

The Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge

Arthur G Adams, the author, was President of the Lehigh, Erie & Walkill, one of the firms studying possible purchase of the Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge



"On January 8, 1850, the Erie Railroad completed a branch line from Greycourt on its main line near Goshen to Newburgh. The line was originally projected in 1845, at which time Newburgh merchants had subscribed \$100,000 towards the project. The idea was to establish a railroad carfloat ferry from Newburgh to Fishkill across the Hudson. There were to be rail connections eastward into New England, and the New York & Erie Railroad could thus tap the lucrative Southern New England market for traffic to the west. The Boston, Hartford & Erie Railroad had completed a line between Boston and Hartford in 1867, and sought Erie financial backing for its completion to Fishkill. Ultimately the western extension came into being as the Newburgh, Dutchess & Connecticut, which was ultimately absorbed into the New York, New Haven & Hartford as its Fishkill Branch. This railroad car ferry operated between 1872 and 1901 using the sidewheel ferryboats Fannie Garner and William T. Hart. Completion of the great Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge in 1888 rendered this ferry concept superfluous.

"In 1871 a charter was granted to build a railroad bridge across the Hudson River at Poughkeepsie. This began a seventeen year struggle to complete the structure. From the outset political and economic difficulties hampered progress. In spite of a great controversy about bridge piers being built in the river, an amendment to the charter was granted permitting construction of four piers.

"In 1873 the Pennsylvania Railroad, through its representatives J. Edgar Thompson and A. D. Dennis, bought \$1,000,000 worth of stock in the company, which was about half the projected cost at that time. Control passed into their hands, and the immediate building of the bridge seemed assured. However, because of the 1873 financial panic and the death of Thompson, the scheme collapsed and the project remained inactive until 1876 when a contract was entered into with the American Bridge Company of Chicago, and work on two of the piers began. Because of construction and financial difficulties, work was suspended in 1878. The charter was kept alive by time extensions, and in 1886 the Manhattan Bridge

Building Company was organized to finance construction, with the Union Bridge Company under subcontract to build the structure.

"Dawson, Symmes & Usher for the concrete, masonry and timber work; the Atlantic Dredging Company; the United Lumber Company for the false work; and John F. O'Rourke, P. P. Dickinson, Arthur P. Paine and John Flack Winslow were the structural engineers. Winslow, who was also the President of the Poughkeepsie & Eastern Railway, was a specialist in steel construction. He had been active in manufacturing steel and introduced Bessemer Process steel to the United States, which he supplied for the famous Civil War battleship Monitor built in 1862. The new Bessemer Steel was used extensively in construction of the bridge.

"Operations resumed in September, 1886 but, once again, opposition to the four river piers was organized by boatmen. Finally their lobbying efforts were defeated and work was resumed. In addition to overcoming these political and economic obstacles, the engineers had to devise solutions to such physical obstacles as a deep, wide tidal river, great depth to bearing rock, height of the palisades, and the great length (6,767 feet) of the structure. The bridge's length was a record for a steel structure as was its 546 foot channel span. The track is 212 feet above the water and the length of structure over water is 2,260 feet, the rest being over part of the City of Poughkeepsie and the western palisades. Construction was finished on August 29, 1888, and approaches were completed later that year. The first train crossed December 29, 1888. Final cost of the bridge was about \$10,000,000.

"For several years after its opening the Poughkeepsie Bridge was operated under the control of the Philadelphia, Reading & New England Railroad, a subsidiary of the Philadelphia & Reading Railway. By 1906 the entire network of lines on the east side of the Hudson had passed to the control of the New York, New Haven & Hartford, except for the Poughkeepsie & New England, which ran east to Boston Corners near the Connecticut and Massachusetts state lines. The New Haven controlled these various lines through its subsidiary, the Central New England Railroad. Its main line ran from Hartford, Connecticut to Campbell Hall, New York. Here it had strategic connections with the Erie Railroad, the New York, Ontario & Western, the Lehigh & Hudson River, and the Lehigh & New England railroads. Under later direct New York, New Haven & Hartford control the terminals were changed to Devon, Connecticut and Maybrook, New York. This route served as a high-speed freight bypass around the carfloats used on the lower Hudson and across New York Bay. At one time the New Haven seriously considered acquisition of the New York, Ontario & Western as a western extension which would turn it into a trunk line carrier. It is interesting to speculate what would have been the ultimate fate of the New Haven if it had pursued this course instead of continuing to divide the traffic at Maybrook among four different connecting lines and ultimately being absorbed by Penn-Central and Conrail.

"The Poughkeepsie Bridge Route served briefly as a through passenger route for a Boston to Washington train known as the Federal Express, and the route was frequently called the Federal Express Route. At that time most through Boston to Washington passenger trains were put upon a car-float in the Bronx and floated around Manhattan Island to Jersey City. Completion of the Hell Gate Bridge across the East River, and of tunnels under the East River and Hudson River, along with the construction of Pennsylvania Station in Manhattan, obviated the need for this inconvenience, and the Poughkeepsie Bridge lost its value as a passenger train bypass. However, it remained a very important freight line. A famous scheduled fast freight called the Central States Dispatch operated through between Cumberland, Maryland and Providence, Rhode Island by the Poughkeepsie Bridge, over the lines of the Western Maryland, Reading, Central Railroad of New Jersey, Lehigh & Hudson River, and New Haven railroads. The Poughkeepsie Bridge was also utilized by an Interurban electric railway operating between Poughkeepsie and New Paltz, entering the streets of both terminal cities over the local trolley tracks. After the amalgamation of the New York Central, Pennsylvania, and the New Haven into the Penn-Central, the Poughkeepsie Bridge Route fell into disfavor. It tended to divert traffic from Southern New England to the competing Lehigh & Hudson River and Erie-Lackawanna railroads, instead of keeping it on Penn-Central tracks for the entire journey south or west. Consequently, after a minor fire damaged the eastern approach trestle on May 8, 1974 no efforts were made to repair the bridge. All traffic was rerouted over other lines and crossed the Hudson on the Penn-Central. Castleton Bridge below Albany. The Lehigh & Hudson River and the Erie-Lackawanna entered legal complaints about loss of valuable interchange traffic and this loss helped drive both of them into bankruptcy shortly thereafter. When Penn-Central went bankrupt, all the various lines

were lumped together into the new unified Consolidated Rail Corporation, better known as Conrail. As a monopolistic carrier Conrail has shown no interest in reopening the Poughkeepsie Bridge Route and prefers to pass on the additional cost of operating via the Castleton Detour to New England shippers and receivers in the form of large surcharges. In 1982 it remains out of service. Shippers in New England and mine owners in Pennsylvania have exerted political pressure to get it reopened and Congress passed legislation in 1978 mandating its repair, modernization, and reopening and authorizing \$9,000,000 to do so. Conrail countered with new wildly inflated repair estimates and false references to "iron construction" and "rotting wooden pilings," when in fact engineering studies confirm the basically good condition of its Bessemer Steel structure and all-masonry piers. Agitation to reopen the bridge continues and Conrail seems more stubbornly set against it than ever before. Possibly this is because they fear such a reopened bridge will fall into the hands of a competitor and break their monopolistic strangle-hold. Several plans for competing independent railroads to take it over from Conrail under a Federally administered "controlled transfer" process have been proposed and are under study. Among those interested were Timothy Mellon's Guilford Transportation Company; the Lehigh, Erie & Wallkill Transportation Company; and Niel St. John Raymond, the Boston financier. Presently the bridge is proposed for formal abandonment under ICC Docket AB-167, Sub. 168 N filed on November 13, 1981, and will take effect 90 days from then. It carried on Conrail's books at a negative value of \$5,000,000 and can be purchased for only \$35,000, the value of the easily removable running rails. Otherwise the bridge would cost more to remove than its value as scrap. Several consulting engineering firms estimate that it can be put effectively back in service for under \$3,000,000. The reason nobody has made a bid for the bridge is that Conrail is refusing to sell other track on either side needed to reach the bridge. Buyers cannot be assured of being able to reach it and are therefore hanging back. Meanwhile, if no buyers appear after a second 90 day period, they would be free to begin dismantling. The whole matter has become a political cause célèbre and the results seem problematical at this writing. The bridge was ultimately sold for \$1.00 to Mr. Gordon S. Miller, agent for Railway Management Associates of St. Davids, PA. They have since done nothing with the bridge, which is becoming dilapidated.

"... Destruction of this vital defense link would be seriously harmful to the economy of the region and would further stifle regional economic revitalization which would be a real crime"

editor's note. Although the reference by Adams is dated 1996, it is the third edition of a book first published in 1983, and the description obviously has not been altered substantially since 1983.

Reference:

Arthur G. Adams, *The Hudson Through the Years*, Third Edition, New York, Fordham University Press, 1996, 340 pp, pp.221 - 225

most recent revision: September 26, 2001

return to [top of page](#) [documents list](#) [home page](#)