

New York, West Shore & Buffalo Railroad

excerpts from [Arthur Adams](#) and [Ron Chernow](#)

from Arthur Adams:

"The West Shore Railroad was built as a "nuisance road" by interests that may have been backed by the competing Pennsylvania Railroad. This is a matter still in dispute among rail historians. The idea was to directly parallel the highly profitable New York Central from Albany to Buffalo, and to also serve some new markets on the west bank of the Hudson between Jersey City and Albany. The west bank had previously been completely dependent on steamboats and ferry connections to the Hudson River Railroad on the east bank. Naturally this left them completely cut off during the freeze up of the river, and there was considerable agitation for a railroad on the west side.



"In

Photo by Victor van Carpels December 2001

In the 1870s the New York, West Shore & Chicago was surveying a route to Buffalo, but the enterprise was abandoned in 1877 during a financial panic. This route was to include the Ridgefield Park Railroad, built in 1866 from Jersey City to Ridgefield Park, New Jersey. It ran west of the Palisades, and along the Hackensack River. In 1873 the new Jersey City & Albany Railroad incorporated the Ridgefield Park Railroad into its projected line, which was in turn to be part of the New York, West Shore & Chicago. The Jersey City & Albany got as far as South Haverstraw, now called Congers, before funds ran out in 1880. North of Congers an expensive tunnel was required to get the line from the Hackensack to the Hudson Valley.

"During this same period, the Wallkill Valley Railroad, which connected the Erie Railroad, at Montgomery, with Kingston began building a Northern Extension from Kingston to Athens. Also, the New York, Ontario & Western, which ran from Middletown to Oswego through the Southern Catskills, was looking for a good entry to New York City. It had been originally built as the New York & Oswego Midland, and it depended on a connection to Jersey City over the New Jersey Midland Railroad, which was then coming under the domination of the competing New York & Erie. This was most unsatisfactory. It decided to build its

own line east from Middletown to Cornwall-On-Hudson, and thence south along the Hudson to a connection with the Jersey City & Albany at Congers. A new corporation, the New York, West Shore & Buffalo, was formed to take over the Jersey City & Albany and complete the line north from Congers to just south of Albany, and thence westward to Buffalo along the route previously surveyed by the New York, West Shore & Chicago. This new line was to pass through Haverstraw, West Point, Cornwall (where a junction would be made with the New York, Ontario & Western), Newburgh, Kingston, and Athens. This new line was to incorporate the Wallkill Valley's Northern Extension and the Saratoga & Hudson River. Totally new construction would be required from Congers to Kingston and from Rotterdam Junction to Buffalo. A branch was to be built from Ravena, near Coxsackie, to Albany. To eliminate dependence upon use of the New York, Lake Erie & Western and the Pennsylvania Railroad's Jersey City terminals, a new tunnel was to be drilled through the Palisades from North Bergen, on the Jersey City & Albany line, to Slough's Meadow in Weehawken, opposite 42nd Street, Manhattan. A large terminal was to be built at Weehawken and ferries established to West 42nd Street and Franklin Street. The New York, Ontario & Western was to have trackage rights from Cornwall to Weehawken, and use of the new terminal and ferry services. This great amalgamation took place in 1881, and by January 1, 1884, trains were operating from Weehawken to Buffalo.

"Among the principal backers of the New York, West Shore & Buffalo were General Horace Porter and George Mortimer Pullman. Pullman was mad at the Vanderbilts for using the sleeping cars of the competing Wagner Palace Car Company rather than his own, and thought he saw a good opportunity to make a profit while getting some delightful revenge.

"General Porter was a personal friend of the late President Ulysses S. Grant, and an active railroad builder and promoter. Actually, both may have been simply front men for the Pennsylvania Railroad, as President Grant himself, much to his subsequent grief, invested heavily in what seemed a "sure thing."

"The new railroad was built to the highest engineering standards and even had lower grades than the New York Central & Hudson River Railroad. For this reason Conrail is using it today as their principal route for heavy tonnage. However, the new railroad was undercapitalized and it was soon engaged in a vicious rate war with the parallel New York Central. This rate war was so sharp that, at one time, the passenger fare from New York to Chicago dropped to only \$8.00. By 1885 the New York, West Shore & Buffalo was bankrupt. A secret deal was worked out aboard J. P. Morgan's yacht, the *Corsair*, whereby William Vanderbilt would stop construction of the South Pennsylvania Railroad and acquire the West Shore line for a nominal amount. The South Pennsylvania Railroad was another nuisance line financed by the Vanderbilts, parallel to the main line of the Pennsylvania Railroad, from Harrisburg to Pittsburgh. Its old alignment is now used by the Pennsylvania Turnpike. In this deal only the other stockholders in the two nuisance roads -- the South Pennsylvania and the West Shore -- really lost anything, and it was rumored that J. P. Morgan earned a commission of \$3,000,000 for arranging the compromise. The New York Central took over a 475 year lease on the New York, West Shore & Buffalo, with an option to renew for a like period. A new corporation, the West Shore Railroad Company, was created to operate the line under New York Central control, and to complete further terminal improvements, including construction of a large grain elevator at Weehawken.

"The West Shore operated DeLuxe through passenger service to Chicago until the First World War. Its top train was the Continental Limited, which operated between Buffalo and Chicago over the tracks of the Grand Trunk Railroad. The Grand Trunk was affiliated with the Grand Trunk Western, which ultimately built to Prince Rupert, British Columbia, on the Pacific Coast. Ultimately a through Continental Limited route was extended to Prince Rupert and Vancouver. The Grand Trunk and the Grand Trunk Western later became part of the Canadian National System, and the name Continental Limited survives in today's Super Continental, which is now operated between Montreal and Vancouver by VIA, Canada's counterpart to Amtrak. The West Shore advertised itself as "The Niagara Falls Route," and its monogram showed a picture of the Horseshoe Falls.

"However, the West Shore's greatest importance in the early years was to provide service to the plush resorts of the Catskill Mountains and Saratoga. Other important trains were the *Saratoga & Mohawk Valley Express* and *Rip Van Winkle Flyer*, which was operated in conjunction with the Ulster & Delaware Railroad. They offered through parlor car and drawing room service from points as distant as Washington and Philadelphia by connections over the Pennsylvania Railroad. Cars to Saratoga and Lake Champlain continued from Albany over the Delaware & Hudson. The *Mountaineer* and the *Ontario Express* of the New York, Ontario & Western also operated over the West Shore as far as Cornwall. Through passenger service between Weehawken and Albany was continued until 1958. After that date only commuter service was operated as far north as West Haverstraw.

"After a very nasty and prolonged legal battle the New York Central was allowed to discontinue this once extensive service on December 10, 1959, on which date the author was the last passenger ever to board a regularly scheduled West Shore passenger train. The New York Ontario & Western had been totally abandoned on March 29, 1957.

"Under Perlman management, the West Shore was cut down from four to two tracks between Weehawken and Dumont, New Jersey; and from two tracks to one, between Dumont and Rotterdam Junction (ed. note near Schenectady, New York). Most of the line from there to Buffalo was completely abandoned, only short sections being retained as industrial spurs. Under Penn-Central austerity the line deteriorated greatly under very heavy use, and from lack of the barest maintenance, until it reached the point where there were many derailments and slow orders were imposed over long stretches. As this was the Penn-Central's main freight line, this deterioration of service hurt Penn-Central by driving away traffic. On April 1, 1976, Conrail took over the West Shore, and immediately began reconstruction of the line and installing welded rail. However, it was a 'cheap and dirty' job without proper attention to rebuilding the track substructure, and under even heavier tonnage use, the track and the expensive new rails, are in worse shape than ever the the derailment-delay syndrome is back in effect, again driving away business.

"There have been various plans and proposals for restoration of commuter passenger service to New Jersey and Rockland County points under state auspices. Until Conrail improves the track, this does not seem feasible, although recent population growth and the present gasoline situation make this inevitable eventually. Any such service would operate to Hoboken Terminal, which has just undergone major renovation."

from Ron Chernow:

Although the business life of Pierpont Morgan was bound up with the railroads, Pierpont felt more keenly the allure of the sea. At a time when private railroad cars were common showpieces among tycoons, Pierpont never owned one and took private cars, as needed, from the railroads he directed. By midlife, the sea was his best remedy for depression, the place where he escaped from the perpetual strain of the office and was liberated from care. When a yacht-owning fad swept fashionable New York in the 1880s, he needed little inducement to participate. In 1882, he bought the first of a series of enormous yachts, named Corsair, and joined the New York Yacht Club. This black-hulled steam yacht -- 165 feet long and the second largest in the club's fleet -- marked a new Morgan magnificence.

Purchase of the Corsair coincided with a new phase in Pierpont's career, in which he became an arbiter as well as a financier of railroads. The boat was useful as a meeting place to settle disputes, a secret clubhouse beyond spying eyes. Pierpont had an actor's talent for creating dramatic backdrops for his exploits, and the Corsair allowed his business life to take on an aura of operatic flamboyance. This was never truer than in the 1885 dispute between the Pennsylvania Railroad and the New York Central over a railroad called the West Shore.

Pierpont's involvement had a personal dimension. One day in 1881, he saw a peddler leading a pair of donkeys up Broad Street; delighted by their resemblance to small donkeys he had seen in Egypt, he sent a clerk out to buy them. Christened Beelzebub and Apollyon, they were favorites of the Morgan children at Cragston. The following year, his children felt menaced by Irish ruffians building a new railroad below his house on the Hudson's west bank, and Pierpont forbade them to ride unaccompanied by an adult. At the same time, blasts of explosives from the construction of this new West Shore road rattled Cragston's windows, invading the tranquil Morgan hideaway.

The West Shore was that railroad bane of the period -- the blackmail line. Extortion artists would lay down parallel lines just to be bought out by an established road. Since railroads were natural monopolies and couldn't survive much direct competition they could be easily threatened by small competitors. The West Shore ran up the west side of the Hudson parallel to the New York Central on the opposite bank, then tracked the Central to Buffalo. It was widely believed the powerful Pennsylvania Railroad stood behind the West Shore. So in retaliation the New York Central broke ground on a South Pennsylvania road to compete with the Pennsylvania from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh.

A fierce rate war between the West Shore and the New York Central hammered down stock and bond prices for both companies, confirming Pierpont's growing hatred of competition. It came at a precarious time for railroad bankers. During a stock market plunge in 1883, there was a near-panic in American rail stocks in London, producing a rising clamor for a financial czar who could arbitrarily settle such disputes. Cyrus Field cabled Junius, "Many of our business men seem to have lost their heads. What we want is some cool-headed strong man to lead." As fiscal agent for the road, Junius watched with alarm as New York Central stock fell below par for the first time; its dividend was halved. In early 1885, Pierpont went to London to consult with Junius and fumed over the "absurd struggle for preeminence" plunging America's railroads into internecine

warfare. By the spring of 1885, the West Shore had gone into the hands of a receiver, while the hard-pressed New York Central deferred critical maintenance.

It seems anomalous that America's most famous financier was a sworn foe of free markets. Yet it followed logically from the anarchy of late nineteenth-century railroads with their rate wars, blackmail lines, and lack of standardized gauges. To destroy competing lines, railroads could simply refuse to transfer freight to roads that abutted theirs. From an engineering standpoint, Pierpont knew little about railroads. What he did know was that they required steady revenues to cover their fixed interest costs on bonds marketed in New York and London. In the mid-1880s, freight rates were declining sharply under the pressure of savage price-cutting. Pierpont decided that "the principal thing was to secure a harmony between the Pennsylvania and New York Central. "

On the sultry morning of July 20, 188, with an impresario's flair, Pierpont staged reconciliation between America's two largest railroads. After picking up the New York Central's president, Chauncey Depew, he crossed to a New Jersey pier and took aboard George H. Roberts, president, and Frank Thomson, vice-president, of the Pennsylvania Railroad. Pierpont always denied his yacht was chosen for the sake of secrecy. "I do not know that that was a part of the consideration", he testified. "It might have been."

Before bringing both parties on board, he worked out the broad outlines of a truce. While the Corsair sailed up and down the Hudson, he sat under the rear awning, flanked by the railroad chiefs and smoking his nightmarishly huge black cigar. He stressed the displeasure of European investors with American railroads, but mostly let the railway men debate among themselves. In general, he used two negotiating ploys. He would create a "no-exit" situation and add to it threats that his rival faced a deadline -- a way of building tension and softening up the parties. Also, by saying little, he underscored his position as honest broker, and permitted the antagonists to vent their anger. Pierpont was, by nature, a laconic man. He had no gift for sustained analysis; his genius was in the brief, sudden brainstorm. As one lawyer said of him, "Morgan had one chief mental asset -- a tremendous five minutes' concentration thought." By the time the railroad presidents were deposited on their respective shores at seven o'clock that evening, they had agreed to buy out each other's lines and desist from their mutually destructive warfare. Years later, the tunnels and embankments from the abandoned South Pennsylvania line would be incorporated into the Pennsylvania Turnpike. And as the New York Central's business expanded, it enlisted the West Shore tracks for a second line along the Hudson River.

The newspapers lionized the author of this Great Railroad Treaty of 1885, also known as the Corsair Compact."

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