

Railroads

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Dutchess and Ulster counties shared in the railroad building boom of the nineteenth century. Railroad buffs can describe in detail the construction of lines during the later half of the century. However, the Marist College land history is most interested in the Poughkeepsie & Eastern RR, rights of way which still course through or adjacent to College land and the Hudson River Railroad Company, which arrived at the Dutchess area along the shoreline of the Hudson 1848-1850.

The Harlem Line

The first north/south line to run through Dutchess county was the **Harlem** line along the Connecticut border, running parallel to state road 22. Completed around 1840, it was the first line to connect New York City to the Albany area. Its northern terminus was Chatham, a town which still has tracks for train storage. Besides passenger traffic, the line became known for its milk run each day. When I was a youngster (1930s) we bought our milk from Sheffield Farms. This was a milk producer located in the south Bronx below Fordham Road near the tracks of the Harlem Line. Sheffield Farm was along the Harlem line. Early morning each day a train would make stops along the line to pick up milk from the local farmers and bring it to New York City for processing.

The Harlem line also carried other passengers and freight. It connected at Chatham with an east/west railroad which brought it to the Albany/Troy area.

The Hudson River Line

The Poughkeepsie Improvement Committee, of whom Matthew Vassar was an important member worried that Poughkeepsie would lose its importance as a trading center if business shifted to the Harlem line. They successfully campaigned to have the railroad run along the Hudson River. The railroad reached Poughkeepsie in the mid 1840s, and by 1849 the railroad purchased land from the owners of the properties now owned by Marist College. These deeds are stored with the other deeds relating to the property parcels.

The map filed with the county and available in the Dutchess County records office, constitutes a benchmark of who owned the lots in 1848 as well as the length of the lots north-to-south.

The West Shore Line

The West Shore line was a late development dating to 1880. It was started by the Pennsylvania Railroad to compete against Cornelius Vanderbilt who had led the construction of the Hudson River line. It ran to Albany, then westward (often within sight of the Vanderbilt line) to Buffalo. To challenge the Pennsylvania, Vanderbilt began construction of a railroad from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh. Eventually J P Morgan stepped into the picture and engineered a truce. The West Shore was purchased by Vanderbilt and the Philadelphia to Pittsburgh line was abandoned. (It later became the route of the Pennsylvania Turnpike!). West Shore line carried passengers and freight for many years, but discontinued its passenger traffic about 1960. It has grown important to carry goods from the midwest to the shipping areas in New Jersey. By 2010 it carried 24 long freights per diem to Hoboken and Newark.

Poughkeepsie & Eastern Railroad

A primary mover behind the Poughkeepsie & Eastern Railroad was [John Flack Winslow](#), who moved to Poughkeepsie from Troy New York in 1867. Winslow is remembered mainly as the man who managed the building of the Monitor during the Civil War. He and Erastus Cornell owned the largest foundry on the Hudson River in Troy.

When Winslow was active in the Troy foundry operation, he obtained much of his iron ore from the Millerton / Dover Plains area in northeast Dutchess County. At that time the foundries operated by Edwin Bech obtained most of their ore from the Beekman / East Fishkill area. The ore was transported to Poughkeepsie by oxcart along plank roads that made transportation possible in rainy times.

Winslow developed the plan to organize a railroad from Millerton to Poughkeepsie. At this time most railroad development was private, so the money had to be raised from private individuals, but government approval to secure the right of way, using eminent domain if need be.

The bulk of this undertaking was achieved in the 1868 to 1871 period. [Land purchases](#) take up lots of space in the county records. They show the path of the railroad to be westward from Millerton and Boston Corners (in Columbia County) then moving southwest through Stanford and Pleasant Valley. The route ran behind the St. Peter's Catholic Cemetery along the road currently at the back of the cemetery with the Fallkill Creek just beyond. The path then moved into Smith Street where a large space still remains which stored trains and engines.

How could the P&E hook up with the Hudson River Railroad? Smith Street is about 100 feet above river level; a direct path down to the railroad was impossible. To create a gentle slope to the river, the path took a 180 degree turn north

moving into what would later become the Hudson River State Hospital. There the engineers created another 180 degree turn southward down a gentle slope to reach the Hudson River Railroad. This slope is an important element in the College east of 9 property; now devoid of tracks, it is still owned by the CSX. The county is negotiating with the CSX to acquire ownership and make it into a walking path. Marist College did secure permission to build a pedestrian bridge over the culvert. This pedestrian bridge looms large in future plans for an underpass for pedestrian crossing of route 9 leading to a field just north of the Kieran Gatehouse.

The P&E route passes under route 9 and runs along the edge of the Marist College property behind the McCann Baseball Field and the McCann Athletic Center, when it finally achieves the grade of the Hudson River Railroad tracks. The major foundry operated by Bech and Tower was immediately north of Hoffman Street, close to the intersection of the railroads.

The Poughkeepsie & Eastern Railroad failed during the panic of 1873 but was reorganized several times in the next decades. Meanwhile spurs were built to service the industries in the Fairview sector, notable of which Western Publishing Co and Shatz/Federal Bearings company.

The P&E was designed to meet the Connecticut & Western RR near Millerton. Several connecting railroads were built, one of which led to Rhinebeck where freight cars could be ferried across to Kingston and the West Shore RR.

The route of the P&E was overshadowed by the route from Danbury through Hopewell Junction which brought New England traffic to the Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge by 1891. But the P&E still carried passengers until 1937. A recent article by Anthony Musso in the Poughkeepsie Journey

relates the status of the Pleasant Valley station on the P&E, which stands on public school property. The Dutchess County Fairgrounds has asked that it be transported to the fairgrounds as part of its Dutchess History project.

Certain bits and pieces of the P&E were incorporated into the Danbury line by the Central New England railroad.

When I was a student at Marist in 1947-1950, we did not know the history of the P&E. We understood it to be a spur which carried coal to the Hudson River State Hospital which had central heating for all its buildings. We also know it delivered paper to Western Publishing.

But this is meant to concentrate on the P&E rather than all the railroad history for Dutchess County.

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