

BEGINNING OF THE AUBURN & SYRACUSE RAILROAD

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The Auburn & Syracuse Railroad was one of links in the "chain" of lines across the state that eventually became the New York Central. Construction of the Auburn & Syracuse Railroad in the mid-1830s forms an interesting chapter in the early development of internal improvements in central New York. From the beginning, it was an Auburn project. The idea of connecting this thriving community with the Erie Canal had been a popular topic of discussion as long ago as 1828. The original plan was to build a railroad from Auburn to either Port Byron or Weedsport. Various schemes, including the incorporation of several railroad and even canal companies never materialized, and it wasn't until 1832 that the matter of building a railroad from Auburn to Syracuse was put on the table.

Lobbying in Albany, with the support of state Senator William H. Seward, resulted in the incorporation of the Auburn & Syracuse Railroad on May 1, 1834, with a capital of \$400,000. Auburn historian Henry Hall wrote that the venture "began existence under inauspicious circumstances. The construction of the railroad from Auburn to Syracuse was, from the broken nature of the ground over which a large part of it must necessarily pass, and from the retired and unfavorable location of Auburn, regarded in many places an act of unspeakable folly. Hundreds prophesied the total failure of the enterprise, predicting that every dollar invested in the road would be a positive loss."

Prior to incorporation, a preliminary survey had been made by two surveyors at the request of an exploratory committee. They reported that pursuant to instructions "we commenced our survey and leveling at the prison running thence in a northeasterly course 13 1/4 miles to a point on the Nine Mile Creek feeder, two miles south of Camillus Village, being 250 feet below the village of Auburn." They reported "the route from thence to Syracuse is favorable, as by reference being had to former surveys and estimates by the Canal Commissioners and others. "The soil," they said, "for a distance of 13 1/4 miles, as above, is in our estimation favorable, being along the descent of a ridge through much of the route, where gravel and limestone may be had in abundance."

The company was organized on January 20, 1835. Stock subscriptions were quickly taken up. The engineering department was organized the following April, the Chief Engineer being Edwin F. Johnson. That summer, Johnson, assisted by Levi Williams, the resident engineer, prepared the necessary surveys and examinations preliminary to the location of the of the route. The line of the road was officially chosen on August 22, 1835 and on September 11, certificates of location were filed with the Cayuga and Onondaga county clerks.

With these preliminaries out of the way, Hugh Lee, another civil engineer, proceeded to prepare contract specifications. Soon a temporary depot was erected near the southeast corner of VanAnden and State streets in Auburn.

Work quickly got underway under the supervision of Colonel Levi Lewis, the first superintendent. On August 22, 1835, Johnson advertised for bids for grading, masonry, and bridges. Bids would be received until noon on October 15th. Plans for the different structures were available for examination at Johnson's office in Auburn. The bids were received and let and work commenced on May 1, 1836.

The contract specifications for the wooden rails initially used were extremely specific. They called for one million board feet of Norway pine for rail timbers to measure 5.5 by 6.5 inches, in lengths of 18, 21, 24 and 27 feet, or of the same dimensions in yellow pine. Also called for was one million board feet of bed timbers of white cedar and chestnut, 4 by 8 inches, not less than 18 feet in length. Also needed were 50,000 crossties of white cedar, chestnut, white oak or red beech, 5.5 by 6.5 inches, 8 feet in length, and framed and ready to receive the rail timbers.

Three fifths of the timber were to be delivered by November 10, 1836 and the remaining supply by June 1, 1837, and deposited along the embankment, or along the south bank of the Erie Canal between Syracuse and Weedsport. The portions first delivered were to have been cut before March 15, 1836, and the balance either within that time or between November 15, 1836 and March 1, 1837. The timbers were expected to be of high quality, free of knots and sap, except along one edge where it was not to exceed 1.5 inches in width.

The company very wisely chose to adopt standard gauge of that time which was 4 feet, 8 3/4 inches for the tracks since it was to be a link in the chain of railroads from Albany to Buffalo. The exact length of the line was 25.73 miles. The total descent from the depot in Auburn to that in Syracuse was 271 feet, making an average descent of 10.54 feet per mile. The maximum line inclination of the grade line was 30 feet per mile, which extended only 8,600 feet, or a mile and a half, extending westward from the west side of Nine Mile Creek Valley near what is today Martisco. The railroad was generally straight, 62 percent being on tangent.

To tap the resources of the mills then existing along the Owasco Outlet in Auburn, a spur was built from the main line through Garden Street, Franklin, and Seminary Streets to Genesee Street, where a freight station was to be built. To get through these streets required 400-foot radius curves. This line could only be maneuvered with horses and was abandoned in 1841 after a permanent station was built at the corner of Chapel and State Streets. Except for three miles, this was originally laid out as a double track railroad.

As mentioned, wood was used primarily due to the scarcity of conventional railroad iron. Mudsills measuring 6.5 inches by 5.5 inches or 8 by 4 inches were placed in trenches. On these, crossties were laid three feet apart. The ties were 8 feet long and 6 feet, 6 inches squared, hewed out in the middle and ends tapered down. Wooden stringers 5.5 inches by 6.5 inches square were fastened with wedges by securing them in the notches of the crossties. The mudsills and stringers were of yellow pine, crossties, white cedar, and wedges, red cedar. The wedges were three inches across, 12 inches long and 1 1/8 inches thick on one end and 1/8 of an inch thick on the other end. Opening of

the railroad was celebrated on Christmas Day, 1837 with an excursion from Auburn to Syracuse and return. The train consisted of several cars on which stagecoach bodies had been mounted, drawn by horses furnished by Col. John M. Sherwood, the famous stagecoach proprietor. Financial troubles precluded the use of strap iron rails for the moment, and wooden ribbons and horse-drawn cars - were used until the company became financially capable of purchasing conventional railroad equipment, could be procured.

Due to extreme advances in prices, inflation and the inability to secure capital, the board of directors, on June 5, 1837, authorized the treasure to issue \$100,000 in interest-bearing notes with six-month maturity in denominations not less than \$5 to help cover construction costs. Thomas Y. Howe, the treasurer, said this was done "preferring to proceed with the work rather than to abandon it after the expenditure of so much money. He said this was done at the request of the creditors and contractors to prevent from being financially ruined. How said the issuance of notes was the alternative to trying to force investors to live up to their commitments. In those days stock was purchased in the installment plan and since the country was during a depression, the investors were having their own financial problems. The notes were also used as collateral for borrowing money.

But even this was not enough, and the Auburn & Syracuse became one of five railroads to receive loans from the state of New York. The Auburn & Syracuse eventually secured \$200,000 from the state which it paid back in about three years at five percent interest.

The only engineering obstacle was bridging the Nine Mile Creek valley (a short distance west of Martisco). It was decided that a fill would be more practical than a bridge. This work which included arches for the creek and highway, were completed by November 1837, using fill excavated from adjoining property.

Soon the wooden tracks were laid and on Christmas Day, 1837, a special horse-drawn train, consisting of two 24-person capacity cars drawn by horses in tandem, left Auburn with a group of 50 people on the first trip, at 11:20 a.m. Some have said these cars were improvised from stagecoaches. However, stagecoaches of the day could only accommodate a maximum of 10 or 12 passengers, which debunks that theory.

Forty-nine minutes later and eight miles from Auburn, the horses were changed and proceeded another five miles to what is now Martisco, which was as far as tracks were in place. After returning a short distance, presumably at Halfway, the excursionists partook of refreshments, and arrived back in Auburn at 3 p.m. Exclusive of stops, the average speed was 10 miles per hour which must have been a fast trot for the horses.

The company decided it was in their best interests to contract out the use of the line upon liberal terms with Col. John M. Sherwood of Auburn until such time it could procure locomotives. Sherwood was to receive half of the revenue from freight and passenger service.

The first official trip to Geddes occurred on January 8, 1838. Five cars crowded with passengers left Auburn at 9:30 a.m. and were met at Halfway by another car which had been brought out from Geddes, which returned with them. The train arrived at the first temporary terminal near the Genesee Turnpike in Geddes at 12:30 p.m. where the passengers were taken in carriages and feted with dinner at the Syracuse House (on Clinton Square). After appropriate toasts and feasting, the train returned to Auburn at 8:45 p.m.

By its charter, the Auburn & Syracuse Railroad was authorized to carry both passengers and freight - a luxury denied to other railroads which closely paralleled the Erie Canal that were limited to just passengers. The Auburn & Syracuse Railroad was obligated to pay to the state the equivalent of the toll collected from freight on the canal. A later amendment to the charter changed this so that the toll would only be charged on freight during the canal navigation season. Eventually this was annulled.

By November 1837, both roadbed and superstructure (except for laying the rails) were far enough advanced for service to begin on the bare wooden track. Except for three miles in the vicinity of Camillus to what was later called Sweet's Crossing, the roadbed was laid out as a double track line. There was no major bridge work except at what is now Martisco, across the Nine Mile Creek valley, when a 700-foot earth embankment was created. Stone highway and stream underpasses were also constructed, but no wooden bridgework. During construction, the daily wage of a common laborer was between 75 cents and \$1. A man with a team of horses was paid between \$2 and \$2.50.

Between December 1837 and June 1839, trains were horse drawn. Two horses were harnessed one behind the other, pulling two coaches with a capacity of 24 persons each. Whether these were old stagecoaches as tradition states is questionable as stagecoaches accommodated no more than 10 people. And even that was overcrowded. The 26 miles was covered in 3 1/2 hours, with two changes of horses.

Because the number of passengers was not very great, the railroad contracted with Colonel John M. Sherwood of Auburn to operate the line until such time as steam locomotives were purchased. The fare was \$1; 45 cents of which went to the railroad company and Sherwood kept the rest. He was responsible for furnishing the horses and maintaining the coaches. No freight was carried until steam locomotives arrived in June 1839. Two daily round trips were made, although there are indications the railroad was not initially operated during the winter months. The following account indicates the original station must have been in what is now Solvay.

James S. Buckingham, an English traveler, wrote:

"Thursday, August 9th, 1838. - We left Syracuse in a coach that conveyed us to a railway, beginning at a distance of three or four miles from the town, to take us to Auburn. But great was our disappointment at finding that, instead of a locomotive engine, the cars were drawn by horses, of which there were only two to draw

about twenty passengers, the horses being placed one before the other, as tandems are driven, and not abreast.

"The rails, too, were of wood instead of iron, and the rate of traveling was estimated to be about six miles an hour. We had to wait half an hour before starting, and our progress was then so tedious that we thought of getting out to walk the distance, as the most expeditious mode of the two, when, to add to our mortification, we met a train of cars drawn by a single horse coming right against us, and, the rails being single and the places for turning off being wide apart, we had to shift our tandem paid from the front to the hind part of the train, and be drawn back about a mile and a half to get off the track, and let our advancing rival go past us. After a very tedious ride of four hours in performing 22 miles, we reached Auburn."

In the fall of 1838, the Auburn & Syracuse Railroad erected a depot on what became West Washington Street between Salina and Clinton street. But this only remained in place until the following spring when the Syracuse & Utica Railroad completed its depot between Salina and Warren streets. For the use of this depot the Auburn & Syracuse paid one third of both its construction and maintenance costs. This structure existed for 30 years.

Near the Erie Canal, the Auburn & Syracuse erected a warehouse for \$2,600 from which freight was transferred between trains and canal boats. A stone engine shed was erected in Auburn. Aside from that, there were no other permanent buildings erected initially. A few years later, the Auburn & Rochester Railroad erected a commodious brick station near Auburn Prison. This sort of operation continued until June 1839 when the railroad took delivery of three 10 1/2-ton steam locomotives of the 4-2-0 wheel arrangement from Rogers, Ketcham & Grosevenor of Paterson, New Jersey. They were appropriately named the "Syracuse" and "Auburn." They were the seventh, eighth and fourteenth locomotives produced by that builder. The single drive wheels of each locomotive measured four feet, eight inches and the cylinders were of 10 1/2 inches bore with an 18-inch stroke.

Gradually, the wooden ribbons, or battens, were removed as they would not support the weight of locomotives. They were replaced by strap rails 2 1/4 inches wide, 3/4-inch-thick and in sections 18 feet in length. They were fastened to the rail timbers with rectangular nails 4 1/2 inches long. So that they would lie closer to the center of the stringers, they were nailed three quarters of an inch from the inner edge of the latter. After they were attached the inside corner of the stringer was beveled off. The crossties, laid at three-foot intervals, were fastened to their supports by six-inch iron nails. The cost of this superstructure per mile was a little more than \$4,000.

The first inaugural trip with a steam locomotive occurred on June 4, 1839. Some 200 passengers rode this train. It left Auburn shortly before noon and arrived in Syracuse at 1:20 p.m. The running time was an hour and eight minutes, including 20 minutes in stoppages. The train was met by a brass

band, and other festivities included a VIP banquet at the Syracuse House. The special train left Syracuse at 4:20 p.m. and arrived back in Auburn shortly before 6 p.m.

The editor of the Auburn Gazette the following day lauded the railroad:

"The road is built of the best materials, and in the most substantial manner. It passes through a most beautiful country, and in the vicinity of Nine Mile Creek the scenery is most grand and picturesque. Our citizens and the public generally are indebted to those who have had the management of the construction of this road, for their indomitable energy and perseverance in pressing it forward to a completion this early."