Waiting for the Train: Three Railroads and Their Stations in the Hudson Valley

Photography by Judith Rhein
Text by F. Daniel Larkin

The Hudson Valley together with its western connection, the Mohawk Valley, forms a transportation corridor joining the Atlantic Ocean with the Great lakes. It was key to New York's development as the Empire State. People and products have moved back and forth between east and west since before the American Revolution using the two valleys, which form the only westward water level route through the Appalachian Mountains. The Hudson Valley with its mighty river was of particular importance because the river provided deep water navigation nearly 150 miles inland from the ocean. This fjord-like channel was especially significant prior to the coming of relatively rapid, reliable, and inexpensive land transportation in the 1830s and 1840s. Prior to that time, water travel offered conveyance, especially for bulk items, that was easier and far less expensive than travel over New York's road system.

The New York Central and Hudson River Railroad

In 1831 a challenger appeared to reduce water's predominance in transportation. That year a tiny steam locomotive pulled its short string of cars 16 miles between the Hudson River at Albany and the Mohawk River at Schenectady. The Mohawk and Hudson Railroad was the first in a series of railroads that spanned the state between...
The Romanesque Garrison depot, built in the late nineteenth century, is located on the east side of the Hudson, across from West Point.

Introduced in the late 1950s, locomotive engines such as the one above are still in use on the Metro line. They can operate on diesel fuel or electric power, which enables them to go directly into Grand Central Terminal.
Albany and Buffalo, all completed in little more than a decade of the initial appearance of the railroad in the upper Hudson Valley. Although it was with considerable trepidation that investors backed railroad companies whose tracks would parallel the state’s almighty Erie Canal, the railroads were successful in competing with the highly profitable artificial waterway. However, as cautious as the railroads were in challenging the Erie Canal, it was considered economic suicide to attempt competition with Hudson River trade. As a result, it was not until 1851 that the Hudson River Railroad became the first line to be completed from New York City to Albany, at water level along the Hudson River’s east bank.

By 1865 Cornelius Vanderbilt, “the Commodore,” brought the Hudson River Railroad under his powerful control. Four years later he combined it with the New York Central to achieve an unbroken rail line from New York City to Buffalo. Within a year after that the road stretched to Chicago. This launched the New York Central and Hudson River line on its near century-long predominance as one of the nation’s leading railroads. By 1900, the Central completed the building of its empire that stretched from Boston to St. Louis and from New York City to the Canadian border. The Central’s stations in the mid-Hudson region serve as monuments to the railroad’s height of expansion. In the halcyon days of the Central, even the stations of the smaller communities along its scenic river route reflected the power and success of the line. They were solid bastions exhibiting the financial might of the railroad, many of which continue to serve rail passengers. One such station is at Garrison.

Garrison, on the east side of the Hudson across from the United States Military Academy at West Point presently functions as an Amtrak stop as well as a depot for Metro North commuter trains out of New York City. Also, much of the old station now houses a summer theater. The structure, built in the late nineteenth century, follows the Richardsonian Romanesque architectural style. It is of uniform stone construction and has a large hip roof with wide, flared eaves which are supported by substantial corbeled brackets. The chimney is short, in keeping with the Richardsonian style, “so as not to distract from the solid shape of the building.” (Blumenson, 47) The architect responsible for this particular style was Henry Hobson Richardson, whose Romanesque Revival designs gained considerable popularity in the United States during the final third of the last century.

Another New York Central station still serving its original function is located at Poughkeepsie. The brick structure exhibits aspects of the Romanesque Revival style popular during the second half of the
The Poughkeepsie Station is a blend of the Romanesque and Mission styles of architecture.

Built to serve a city, the Poughkeepsie station demands extensive passenger platforms typical of urban stations. The red-tiled towers were frequently used in the Mission style of architecture.

nineteenth century. Typical of this architectural form are the long semi-circular arched windows and the square additions or low towers on both ends of the main part of the building. However, the gently sloping, red-tiled roof of the station is indicative of the Mission style of architecture that began to make its appearance by the 1890s. This would appear to make the Poughkeepsie depot a blend of two architectural types.
The Rhinecliff Station, with its gently sloping roof extending beyond the building’s walls, is a classic representation of the Mission architecture.

North of Poughkeepsie and across the Hudson River from Kingston, is the station at Rhinecliff. This structure is a fine representation of the Mission architecture which remained in vogue into the third decade of the twentieth century. The roof is of red tile and extends with its partially exposed rafters generously beyond the building’s walls. Both the doorway and the windows have the curved arches integral to the Mission style.
The Hudson station is representative of the Italianate architectural design of the mid-nineteenth century.

Today, Amtrak continues to operate on the Penn-Central line.
The Hyde Park station, no longer available for public use, was built in the Mission design.

The Hudson station, located in the city of Hudson, tends to be representative of the Italianate architectural design of the mid-nineteenth century. The roof has a relatively low pitch and the doors and windows were made with the typical round arch. The placement of the doors and windows lend support to the formality of the building, as does the use of the heavy molding. The Italianate style was frequently used in American commercial architecture during the middle of the last century.

In 1966, the New York Central and Hudson River Railroad merged with the Pennsylvania to become the Penn-Central. This attempt to create a larger corporation that would save both lines lasted only a decade before its failure led to a takeover by Amtrak. Today, 15 years later, as the picture illustrates, Amtrak continues to operate the line and do a business that has become increasingly more brisk.

Two other existing Central stations are at Hyde Park and Cold Spring. The depot at Hyde Park was, like the stop at Rhinecliff, built in the Mission design. The tiled roof and the overhanging eaves with their exposed rafters place this 1914 structure well within the Spanish/Southwest motif so prevalent at that time. The Hyde Park station is not open for public use.
The Hyde Park station's overhanging eaves place this 1914 structure within the SpanishSouthwest motif.
The depot at Cold Spring is, however, used by the public, although not as a rail stop. As a restaurant it continues to retain the appearance of a railroad station. Its shape and style tends towards the simple Gothic. The vertical line is stressed in the massive appearance of the structure, not only by its windows and doors, but by the solidly built chimney. In keeping with its plain yet sturdy design, the Cold Spring station would have been less expensive to construct than its more elaborate Gothic cousins constructed in abundance during the nineteenth century.

As a restaurant, the depot at Cold Spring retains the appearance of an old railroad station.
The Erie Railroad

The New York Central and Hudson River Railroad was the Hudson Valley's principal rail line. Yet, soon after the opening in 1831 of the first link in what would become the Central's great chain of railroads, a direct rail route was being planned to connect New York City with Lake Erie which would avoid the competition from either the Hudson River or the Erie Canal. In 1832 the New York and Erie Company was chartered by the legislature with an authorized capital limit of ten million dollars. As proposed, the railroad would cover a total of 483 miles from Piermont-on-Hudson, about 25 miles north of Manhattan, westward through Binghamton to Dunkirk on Lake Erie. The company directors decided to use a 6 foot track gauge instead of the 4 foot 8 1/2 inch width of track that was becoming standard for American railroads. Among the reasons for the wider gauge was that it would allow the use of large locomotives needed for the steep grades of the line.

By 1841, the Erie reached Goshen in Orange County and opened its initial 46 miles of track. By then, the company was limping along financially and progress on the road slowed considerably. It took two years to build to Middletown, 5 miles west of Goshen. Port Jervis, 15 miles from Middletown, was not reached until 1847 because continued financial difficulties nearly brought work to a standstill. Finally, in 1851 the railroad arrived at its Lake Erie terminus of Dunkirk.

Completion of the line did not end the New York and Erie's woes. By 1859 it was forced into receivership and reorganized as the Erie Railway Company. But, manipulation of Erie stock by unscrupulous Wall Street operators caused the failure of the new company which resulted in a second reorganization. In 1878, the company became the New York, Lake Erie, and Western Railroad.

The new corporation began an ambitious program of modernizing the railroad. It also bought some lines in the Mid-West in order to secure a route into Chicago. However, although the road's services remained in demand, heavy debt along with the major economic downturn of the Depression of 1893 forced the company into yet another reorganization. In 1895, it became the Erie Railroad Company. Under its new leadership, the Erie began to show a profit as it headed into the twentieth century. No further changes in Erie organization occurred until 1960. That year the Erie merger with the Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western Railroad brought the new Erie-Lackawanna Railroad into existence. But, financial problems continued to haunt the Erie. In 1985, the Erie-Lackawanna was forced to join Conrail in order to obtain the federal funding needed to maintain operations.
The plain, sturdy structure of the Goshen station, with its arched doorways, follows the Romanesque Revival architectural form.

The Erie station in Middletown's elaborate design contrasts with the simplicity of the Goshen station. The structure of this depot is suggestive of both the Romanesque and Mission styles.
The substantial entry arches of the Erie station reveal the Romanesque influence.
The station in Goshen is a plain but sturdy brick structure with heavy brackets supporting the wide overhang of its pitched roof. Its overall design and its semi-circular arched doorways and long windows follow the Romanesque Revival architectural form of the second half of the nineteenth century. Note also the cupola atop the roof. The simplicity of the Goshen station contrasts with the more elaborate design of the Erie station in Middletown. This depot with its tiled roof and overhanging eaves suggest the Mission style. Yet, the classical massiveness of the gabled end of the building and the substantial entry arches demonstrate the distinct Romanesque influence. The Middletown station undoubtedly was meant to demonstrate Erie financial security, real or imagined. The same could be said of the railroad’s depot in Port Jervis.

This imposing structure complete with its pointed Gothic tower illustrates the Victorian Gothic building form of the post Civil War era. Different colored materials were used in the construction to create the decorative bands typical of the style. The chimneys were extended well above the roof in order to contribute to the linear dimension of the station. The covered main entry demonstrated the infusion of a touch of curvilinear gingerbread so common on most of the Gothic residential structures and, of course, seen on some commercial buildings such as this depot in Port Jervis. This excellent example of a nineteenth century railroad station exists in its
The steep gabled roof of the station in High Falls marks Eastern Stick building style.

current restored condition due to a combined effort on the part of several community and preservationist groups.

The Ontario and Western Railroad

As plagued by financial hardship and poor management as was the Erie, more prominent among the less successful railroads of the Hudson Valley was the New York, Ontario, and Western. Known throughout much of its existence as simply the O & W, the line toward the end of its days was often referred to as the “Old and Weary.” Originally chartered as the New York and Oswego Midland Railroad in 1866, it was not until 1873 that road connected the State’s leading metropolis with the Lake Ontario port. Even then, the connection was over the track of the New Jersey Midland and the Middletown, Unionville, and Water Gap railroads. Unfortunately, it also was that year that the Oswego Midland entered bankruptcy, another victim of the Panic of 1873. One of the men selected to administer the railroad in its receivership was the great magnate, Abram S. Hewitt. But, even Hewitt’s business prowess could not save the line. In 1877, the railroad was offered for sale. Late in 1879, a group of investors from New York City purchased the road and, when they formed the new corporation the following year, the Oswego Midland was renamed the New York, Ontario, and Western Railroad.
During the next two decades, the new company expanded its Hudson Valley track. Among its new connections in that area was the Ellenville and Kingston Railroad, completed in 1902 and financed by the O & W. The construction of a State reformatory at Naponach coupled with the closing of the Delaware and Hudson Company's canal with its eastern terminals at Kingston, spurred the building of the Ellenville and Kingston. It was on this branch of the O & W that two more examples of Hudson Valley depots were built.

Both the station at Accord and the one at High Falls are late examples of the Eastern Stick building style. Steep gabled roofs with cross gables and pointed dormers mark this architecture. Large porches are also among its characteristics, as is the use of diagonal and horizontal board siding to produce a decorative effect. The station at High Falls is now used as a private residence, but the depot in Accord appears to be nearing the same fate as the railroad it once served. The O & W ceased to exist in 1957.

As stated, this is but a brief review of some railroads and their stations in the Hudson Valley. Several such articles could be written without exhausting this broad topic.
The depot in Accord may suffer the same fate as the railroad it once served.

A view of the station in Accord.
Reference:

Henry James and his father from a daguerreotype taken in 1854.