

The Bridges at Hubbard Place

Prepared by John Taibi

The rural roadway we know as Hubbard Place today was at one time named Farrier's Highway. Earlier yet, its name was Cowasellon Road, the name taken from the creek that passes immediately west of the road. Regardless of name, this rather non-descript road, which connects Route 5 with West Elm Street, is an historically important thoroughfare.

It is Cowasellon Creek that provided the need for three railroads to build a series of bridges that lie at the north end of this otherwise lack-luster roadway. All three of the railroads are now abandoned and it is this set of surviving bridges and abutments that help perpetuate the memory of the New York Central Railroad, the New York, West Shore & Buffalo Railway, and the Oneida Railway Company. It may have been the case that when the railroads were employing eight tracks to move freight and passengers through this area of Wampsville the bridges were just as non-descript as the road that crossed them here. But, now that all of the tracks have been removed it falls only to the bridges and abutments to act as the reminders of railroading's past and for us – today – to use for interpretation of what once was.

The first railroad bridge(s) constructed across Cowasellon Creek was for the Syracuse & Utica Railroad that began service on July 3, 1839. The S&URR was merged with seven other railroads in 1853 to form the original New York Central Railroad. It was Commodore Vanderbilt's NYCRR that would eventually develop the need to have four tracks crossing the creek immediately south of West Elm Street. Two plate girder spans, carrying two tracks each, would become the final form for the bridge that the railroad numbered 572. This steelwork did an admirable job in allowing for the Central's Great Steel Fleet of passenger trains to pass safely. These trains included luminaries such as the 20th Century Limited, the Empire State Express, and the Commodore that carried passengers to and from New York, Buffalo, and Chicago, not to mention Utica, Oneida, Wampsville, and Canastota. And, there were many more freight trains carrying the nation's commerce than there were passenger trains. Hence the need for four tracks and two bridges across Cowasellon Creek.

During 1883, the New York, West Shore & Buffalo Railway built its 2-track bridge across

Cowasellon Creek allowing this new railroad to open to Syracuse on October 1st of that year. The NYWS&BRy was a short-lived affair; it was purchased at auction by the New York Central Railroad in 1885. At the time of its purchase by the Central, the name of this railroad was shortened simply to West Shore Railroad, a title that would reflect a degree of independence from the Central until 1955 when the West Shore Railroad was merged in its entirety into the fold of the NYCRR. The West Shore's bridge across Cowasellon Creek was designated as W-392, the W standing for West Shore.

That makes three bridges (two on the NYCRR mainline, one on the WSRR) even though numbers only reflect two. In 1902, a fourth bridge would be built and – two years later – bridge W-392 would be widened so that another track could cross the creek.

The need for another new bridge to be built in 1902 was due to the expansion of the Oneida Railway Company's electric trolley line to reach Wampsville. For the trolleys to be able to reach the soon-to-be Madison County seat (Wampsville) they had to cross Cowasellon Creek, and so ORCo bridge #1 was erected. It was the southern most of the three railroad's bridges, and it was situated much closer to bridge W-392 than bridge W392 was to bridge #572. Noteworthy for the Oneida Railway Company's bridge #1 was the casting in both concrete abutments the initials of the railroad and the date of construction: ORCo 1902. It is not unusual for bridge abutments to have their date of construction cast into the abutment(s), but it is *rare* for the railroad name to appear as well.

Between the years 1902 and 1904, a unique alliance took place between the management of the New York Central Railroad and the Oneida Railway Company. Unique because the Central embraced the purpose of the local electric trolley line, if for no other reason than it saw an opportunity to make more money for the senior railroad. Under NYCRR direction, the ORCo. was designated to develop an electric interurban system between Utica and Syracuse utilizing the right-of-way of the West Shore Railroad. During the course of construction for what would become central New York's *only* electrified 3rd rail operation, bridge W-392 was widened so that a new track could cross the creek. This additional track was placed on the north side of

the existing bridge and the date of this widening was cast into the new north abutments: 1904.

It was at this juncture, 1904, that all of the bridge and track elements had reached their final form: Four bridges, eight tracks.

Upon the opening of the Oneida Railway Company's electrified 3rd rail line on June 15, 1907, Farrier's Highway (today's Hubbard Place) received a degree of prominence. It was designated as the location for Local Stop 23 on the interurban line. (Oneida was Stop 21, Clockville Road – today's Lenox Avenue – was Stop 22, and Wampsville was Stop 24.) Imagine that! Despite the fact that Farrier's Highway was only a short local "unimproved" roadway it was still a place where passengers could board an interurban car for travel to Utica, Syracuse and beyond, or to any of the other 40 Stops on the electrified 3rd rail line. Having Stop 23 located on Farrier's Highway made the location more than just a dot on the railroad's map. It was now a place where residents could travel to the four corners of America by the inter-connecting railroad system. And, because human beings tend to give names to places they hold dear, Stop 23 became locally referred to as "23-Skidoo."

In considering all of the railroad bridges over Cowasellon Creek it's important to remember that they all became owned by the New York Central Railroad. But, even for the Central – one of America's premier and affluent railroads – all good things would eventually come to an end.

The end of railroad life for the bridges at Hubbard Place began on January 1, 1931. That was the first day that the Oneida Railway Company (that had become the Oneida Lines of the New York State Railways in 1912) ceased operation. The track across ORCo bridge #1 was taken out of service, as was two of the three tracks across WSRR bridge W-392. When the need for scrap steel developed during World War II, the steel superstructure of bridge #1 was removed leaving the abutments on both sides of Cowasellon Creek without purpose. Fortunately, they were not also removed, which preserved the unique casting of "ORCo 1902."

Further eroding of the importance for the bridges at Hubbard Place came about during the New York Central's track relocation project of 1964-65. When completed, the mainline tracks that had previously crossed bridge #572 were taken out of service and removed. The only remaining active railroad bridge was W-392 that now only had one track crossing it and the creek. The day finally came, during 1982, that this track was abandoned and removed. Now, all three surviving bridges and abutments were without

purpose. But, survive they did, as the steelwork for bridges #572 and W-392 remains intact, a circumstance that may not have been the case had the United States become involved in another major war. Thank goodness for the bridges at Hubbard Place that the Korean and Vietnam wars did not provide a need for abundance of scrap steel. Otherwise, they would have been removed to support the war(s) effort.

The surviving bridges and abutments lying along Hubbard Place are a unique reminder of the glory days of railroading across Madison County. There is no other location within the county – or neighboring counties – where significantly important reminders of railroading exist. These surviving bridges and abutments are important for people to contemplate the past because they are where:

- 1- Thousands of passengers, if not millions, once travelled within the Central's Great Steel Fleet of passenger trains.
- 2- It is where the unique Oneida Railway Company's electrified 3rd rail line once ran and where 23-Skidoo was located, and
- 3- It is where the abutments for Oneida Railway Company bridge #1 still display the casting(s) of ORCo 1902. These surviving castings are *the only* tangible reminder that the Oneida Railway Company ever existed. They are historic treasures.

Today, upon the abandoned roadbeds for the West Shore Railroad and its Oneida Railway Company 3rd rail line the Parks and Recreation Department (of the City of Oneida) is developing the Oneida Rail Trail. It is of the utmost importance, for all the reasons discussed above, to keep all of the surviving bridges and abutments at Hubbard Place intact. In this manner they will form a perpetual remembrance of Madison County's railroading past that can be best contemplated, interpreted, and enjoyed. There's a great deal of historical significance to Hubbard Place today; we should embrace that significance and not diminish our railroading history by changing any of the elements that are now in place along the roadway where once 23-Skidoo was situated. Let's forever keep Cowasellon Creek and its bridges together and in place, as they have been since (beginning) in 1839.

John Taibi