

Always In Financial Difficulty

TROLLEY SERVICE TO WESTFORD

By Gordon B. Seavey

WESTFORD — Perhaps because of its geographical characteristics, Westford Center never was blessed with good public transportation.

Being a hilltop town, the railroad line took the easiest way through Stony Brook Valley between Lowell and Ayer, where the grade started at Brookside at around 150 feet above sea level and reached its greatest height at Forge Village of 204 feet.

Highest point in the residential area in Westford Center is 406 feet above sea level (Prospect Hill is 465) and it is a sturdy upgrade from any direction to reach Tadmuck Hill.

When the Lowell and Fitchburg Street Railway Company planned electric trolley service between the two cities around 1905, engineers chose the easy village route, passing up Groton Rd. beyond Fletcher's Quarry then through the woods to Graniteville to Forge Village and again through the woodlands via Sunset Crossing, on Route 119, to Ayer.

WESTFORD CENTER people, hopeful for public transportation at the turn of the century, ear-

nestly sought that the line be routed through Brookside to the Center, then down to Graniteville and on to Ayer. But it is said that others, fearing the destruction of trees and limbs along the route from the Center

to Graniteville would raise havoc with the appearance of the town, opposed the idea.

Therefore, the idea of a route from Westford Center down Forge Village Rd. as far as the old Coolidge homestead (now occupied by David Scott) then turning north through the meadows to a point near St. Mark's Church and on to Graniteville, was abandoned. It would have been a drop of some 200 feet within a couple of miles, but engineers claimed that even so, it would have given the trolley line a "permissible grade."

In order to feed the Westford line at the Brookside end, a branch was taken off the "main line" at the triangle on Groton Rd. and ran via West Chelmsford to Brookside. Here this branch ended as the Boston & Maine Railroad would not permit the line to cross their rails.

THIS BRANCH proved to be more successful than the Westford branch as it hauled a good many passengers to work in the mills at West Chelmsford and Brookside.

The Westford branch was established in 1908. Passengers wishing to reach the Center from Lowell would change at North Chelmsford for the Brookside branch. Arriving here, they would walk across the railroad tracks to the usually waiting little car that would be near the bridge over Stony Brook at the mill dam.

The route was by the Brookside mill to Eliason's corner, then swinging on to Lowell Road to pass by Taylor's corner. Continuing along this main highway to Bainster's corner, it turned out Cummings Road for the steep climb up to Depot Street.

It has been said that an easier grade would be up Depot Hill, but it was feared that travelers would use the line just to get to Westford Depot and take the steam train.

Perhaps this was true, for it must have taken over an hour to ride the trolley from Westford to Lowell, whereas the local steam train would make the journey in twenty minutes.

But things weren't as hurry-up in those days!

POWER FOR the Westford line came via a pole line from a substation in Forge Village, now Reeves Garage, and was 550 volts, DC.

Equipment used on the car line was varied, according to what the company could pick-up from other lines. Old No. 101 was probably the first unit to grind over the tracks, and later came No. 6 as pictured with this story. Later a real fancy job suddenly appeared, the largest of all and we remember that it had markings as being run between Harvard Square and Boston.

Terminal of the line was at the head of the Common, opposite the First Parish Church. Here the car would remain overnight.

It was an era when manpower was cheap and labor laws required the car be operated by a motorman and a conductor, although on many a trip only two or three people would make the passage.

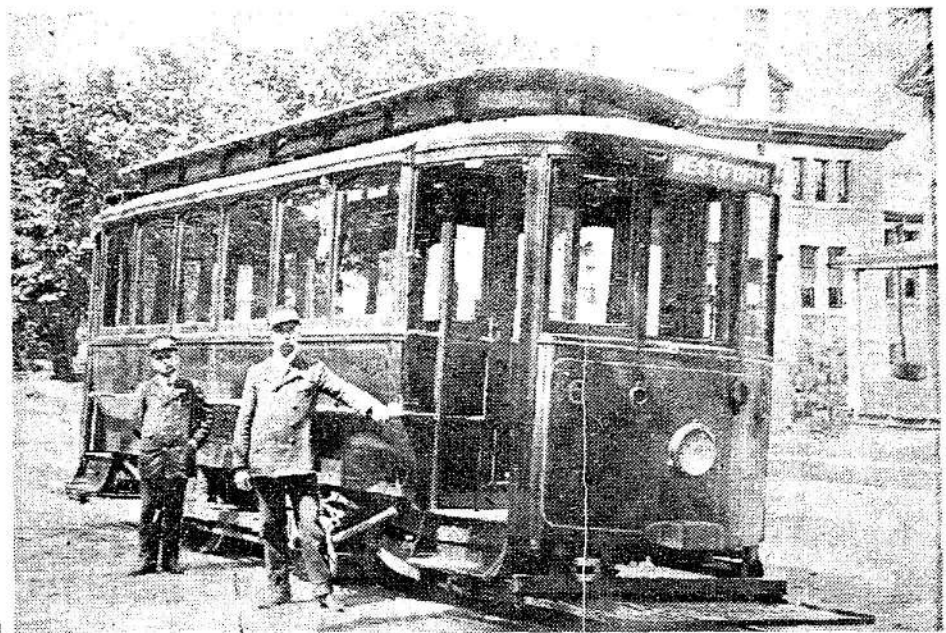
For years, the team of Walter Cutter and Edward Clement was the motorman and conductor, respectively. Mr. Cutter was a short man while his assistant in the rear was well over six feet tall. Following the comic idols of that period, and today, too, they came by naturally the title of "Mutt and Jeff."

Alfred Tuttle was also one of the conductors before he wisely left to become rural free de-



Conductor

The late Edward Clements, a conductor, stands on the electric car track at the start of the run from Brookside (now Nabnasset) to Westford Center, with the station in the rear. The electric car went from Westford Center to Brookside where passengers changed to the Stony Brook Railroad to North Chelmsford.



Old Westford Trolley

Old No. 6 churned the three miles between Westford Center and Brookside Station for many years, carrying at times few if any passengers. This electric trolley line was established in 1908 and the photograph, taken from an old postcard published by Arthur H. Slater of Lowell, was taken around 1912. Walter Cutter, motorman, is shown in the

rear and the conductor with the handle bar moustache is not identified. Although the end of the line was in front of the First Parish Church, this picture was made at the lower end of the common, with the J. V. Fletcher library in the rear. The old store building, which stood at the right for a century, was demolished two years ago.

livery postman working out of the old post office located on Lincoln Street.

FIRST FARE Increase: Operators of the carline, finding that income did not meet the expenses, put into effect a fare increase on January 5, 1909, but when they added another one the following May 17, townspeople raised a protest.

Then, it is the same as today... many raised their voices for public transportation only to patronize it infrequently.

With Oscar R. Spalding as chairman of the selectmen and the other members of the board, Edward M. Abbot and Andrew Johnson, suggested that a new schedule of fares, together with travel zones, be put into effect to see if it would be a "fair and just one in all particulars and one likely to produce the greatest revenue."

They proposed that a person should be able to ride from Westford to Brookside, a distance of three miles, for seven cents; and from Brookside to North Chelmsford for a nickel. Also, for five cents, a ride should be made from the Center to either Bainster's or Taylor's corners... or from Brookside to either of these corners for the same sum.

THE SELECTMEN also made the following plea: "This line must be patronized if it is to continue in operation and it needs no lengthy statement or argument to prove that its discontinuance will be a very severe blow to the community." With the new, lower schedule they hoped that "each and every one should use this means of conveyance not only as a necessity or convenience but also at each and every opportunity that is afforded... and even when one may prefer some other method or means of travel."

H. Arnold Wilder, a railroad buff, reports in spite of fare increases, income was not adequate and that subscriptions were collected periodically to meet operational deficits. Eleanor Fletcher has a collection of the names of the donors, which included such prominent citi-

zens, now long since gone, as: Abiel J. Abbot, Julian A. Cameron, William R. Taylor, Wayland Balch and Leonard Wheeler. Captain Sherman H. Fletcher, who was also a contributor, apparently took up the collection, showing many items of only 50 cents and \$1.

The increase of fares and the added aid of collections proved not the solution to keeping the old line solvent. Being a branch operation, it had a gloomy economic future from its very initial run.

AND SO, THE Westford-Brookside trolley line made its last run probably in 1921 and soon thereafter the tracks were torn up.

According to Mr. Wilder, the actual date of the discontinuance is in doubt. There are no notes in the old Westford Wardsman, nor has anyone come up with the date from the files of the Lowell Courier-Citizen.

The warrant for the town meeting in March of 1921 asked the townspeople to vote \$11,000 plus "to be used to rehabilitate the roadbed and equipment of the Westford Branch Line, if, in the opinion of the Selectmen, they shall see fit." Nothing came of this and the line was gone for good.

AS A KID WE USED to place an ear close to a wooden pole which held the overhead power wires for the trolley car. We knew, if we heard a distinct hum, that the "Toonerville Trolley" was nearing our listening post.

Following a snow storm, smart kids were able to ride for free, if they carried (and used) a snow shovel to help the trolley through the drifts. And it seemed that only a small amount of ice on the rails was sufficient to run the trolley off the tracks.

There was much excitement in town one 4th of July morning to find the trolley, not at its usual overnight spot at the top of the common, but sitting silently in front of the Town Hall down the street. To this day, no one has admitted releasing the brakes and giving the car a heave to get it started rolling down the slight grade.

WESTFORD people venturing to Boston used the trolley to Brookside and then changed to the steam trains. Heading for Westford, if they were to miss the last car they would ride the trolley from Lowell Depot and at North Chelmsford take the Ayer line, getting off at Graniteville for the two-mile hike up Tadmuck Hill.

The Ayer-North Chelmsford line did much better financially, being a through route, and did not discontinue service until April 30, 1933. A car left Ayer every 45 minutes throughout the day for North Chelmsford, starting at 6 a.m. On arrival, it would start the return trip almost immediately, with the last car arriving in Ayer at midnight.

Old schedules show that "This Railway connects at North Chelmsford with the Boston and Northern Street Railway Co. and at Ayer with the Fitchburg and Leominster Street Railway." J. P. Satterlee was the superintendent.

The branch line from North Chelmsford to Brookside stopped operation in 1929.

THE BOSTON & Maine fared a little better passengerwise than the local trolley lines, and its final demise of service took longer. Railroad officials first began cutting down by eliminating the noon train running both ways between Lowell and Ayer. The final one trip daily, Ayer to Lowell in the morning and return in the evening, stopped on April 25, 1953.

Perhaps the biggest blow to all train lovers in the area was when the famed "State of Maine" express, which daily ran both ways through Stony Brook Valley on its way between Portland and New York City, suspended service on October 29, 1960. It missed operating a full half century by one year.

The mournful echo of its steam whistle, blasting at every crossing, would give the careful listener the exact position of the flyer as it clattered up or down the valley shortly after midnight, every night, for 49 years.