers. Adding to its financial problems, the popularity of its passenger service gradually faded in response to improved highways and the heightened allure of other travel destinations. The carrier responded to growing bus competition by placing a gasoline-powered motor car into service in 1925. O&W later replaced this rail bus with more powerful Brill motor cars, relegating the original car to nontransportation use as a lunch room for a local manufacturer, Roscoe Knife Handle Works....

The Great Depression worsened the plight of the O&W and the resort and coal-hauling business upon which it depended, which led the carrier to file for reorganization in 1937. Although the O&W equipped its trains with modern diesel locomotives and benefited from additional freight traffic during World War II and the postwar period, its revenues gradually fell to grossly insufficient levels.

The carrier took steps to cut costs and eliminated all passenger service after the war except for a seasonal run between Weehawken and Roscoe, a residual service lasting only until 1953. Considering the O&W's demise to be inevitable without public assistance, stakeholders along its route organized the Eleven-County Consolidated Committee. The committee tried to help the 541-mile carrier stabilize its freight revenues and manage its rising debt burden, efforts that ultimately proved unsuccessful.... the struggling carrier terminated operations in March 1957.

....When the New York state legislature deemed the O&W valuable for civil defense, it authorized \$1 million in financial assistance. While this proposal portended an era of heightened public intervention to preserve routes threatened with abandonment, it was scuttled by the

state's civil defense commission.

The abandonment of the carrier's main line was a poignant moment in regional railroad history, rendering the O&W the largest American railroad operator ever to be liquidated, a distinction it held for several decades. For the first time, the closing of a railroad line in America left not only small villages without service, but also numerous outlying communities with populations of twenty-five hundred or more, such as Delhi, Ellenville, Monticello, and Walton, New York. With the railroad's demise, planners moved forward with proposals to transform portions of its right-of-way into the Route 17 Quickway, a proposed new regional expressway. Toward this end, work crews razed several community landmarks.... During the early 1960s the state molded portions of the right-of-way, whose width measured 124

owner, to spend time at area camps and lodges. Around 1900 the carrier formally renamed its local depot Roscoe due to the village's growing commercial significance. By 1909 more than 150 hotels and hundreds of boarding houses lined the O&W's eighty-three-mile stretch between Roscoe and Cornwall-on-Hudson, rendering it one of the Northeast's most revered routes among leisure travelers....

To the left and top are two holiday timetables from 1938 and 1940.

An O & W diesel-powered engine at Cadosa station.



trout car to be built for transporting the fish over the O&W in 1891. In recognition of Roscoe's significance to outdoorsmen, the carrier installed a weathervane resembling a trout on its newly constructed depot in Roscoe in 1896.

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, thousands of sportsmen and children arrived annually in the Roscoe-Rockland area as well as Livingston Manor, a nearby village named after the late land-

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feet through Roscoe, into this divided highway....Other stretches, soon reclaimed by nature, reverted to private landowners and entered a lengthy period of dormancy. Meanwhile, several nostalgic residents, eager to preserve the famous weathervane, secretly had this artifact removed from the depot and placed in temporary storage.

Abandonment's Legacy

Roscoe remained a small town of diminished significance to tourism during the 1970s and early 1980s. More than a quarter century after its last train departed, a high school teacher and town historian, Wilmer E. Sipple, went to the town boards of Roscoe and Livingston Manor for approval to establish mini-museums and information centers in cabooses he sought to bring to these villages. After Sipple received their consent, he successfully bid on two Conrail (former Erie Railroad) cabooses with high cupolas similar to those used by the O&W, which each town acquired in 1985 through individual and organizational donations. At the site of the former depot, the Roscoe caboose, painted in the O&W livery, became the Roscoe O&W Railway Museum & Information Center.

To provide room for a more extensive museum, Sipple and other benefactors worked collaboratively with various groups, such as the Ontario & Western Railway Historical Society, to acquire a local garage near the abandoned right-of-way. In 1987 they used siding and shingles salvaged from a former O&W station in Summitville to enhance the appearance of a modest dwelling, giving it a motif reminiscent of the railroad. The O&W Railway Museum includes...a former Roscoe watchman's shanty and an O&W signal....

Visitors to the Catskills can experience its diverse aesthetic qualities on the Sullivan County Rail Trail, a rural

pathway opened in 1991 on a portion of the abandoned right-of-way deeded by civic-minded property owners to a conservation group. The trail occupies the abandoned grade between Woodridge and Mountaintop, small communities southeast of Liberty, New York. Although there has been discussion about extending the trail to Liberty, residential development and other obstacles (including the Quickway) prevent its extension to the museum complex.

Epilogue

The extraordinary contribution of the O&W to the cultural and commercial development of the Catskills is recognized each summer in Roscoe, when the community hosts the O&W Railway Festival. The celebration attracts former O&W employees, railroad enthusiasts, residents, and historians for self-guided tours, slide shows, and song. Many congregate next to the caboose which is today flanked by a historical marker informing visitors of the location of the former depot and a copper replica of the famous trout weathervane (the original is housed in the museum). Although trains will likely never return, their presence can still be felt during the two-day event, when the O&W recaptures the spotlight in the area once known as Big Beaverkill Flats.

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Illustrations courtesy of the Ontario & Western Railway Historical Society.



The O&W's IMPACT on the Catskills

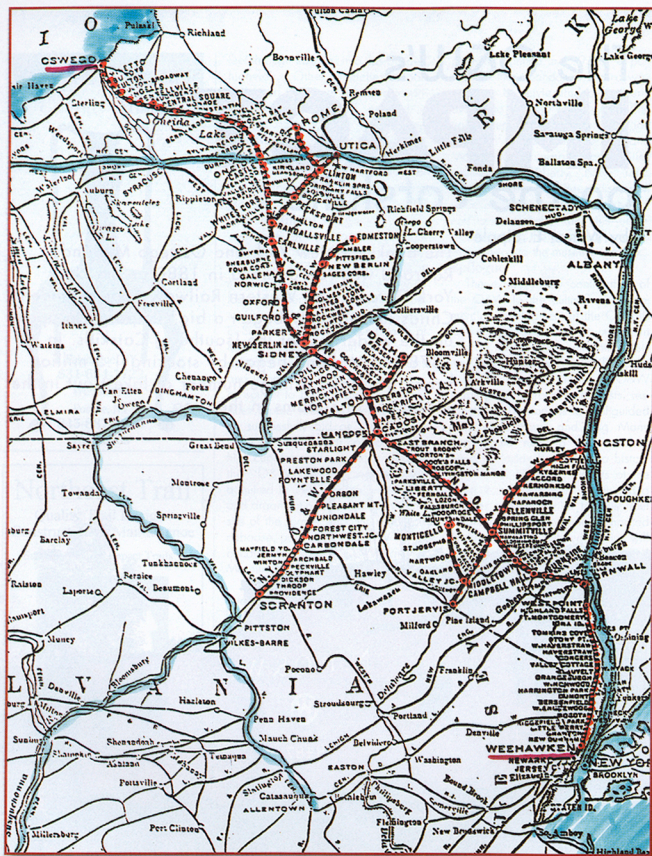
by Wilmer E. Sipple

The bankrupt New York and Oswego Midland Railroad was reorganized in 1880 as the New York Ontario and Western Railway. Superintendent Childs immediately began a big campaign to open up the wilderness of the [southern] Catskills. In 1878 The Midland began by stocking 1.5 million brook trout and a large number of lake trout in the 400 miles of streams in the area.

O & W caboose in Roscoe



Patrick Costello



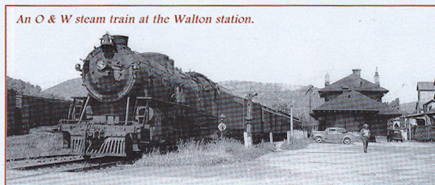
Already six resorts were stressing the excellent trout fishing in the area. Prior to this Sir Isaac [sic] Walton, early English fisherman, wrote about his fond memories fishing along the Beavertkill. Thaddeus Norris, father of American dry-fly fishermen, fished the Willowemoc before 1865. The railway crossed the Rondout which John Burroughs said was one of the finest of all trout streams; and then ran along the headwaters of the

used to haul the trout filled milk cans to the streams along the railroad.

In 1891 the New York Fishery Commission had a special fish car built and it was named the "Adirondack." It was built by the Gilbert Car Company of Troy, N.Y. at a cost of \$4,215.00. This car was built along the lines of a wooden passenger coach and was finally taken out of service in 1927.

In 1866 the sleepy farm village of

An O & W steam train at the Walton station.



Neversink, across the Willowemoc Creek and ran along the Beavertkill, perhaps the most famous trout stream in America. In the words of Theodore Gordon, father of American [sic] dry-fly fishing, it would be hard to find a more beautiful stream than the Beavertkill. Gordon settled on the Neversink in 1880 and for 20 years communicated the pleasure he found fishing Catskill streams as contributor to the English Fishing Gazette. John Burroughs published essays as "The Heart of the Southern Catskills." Such writers as these made the Catskills known to discriminating fisherman all over the world.

Even after the Midland was reorganized as the New York Ontario & Western Railway, Superintendent Childs continued the policy of stocking the Catskill streams as follows:

1880: 85,000 trout
1883: 155,000 trout
1885: 460,000 trout
1881: 96,000 trout
1884: 310,000 trout
1886: 900,000 trout
1882: 120,000 trout

In the beginning freight cars were

Such a policy of the railroad was bound to speed the development of the resorts in the area.

The Midland announced the publication of its first resort guide in the Liberty Register on April 19, 1878. The summer homes guidebook listed all the hotels, boarding houses, inns and farm houses who would take in summer guests. The "Liberty Register" later reported "the months in Sullivan County." The 1880 guidebook ran to only 45 pages listing only 28 hotels, but each year the list grew longer. The 1881 edition, Summer Homes on the New York Ontario & Western Railway was 82 pages long, while the 1883 guide was 110 pages and the 1900 volume came to 192 pages. The early guidebooks were bound in hard covers with nature scenes and used a variety of headings; 1884 Summer Homes among the Mountains, 1890 Summer Homes along the New York Ontario & Western Railway, 1892 Summer Homes and 1937 Vacation Guide. From 1897 to 1906 the O&W issued a Winter Homes guidebook. All resort guide books were given away free for the asking.

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Fishing in the Beavertkill at Cooks Falls on the first day of trout season, 1953.

