

THE MIDDLETOWN, UNIONVILLE & WATER GAP (MU&WG)

The first railroad to reach Middletown, NY, was the New York & Erie Railroad (NY&E), a predecessor of the Erie Railroad, which entered the hamlet on June 1, 1843 and would remain the only railroad in the region for over two decades. In the early 1840's, the NY&E fostered the growth of Orange County's dairy industry near its route by developing the capacity to ship fluid milk to the New York metropolitan area, a far more profitable business opportunity for area farmers who were previously limited to shipping butter. The NY&E was re-organized as the Erie Railway around 1862. Meanwhile, the inhabitants of various towns and hamlets in Orange County located too distant from the Erie to benefit from its service also recognized the great value of having rail service and proposals to build local connecting railroads began to appear. One such proposal involved the dairying region south of Middletown which relied on the Middletown and Unionville Plank Road whose intended construction between Middletown and Unionville was aborted by the Civil War and consequently only extended five and a half miles, less than half the intended distance.

In very early February of 1866, a meeting was held in Westtown (the name referring to its location west of the Drowned Lands (Black Dirt Region) and on the western edge of the Goshen Precinct) to discuss the viability of a railroad between Middletown and Deckertown (later Sussex), NJ, and a survey of a proposed route from a connection with the Erie in Middletown to Unionville was begun within days on February 7th. On March 3, 1866, at a meeting in Middletown, a board of directors was elected and the Middletown, Unionville & Water Gap Railroad Company (MU&WG) was organized. On May 26th, the directors met again and elected a slate of officers for the new company. A ground-breaking ceremony was held near Unionville on October 8, 1866 but actual construction proceeded southward from "Unionville Junction", the connection with the Erie on the south side of Middletown. The new railroad was built to the Erie's broad gauge of six feet and tracks reached Unionville on December 6, 1867. An excursion from Middletown to Unionville operated on December 11th and the MU&WG's first train ran on January 14, 1868 as six loads, four cars of lumber and two cars of coal, were delivered to Unionville customers.

The MU&WG's board of directors contracted with the Erie to operate the new line and regularly scheduled operations of the Erie's "Unionville Branch", as the Erie designated the MU&WG, commenced on May 4, 1868. Stations with agents were located at Slate Hill (originally called "Brookfield" referring to the brook that almost circles the village), Johnsons (originally called "Rutgers" but soon renamed Johnsons after a local farmer who donated land for the building of the railroad), West Town and Unionville. Over the years, these hamlets on the railroad would prosper while those bypassed often went into decline. In addition, reflecting the importance of the local dairy industry, three milk stations were also established: "Haunted House" (Van Duzers road crossing, later Springside, now Kirbytown Road) halfway between Middletown and Slate Hill and renamed "Springside" during the winter of 1877-78; "Decker's Crossing" soon renamed "Rutgers" after a nearby

creek which was named after a landowner in the 1700's (Decker's road crossing later Ford's, now Ford Lea Road) between Johnsons and West Town and "Waterloo" (Yerks road crossing, Waterloo Mills had once been a busy hamlet in the early 1800's dependent on water power for its grist mill) between West Town and Unionville. The distance from the Erie's Middletown station to Unionville was 13.89 miles, apparently from a land survey as the Erie's time tables gave distances rounded to the nearest quarter mile. Around November 1, 1868, the MU&WG board approved a milk station at Connor's Crossing, between Slate Hill and Johnsons, but the "Wawayanda Milk Station" did not become operative until early March, 1869. "Wawayanda" was a term from the Lenape Indians who once lived in the region and literally translated as "our homes and villages, the place where we live."

Throughout its existence, the MU&WG would be operated by larger neighboring railroads and its initial period under the Erie was relatively short-lived as it soon became an important link in a new system. On January 11, 1866, the New York & Oswego Midland Railroad (NY&OM) was incorporated with the goal of linking Oswego, NY, on Lake Ontario, with the Hudson River, opposite New York City.

The Sussex Valley Railroad Company was incorporated on March 14, 1867 to "construct a railroad from some suitable point in the county of Sussex, on the boundary line between this state and the state of New York, within three miles on either side of where the Wallkill stream crosses said boundary line to or near the village of Deckertown in said county, ...". Later in the year, on November 30th, the proposed Sussex Valley Railroad was the subject of a meeting held at Deckertown, NJ. This meeting was attended by two groups of competing interests. A Middletown faction favored building the Sussex Valley to a connection with the MU&WG. However, Goshen interests advocated a connection to their Goshen & Deckertown Railroad which had been organized on February 22, 1867. The Middletown interests won out with the considerable aid of William H. Bell and it was determined that the seven-mile road was to connect Deckertown to the New Jersey/New York state line about one mile south of the MU&WG's terminus at Unionville. By early 1868, the MU&WG had decided to extend its line to the state line to connect with the Sussex Valley. The Goshen & Deckertown never extended beyond Pine Island (Pine Island Jct.) which it reached on November 15, 1869. It is not certain that the Sussex Valley ever built any track but they soon become part of a much larger company as the New Jersey Midland Railway Company (NJM) was incorporated on March 17, 1870 and on April 26, just over a month later, the NJM took over the Sussex Valley Railroad, the New Jersey, Hudson and Delaware Railroad and the New Jersey Western Railroad. By early May of 1871, the NJM had completed grading a right of way from Franklin, NJ, to the State Line, south of Unionville. This line connected to the NJM main line at Two Bridges, NJ, later known as Beaver Lake, and would eventually, in the 1900's, be known as the Hanford Branch.

(William H. Bell evidently had lived in Slate Hill in the 1850's and hosted a meeting on January 15, 1853 for people interested in construction of the Middletown-Unionville Plank Road. By 1867, he lived in Branchville, NJ. and as a contractor was building an extension of the Sussex Railroad through Lafayette to Branchville, a segment which opened on July

4, 1869. The South Mountain & Boston Railroad was organized in 1872 to extend from Harrisburg, PA, to Boston, MA, via a proposed bridge over the Hudson River at Poughkeepsie, NY. The proposed route was to run through Deckertown via the NJM; Unionville to Middletown via the MU&WG and on to Pine Bush via the Middletown & Crawford. The president of the SM&B was none other than Mr. Bell who thus seems to have played a major role in the development of transportation between Middletown and Unionville for several decades. The SM&B was never built but did culminate in the Lehigh & New England Railroad.)

The NY&OM, which had reached Middletown, had evidenced an interest in the MU&WG as early as July 3, 1869 when it held a meeting at Unionville to explore the purchase or lease of the MU&WG. Subsequently, the NY&OM leased the MU&WG on May 1, 1871 for a ninety-nine year period beginning with the completion of the NJM to State Line and a connection with the MU&WG. The NY&OM would then achieve its original goal of linking Oswego and New York Harbor through its control of the MU&WG and cooperation with the connecting NJM at State Line. This would be a route of standard gauge track, not broad gauge as used by the Erie and lines operated by the Erie. The MU&WG, on its south end, still had to be completed between Unionville and State Line while on its north end, the MU&WG only connected with the Erie and a one-mile extension would be needed to reach the NY&OM. By August of 1871, the NY&OM was building a one-mile extension of the MU&WG northward from just east of the present day Dolson Ave grade crossing to the NY&OM tracks at East Main Street, Middletown. This new track bridged over the Erie's main line. On November 13th, the NY&OM began laying a third rail inside the MU&WG's broad gauge track to establish a standard gauge route between Middletown and Unionville. The Erie was not pleased at the prospect of losing its lease of the MU&WG but the matter was successfully resolved and the Erie continued to operate the MU&WG until the NY&OM takeover. The connection between the MU&WG and the NJM was also completed and a sizeable interchange business developed on the Unionville end of the MU&WG.

The NY&OM began operation of the MU&WG on April 1, 1872 and the first day's trains included a new milk train which originated in Paterson, NJ, on the NJM and ran via the MU&WG to the NY&OM and on to Bloomingburg, NY, where it turned and then stopped at every milk station until it reached Hamburg, NJ. Approximately 500 cans of milk were picked up on the inaugural run. The NY&OM leased the NJM on June 17, 1872. By August of 1873, the milk train was carrying 1,100 cans daily and in that same month, the NY&OM completed its line to Oswego. Among the creameries operating on the MU&WG in this era were Pound & Thorn at both Pound's Station and West Town and Dr. M. S. Hayne's creamery in Unionville as well as a cheese plant built by Hayne and Samuel Christie, his father-in-law. Pound's Station does not appear to have been listed on time tables before the M&U era and we have not seen information on when it was established. It was located two miles south of Middletown, just east of present-day Webb Road.

Unfortunately for the NY&OM, the Panic of 1873 resulted in its inability to make the required payments under the arrangements of its lease of the NJM and on October 1, 1873

the NY&OM went bankrupt while the NJM resumed operation of its line from Jersey City to Unionville. The directors of the MU&WG met on November 22nd and prepared an application to the court for the NY&OM to turn the MU&WG over to the NJM which occurred on November 23rd. On January 30, 1874 the MU&WG was permanently leased to the NJM.

A new milk station between the milk station at Springside and Slate Hill was established at Eaton's Crossing on June 29, 1878. In April, 1882, a switch was constructed at the Daniel H. Eaton farm near the second crossing north of Slate Hill (now Creedens). A year later, Eaton and his neighbor, Ira L. Cummings, built a milk station on the site and in June of 1884 they erected a small station building, "Eaton Station". It should also be noted that at some point another milk station was established between Eaton's and Slate Hill at the first crossing north of Slate Hill, Vail's Crossing. This location may also have been referred to as Sayer's Crossing.

The NJM was reorganized as the Midland Railroad of New Jersey on May 15, 1880, a short-lived company which merged with several other roads on March 31, 1881 to form the New York, Susquehanna & Western Railroad Company (NYS&W). The lease of the MU&WG was transferred to the Midland Railroad of New Jersey and then to the NYS&W. However, the status of the MU&WG as the west end of the NYS&W's main line was very short-lived as on October 9, 1882, the NYS&W opened an extension of its main line to East Stroudsburg, PA, and a connection with new subsidiary Wilkes Barre & Eastern as part of its effort to gain anthracite traffic. The MU&WG was then reduced to the status of a branch, still very important for the milk traffic it generated, and it was denoted as part of the NYS&W's "Middletown Branch", extending thirty-one miles from Ogdensburg, NJ, to Middletown. By 1887, daily milk traffic was averaging 2,000 cans to the New York metropolitan area market.

The NY&OM was reorganized into the New York, Ontario & Western (NYO&W) in 1879 and its dependence on the MU&WG for the routing of traffic to the New York metropolitan area was greatly reduced with the opening on June 4, 1883 of the NYO&W's own Middletown Branch, from Middletown to Cornwall, NY, where NYO&W trains enjoyed trackage rights over the New York Central to tidewater at Weehawken, NJ. The Erie Railway reorganized as the New York, Lake Erie & Western (NYLE&W) in 1878 and the NYLE&W reorganized as the Erie Railroad in 1895. All three of the MU&WG's connecting carriers had now basically assumed their final corporate identities, each of which would endure for over seven decades.

Despite being reduced to the status of a branch for the NYS&W and no longer being part of a through route for NYO&W milk, freight and other traffic, the MU&WG was still in a very favorable situation as it connected to two major carriers, the Erie and NYO&W in Middletown, and was operated by another major carrier, the NYS&W, which enjoyed the heavy milk traffic generated along the MU&WG. An unsubstantiated claim was made in a history of Middletown that by the 1890's on a mile for mile basis the MU&WG was the most prolific milk carrier in America. Borden's constructed a milk bottling plant at Johnsons in the autumn of 1892 and by early November, the New York Condensed Milk

Company (predecessor of Borden's Condensed Milk Co.) was erecting a condensory at Johnsons as well. Once these new facilities went into operation, the shipment of milk in cans to the New York metropolitan area from rural milk stations along the MU&WG went into decline and by December 1, 1894, only five dairies were shipping direct to the New York City market from the Johnsons milk station and only two from the Wawayanda milk station which formerly originated fifty cans daily. By February of 1895, a hundred dairies were supplying Borden's which was shipping six carloads of milk daily plus butter. Eaton's milk station was closed and moved away from the railroad to private property during 1894 while the Wawayanda milk station originated its last milk shipment on April 1, 1895 and was razed in August. A month later, construction began on a milk bottling plant at Slate Hill and operations commenced by December as Clover Farms Dairy.

Another important industry was also developing along the MU&WG and it would constitute the other major traffic source for decades. A substantial feed business was needed to support the multitude of dairy herds along the railroad. Unlike the creameries, which often were part of larger companies, the feed mills were locally owned and like the creameries, every village along the line below Middletown had at least one feed store and most went through multiple ownership changes. Castle's Flour & Feed operated in Slate Hill as early as 1881 and in 1886 John H. Budd opened a feed store in Slate Hill which required an expansion the next year. By March of 1893, J. W. Thorn and C. G. Clark operated as Thorn & Clark which became C. G. Clark & Co. by 1903. Hulet D. Clark began construction of a feed store in Johnsons in 1885. It went through progressive ownership changes over the decades as Clark Brothers, C. G. Clark Feed Store, Clark & Horton and then Clark Company. Hiram T. Manning moved his mill from Gardnerville to Johnsons in 1892 as a partnership with a man named Simpson. They rebuilt it as a feed store after a fire in 1897 and after another fire in January of 1900 re-opened by May. As of 1903, the firm was still known as Simpson & Manning. Niven Clark also built a feed store in Johnsons in 1905 which burned two years later. In West Town, C. G. Clark built a feed store near Bordens that was in business at least as early as 1903 and probably earlier. In 1913, the Manning Co. purchased land in Unionville to erect a feed, coal and lumber supply.

On July 1, 1898, the Erie gained control of the NYS&W and the MU&WG was once again part of the Erie's system, now converted to standard gauge. Milk traffic continued to grow on the MU&WG and by April of 1904, the NYS&W milk train was moving fifteen cars daily with twelve alone coming from Johnsons (Bordens) and the balance from MU&WG stations at Pounds Station (Sheffield Farms, Slawson-Decker Co.), Slate Hill (Clover Farms Co.), West Town (Bordens and J. Wesley Thorn) and Unionville (William Richman). The total volume included about 3,700 cases of bottles, 1,100 cans of milk and about 30 cans of cream.

The MU&WG was taken over by the holders of its two mortgages on September 8, 1913 because the Erie failed to pay the interest on their bonds, perhaps because the Erie preferred to invest in major expansion projects along its own lines. The mortgage holders organized an independent short line, the Middletown and Unionville Railroad, which began operations on December 1, 1913.

