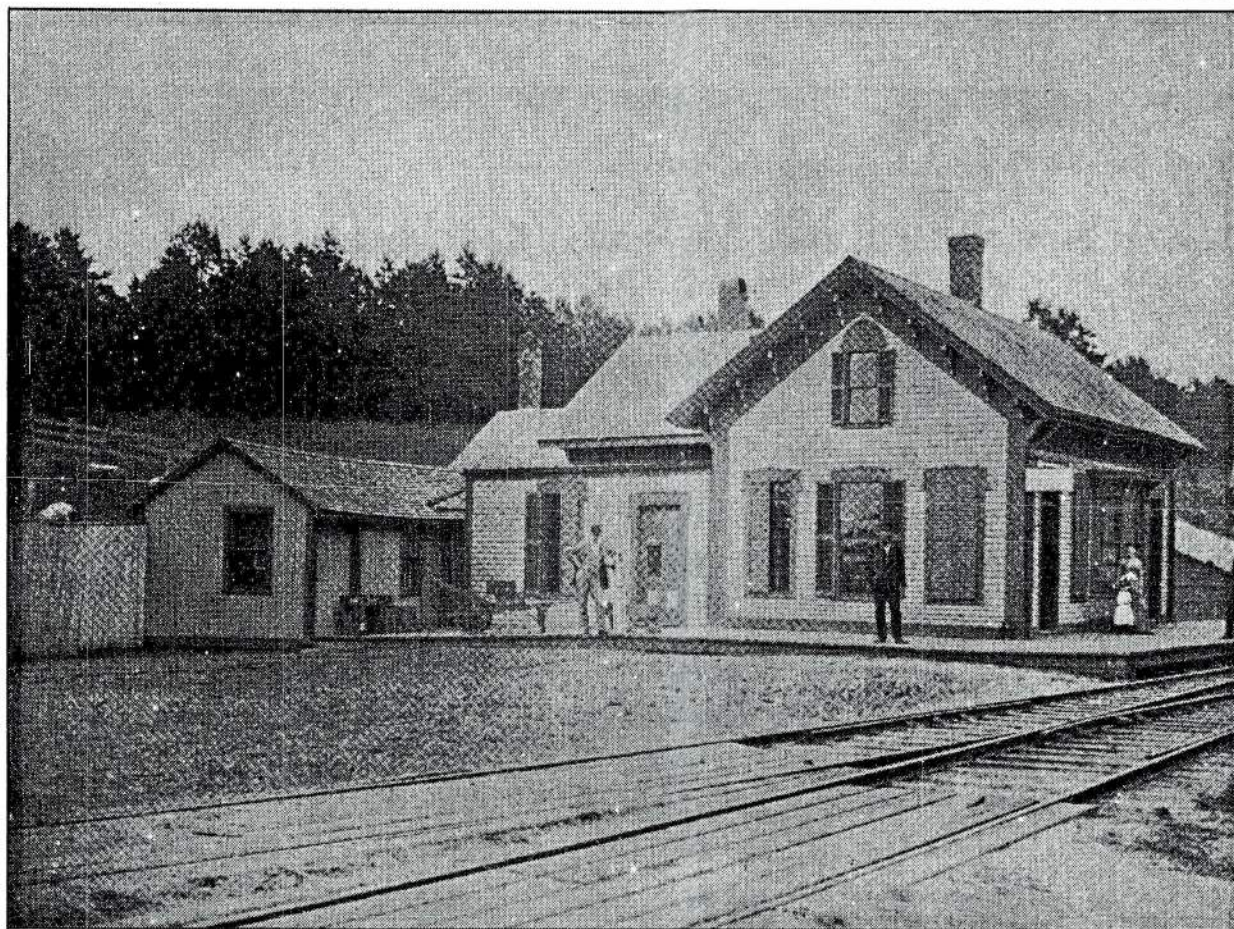


Presence of railroad ebbs



CAPTURED FOR ALL time waiting for the train at Westford Depot, this turn-of-the-century photo shows the steep hill leading down Plain Road to what today is the railroad crossing at East Boston Camps. The depot officially closed in 1928 and the building was razed in 1947.

(Photo courtesy June Kennedy)

Trains crisscross social and economic lines

By Arnold Wilder

The coming of the railroad to Westford was undoubtedly one of the most significant events of the 1800s. It shaped the town's future and served to convert its economy from one of slow travel and transport by horse and ox-drawn vehicles to more rapid modes by rail.

When the Stony Brook Railroad gave notice of building up its namesake valley, local industry was quick to recognize its import, use of which would influence mills, shops and quarries. Other lines would be built, within the town's limits but would lack the impact of this original line.

The Stony Brook railroad
The successful completion of the Boston and Lowell Railroad in 1835 quickly demonstrated its superiority over the Middlesex Canal, road and carriage. It swiftly lent itself to expansion

of Lowell industry.

The Stony Brook Railroad Company was formed at Lowell to build a railroad from a point in North Chelmsford westerly through the towns of Westford and Groton. Completed in 1848 and leased by the Nashua and Lowell Railroad, stations were established at West Chelmsford, Brookside (near Nabnasset), Westford Depot, Graniteville, Forge Village and at North Littleton, plus freight house and sidings for handling local freight.

Local passenger trains, morning, noon and evening, accommodated increasing numbers of townspeople to local and far-away points.

As these smaller lines connected with larger ones, grist and sawmills were established at Westford, using water power from the Stony Brook; extensive ice-houses were built at Forge Village and North Littleton, shipping countless carloads of ice to

Lowell consumers in the summer months.

Westford Center, sitting high on Tadmuck Hill, required postal transport downhill to the railroad; a pattern of mail carriers between post office and trains was early established.

Graniteville also required carriers, but other town post offices could hand-carry mailbags the relatively short distances.

The Stony Brook line, since 1887 a leased line of the Boston and Maine system, became an important cross-connector for both passenger and freight service. Traffic from Portland and points east, the beaches, to and from southern New England, New York and the West, used this line.

Few local citizens needed reminding that such famous trains as the Bar Harbor Express in summer and the year-around State of Maine Express moved

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Once bustling, railroad presence now is ebbing

□ RAILROAD

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over the Stony Brook in the dead of night, to and from Philadelphia, New York and Maine. Local travelers could board a sleeper at Lowell after 9:30 any evening and be in Manhattan at sunrise next morning.

Campers and sports

Just prior to July 4th each year, a heavy exodus of city children bound for summer camps in Maine and New Hampshire moved in special trains of 12 to 15 Pullmans. The return move occurred just prior to Labor Day. Observers would note the long lines of empty Pullmans rolling east in daylight, to pick up their homeward bound campers, who again that same night would roll over the Stony Brook. The then-single track was seldom idle.

During the years of the 1920s and early 30s, the Abbot Worsted Company sponsored a number of sports teams, particularly soccer and hockey, of sufficient calibre that they competed with many of the teams in New England. To reach these

points, such as Fall River, New Bedford and Brooklyn, N.Y., special trains were chartered to accompany the teams and the Abbot Worsted Band from Forge Village. One can only imagine the tumultuous occasions, both going and coming.

In later years, the Boston and Maine ran special trains to the Maine beaches, to Provincetown, and to Lake Winnepesaukee. This was sponsored in part by Abbot Worsted Company, with as many as ten cars filled with local citizens. The principal business and big money-maker has continuously been freight traffic.

In 1925, with the growing use of the private automobiles and trucks, plus the trend for more speed and efficiency, B&M management apparently decided new improvements were necessary.

Construction of the new North Station complex with the Boston Garden and Hotel Manager was begun; significant main line changes were effected throughout the system. Included was a reconstruction of the Stony Brook line; double track was

installed in its entirety and middle siding handling 100 cars laid between Westford and Caunter's Bridge in Graniteville.

In 1927 a new system of switch and signal control, remotely operated from the signal tower in North Chelmsford, was installed. It was one of the first of its kind in New England. The station had been maintained by caretakers for many years. No longer were their services required.

The scene on the Stony Brook line during World War II was a busy one. On the average, a train movement occurred every 20 minutes. Appended lists from published passenger and freight schedules show the considerable traffic including the military.

The coming of the diesel locomotive and the gradual elimination of the steam locomotives began in 1948 on both passenger and freight. By the early 50s, a steam-powered train was rare indeed.

Waves of nostalgia swept the rail fans as they stood on the bank at Graniteville or at Forge

Village, with camera in hand, and recorded lines of steam locomotives being towed to steel mills for scrap.

Passenger service gradually diminished; the local passenger train from Worcester, via Ayer and the Stony Brook, was discontinued on April 25, 1953.

Perry Shupe loaded the last mail bags at Westford Depot. Boston and Maine plunged into bankruptcy, and since the early 1980s the system has been taken over by Guilford Co. of Connecticut.

Thus the Stony Brook continues to play an important part in the railroad line of state and northern New England, even though the community finds little practical use for it. In 126 years, the Stony Brook Railroad, still a separate entity under the Guilford ownership, has come quite a long way.

One may properly assume it will continue to do so in the foreseeable future.

Arnold Wilder is a Westford native and originally compiled this history for June Kennedy's "Westford Recollections" series.