

RAILING ON THE RIVER

On January 15, 1831, the first train of passengers ever drawn by locomotive power in the United States left Charleston, S.C. On board were a newly married young couple, Mr. and Mrs. Henry L. Pierson of Ramapo, NY, who were on their honeymoon. When they heard of an exciting adventure — a steam locomotive that would pull two cars, resembling stagecoaches — they signed on for the twelve mile round trip. The bride was especially thrilled by the experience and when they returned home to Ramapo, she gave glowing accounts to her new brother-in-law Eleazar Lord and father-in-law Jeremiah H. Pierson.

Neither man needed much convincing. Pierson was an industrialist who owned several thousand acres of land around Ramapo, conducted iron-works, a cotton-mill and a nail factory while Lord was one of the leading merchants, financiers and lobbyists of New York City. Both were aware that for several years Governor De Witt Clinton had been touting development of a highway or canal or some other method that would serve to develop southern New York State. Proponents of the Erie Canal were irate but public opinion was enthusiastic and Eleazar Lord in 1832 Lord convinced the state legislature to charter the New York & Erie railroad. He was elected the company's first president and the ambitious project was launched. Building some 500 miles of rail track through a wilderness would be a stupendous venture, and it took twenty years of toil and discouragement, but President Lord prevailed and in the prolonged negotiations, it was agreed that the eastern end of the line would begin in a marsh on the banks of the Hudson, 24 miles north of New York City.

Eleazar Lord was a seventh generation descendant of an Englishman who came to America in 1635. Born in 1788 Eleazar was the twelfth of fifteen children, studied at seminaries in Andover and Princeton and became a licensed minister in 1812. (During the building and running of the New York and Erie Railroad, he insisted on the observance of "Christian principles" and there was no construction or rail traffic allowed on the Sabbath. Lord married Jeremiah Pierson's daughter Elizabeth in 1824, but after bearing nine children, she died of consumption — and, I suspect, exhaustion. In 1835 Eleazar remarried and soon afterward the newlyweds moved to the tiny fishing village on the Hudson, then known as Taulman or Tappan Landing.

They built a large brick home atop Mt. Nero that they called it "The Cedars/ The locals referred to it as "Lord's Castle" and from that lofty perch, Eleazar looked down on nearly 100 acres of landfill and crushed rock from the Palisades that expanded the shoreline. In 1839 a 50 foot wide, 4,000 foot long pier was completed that extended rail tracks to

deep waters nearly half way across the Hudson River. The population swelled, eventually to about 2000 and Eleazar Lord had the village renamed Piermont in recognition both of the impressive human construction and the town's most prominent natural feature. Crammed into the village's river side space were two round houses that could accommodate 30 locomotives, depots and terminal buildings, a hotel, livery stables, dry goods stores and numerous taverns. Conditions during construction were chaotic with incessant din from clanging anvils, steamboat and locomotive whistles while smoke from engines and furnaces filled the air.

On June 30, 1841 a train pulled by a wood-burning locomotive carried notables nineteen miles in three hours to Ramapo where a gala celebration was held. Three months later (September 23) when completion of the eastern division extended 46 miles to Goshen, the guests included Governor William Seward, numerous politicians and the famous author Washington Irving, who lived directly across the Hudson. There was music, flag waving and gun salutes but six months later the New York & Erie was bankrupt, unpaid contractors were restless and Irish and German workers brawled among themselves in drunken fist fights.

Despite financial difficulties, over the next decade the railroad grew by fits and starts until it reached Dunkirk, it's western terminus on Lake Erie 460 miles distant. It was the country's longest and busiest railroad (there were only four previous railroads in the country, the longest covering only 16.5 miles.) Perishable fruits and vegetables, butter and milk were major parts of the cargo out of Piermont. Most of New York City's milk previously was supplied from sickly cows in the city's swill stables at six cents a quart, but by 1845-46 more than six million quarts of milk a year and 400,000 baskets of berries was being transported downstream from Piermont to the city.

When the New York & Erie railroad's last spike was driven in mid-April 1851, preparations were made for running the first train all the way to Dunkirk. On May 1, 1851 the entire issue of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* was dedicated to furnishing a traveler on the railroad with "that kind of information which everyone passing over a new route desires to have in his possession." As the publisher explained:

In securing this, we not only add to the pleasures of rail-road traveling, but relieve it of the tediousness which so often is the companion of a long ride. The work, it is hoped, will find favor not only with travelers, but with those who take an interest in the progress of internal improvements, of which our road is one of the most

important, being the longest railroad owned by one company and under one management in the world.

The following excerpts from *Harper's Railroad Guide* describe what a traveler might observe upon boarding one of the company's three steam ships at its pier at the foot of Duane Street in Lower Manhattan:

This wharf is covered with a substantial wooden tenement, 300 feet in length, for the protection of the freight interested to the company; and owing to the constant increase of business growing with the extension of the road, this vast shed always contains piles of the productions brought down from its various sections. Milk-cans, strawberry-baskets, butter-tubs and immense deer lie in heaps, the representatives of their different regions; and, in exchange for these, there are the luxuries destined for the inland towns and sequestered hamlets, which the rail-road now dispenses so rapidly. Three fine steamers for the transmission of passengers to the eastern terminus of the road at Piermont are provided, one of which is designed for winter use, when the river is frozen.

Besides these, the company runs a milk-boat, employed in bringing down to New York the lacteal supplies from the region to which the Erie Rail-way is now the only outlet. This staple is brought to New York at midnight, and at day-break those myriad cans "pair off," and are seen flanking the young Johns that fly through the streets of Gotham in light wagons, calling out, with their unearthly shrieks, [to] red-elbowed housemaids to receive their daily allowance from those huge urns.....

We have heard much of the absurdity of the Erie Rail-road terminating so far up the Hudson, and not at Jersey City or Hoboken; but, whatever be the inconvenience, delay, or unpleasantness of the sail to Piermont during winter, commend us to the same voyage on a bright summer morning, when we are refreshed by the cool puffs the river air, amused with the ever-animated scenes on its surface, and then descend with a will and an appetite to comfortable breakfast. A cigar and the morning papers have succeeded that hearty meal, we promenade the deck, and stare for the thousandth time at the basaltic wonder of the Palisades....and just as we begin to weary of the sail, lo! before us the broad basin of the Tappan Zee, on the west side of which runs, far out into the blue tide, the bright yellow line of the Pier that gives the

name to the point where we take the rail for the West. The distance to this point from New York is 24 miles.

The view of Piermont and its pier from the river is very beautiful....With its freight-houses, trains, and crowds of passengers and workmen, the village makes a pretty show, while the steep heights above are dotted with pretty cottages, amid gardens and cedar-groves. To the left the hill-sides slope suddenly into a glen, up which lies the course of the New York and Erie Railroad. The left side of this valley presents beautiful wooded hill, descending to the wide, yellow, marshy flats extending far out into the river south of the pier. Nature seems to have selected this point for an ingress through the steep sides of the Hudson to the country beyond, for the long pillared wall of the Palisades here suddenly sinks into a ravine of gentle slope, to swell again abruptly into a mountainous range, that assumes a grander form in the bold Nyack hills to the north of Piermont.

The pier we have now gained affords a sample of the vast extent and costliness of the New York and Erie Railroad. Extending one mile in length, it presents a general width of 50 feet, expanding at its river extremity, into a fine front 300 feet wide, within there is a spacious basin or dock, affording safe accommodation for the company's boats. A large wooden depot for cars, stores and freight stands at its extremity and under its projecting eaves the trains receive their passengers and goods.....The cost of the pier has been large, for not only is its causeway made ground, but also the wide area at its base, which has been filled in for the erection of the offices, workshops, and stations where we now stop.

Arrangements having been made by the company by which passengers to and from the West take the shorter route through New Jersey, this vast depot ground with its buildings, will be devoted almost exclusively to the accommodation of the immense freighting business of the road.....

We will now quit the dingy precincts of Vulcan, and take a look at PIERMONT. The embankment on which the station stands divides the prettily-situated village into two parts. That to the north of us is the main business street, facing the workshops and showing along its entire length neat stores, dwellings, a church, and a large hotel that gives it an air of dignity and importance. Above rise the steep mountains, up which, as we have said, are

scattered beautiful cottages, with now and then an elegant mansion among trees. Many of these up-town dwellings are occupied during summer by city folks, that find Piermont a pleasant and convenient resort. South of the station, the village is built along the Sparkill, a small creek issuing from the valley we are soon to enter.

The dwellings further up the stream are very neat and tasty, having small gardens around them. Beyond these, scattered over the yellow, marshy "flats," are numerous Irish shanties, the fast-disappearing types of what Piermont altogether was a few years ago, when it figured in the Gazetteer as a "fishing village, with considerable trade, supporting three sloops!"....Indeed, such squalid hovels, only two years since, offended the eye in the midst of the new and fashionable part of the village. Now look at the wonderful change wrought in this "fishing village" by the beneficent power of steam."

The visitor will find it well worth his while to ascend the heights above the village and enjoy the prospects they afford....Hark! the shriek of the steam whistle and its white breath brings us to the foreground and we look down upon long, snakes trains of freight cars gliding amid a labyrinth of iron tracks and preceded by a puffing locomotive, that often requires the application of "a switch" to keep it in the proper track...Northward we have a superb view of the Nyack hills, and a fine curve of the river between them and Piermont, making it resemble the Bay of Naples.

Two weeks after the *Harper's Railroad Guide* appeared, President Millard Fillmore and four members of his Cabinet, including Secretary of State Daniel Webster attended the railroad's grand inaugural. On May 14, 1851 they were accompanied by some 300 guests and after a tumultuous send-off in New York City, they steamed up river and arrived in Piermont at 7:45 A.M. A huge welcoming crowd had gathered at daybreak and the presidential party boarded two lavishly decorated trains. In order to better enjoy the view, Webster insisted on sitting outdoors for much of the trip. The trains made frequent stops and Fillmore, Webster and other dignitaries made speeches to cheering throngs.

When they reached Dunkirk, President Fillmore declared that the Erie railroad was, "the most costly and greatest work of its kind on this continent." A lavish meal was laid out on a 300 foot long table and the partying and speechifying continued until midnight. A second edition of *Harpers* travel guide enthused, "It crosses mountains deemed impossible; it goes over valleys which timid men said it would cost millions to fill in; it

leaps valleys where bold engineers paused, shook their heads and turned back.” Historian E.H. Mott hailed the railroad as “the most stupendous undertaking in engineering and construction, up to that time, that had ever been attempted in this or any other country.” It was “the work of the age.”

But in 1852 the Legislature removed restrictions on interstate transportation and the importance of Piermont as the railroad’s eastern terminal was immediately affected. By the following November passenger trains started using Jersey City instead of Piermont. Freight trains continued to move through the old terminal until December of 1861 when almost all freight and passenger business was discontinued. The railroad works and roundhouse remained in operation until 1869 when they were shifted to Jersey City. As the nation’s population grew and moved west, increased demand drove land prices up, but natural and economic crises during the 1850s imperiled Eleazar Lord’s fortunes. Expecting a land boom, he had attempted to get loans to buy land on the heights at \$25 to \$40 per acre but as he lamented in a letter, “Multitudes in the city prostrated...ruin of men in the trade frightful...”

An international economic crisis that began in 1857 exacerbated the railroad’s financial troubles and a reduction of workers’ wages was put into effect: 250 freight-handlers had their pay reduced from a dollar to 90 cents for an eleven-hour day. When men learned that President Lord would not take a reduction in his annual \$250,000 earnings, they went on strike and everything ground to a halt. In four days 200 carloads of produce backed up and in order to protect the property and disperse the workers the sheriff of Rockland County called out the Piermont Guard with fixed bayonets. When 100 immigrants escorted by 25 policeman arrived by boat from New York City to replace the strikers, they were driven off and some were thrown into the river before the strikers were subdued and relative calm was restored.

There was a brief spasm of euphoria in May, 1870 when the Nyack & Northern railroad opened a spur from Sparkill to Piermont and continued for four miles north to Nyack. This permitted a 28 mile route to Jersey City that would reduce the time from Suffern to New York by an hour (The current RR station was built in 1873.) To celebrate the event every house along the route flew flags, cannons boomed and a champagne luncheon, said “to have done credit to Delmonico,” was held at the St. Nicholas Hotel on Nyack’s Main Street. The featured speaker was 34 year old “Jim Fisk Jr., known variously as “Big Jim,” “Diamond Jim,” “The Prince of Erie” or “Jubilee Jim.” Along with his Robber Baron partners Jay Gould and Daniel Drew, and with the help of Tammany’s “Boss”

William Tweed, Fisk very recently had obtained control of the Erie Railroad after outmaneuvering the equally corrupt Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt.

Jim Fisk was a man of the people — and a crook. Eight months before his appearance in Nyack, Fisk and Gould had unsuccessfully tried to corner the gold market which led to a financial panic known as “Black Friday” - the *original* Black Friday. Fisk modestly began his speech in Nyack by asking, “What do you think the shades of Webster and Clay would say if they could hear me make a speech?....Judging from what the papers say Gould and Fisk never do anything good but this is a good thing and I think I will telegraph Gould that we had better devote our time to opening railroads....[He concluded] Tonight I shall go to bed and dream that I see the road not only to Nyack but with sleeping cars all the way to Albany.” In order to grease the tracks in their war with Commodore Vanderbilt, Fisk and Gould had appointed Boss Tweed to the Erie Railroad’s Board of Directors in 1868 as a reward for his using his influence with corrupt New York judges to assure that the Erie received special privileges. Recognizing a real estate opportunity, the astute Boss Tweed bought land, both along the river bank and high on the Palisades. He planned to build a luxury hotel on the summit of Nyack’s Hook Mountain that could be reached by elevator from a private dock below. He also envisioned a 60 foot wide highway from Piermont to Rockland Lake. It eventually was given the imposing name Tweed Boulevard, but today it is an obscure sometime single lane road that has spectacular views, but hardly is the grand concourse that Boss Tweed had contemplated. Jay Gould went on to open the Union Pacific and other railroads, but without his flamboyant partner Jim Fisk. Boss Tweed and his associates were ousted in the elections of 1872 and brought to justice. Tweed was found guilty of fifty-one of fifty-five offenses and after a series of appeals, jail breaks and re-arrests, he died in jail in 1878. Big Jim Fisk’s fate was more sensational and sudden: a jealous rival for the favors of his mistress shot him down in cold blood.

Although no longer the eastern terminus of the Erie railroad, by 1877 Piermont was being served by fifteen trains from and thirteen to New York on weekdays, four each way on Sundays. The round trip fare was \$1.00. The Northern & Nyack extension continued to carry passengers to and from New York City for almost a century until 1966. Although the plans of the Erie railroad’s original developers failed to materialize, shortly after the end of World War II, with availability of cheap gas facilitating automobile transportation, Rockland County became accessible in ways that the Robber Barons never could have contemplated and the opening of the Tappan Zee Bridge and the New York Thruway in 1955 and the Palisades Interstate Parkway three years later led to profound economic and cultural change.

