

# Red Line railway stations: Neighborhood hub of activity

By Arnold Wilder

The line familiarly known to Westford oldsters as the "Red Line" was completed in 1873. It ran from Nashua, N.H., to West Concord (then called Concord Junction), connecting with the then-Fitchburg Railroad to Boston.

Passing through Westford from north to south, it came down along Massapoag Pond, paralleling West Street and passing beside St. Catherine's Church. It passed through a sparsely settled area which generated little traffic; coal and grain were principal commodities.

In Westford, three stations were provided to serve the community: West Graniteville, near St. Catherine's Church; Pine Ridge (originally called Westford, but changed after the B&M takeover) and East Littleton, near Littleton Road.

With passenger and freight, it was one round trip from Nashua to Concord Junction in the morning, and a second trip in early afternoon, returning north about 6 p.m.

## Scrapping track, cars

Such service prevailed from pre-World I until 1925, when all service was discontinued and the track taken up in 1926.

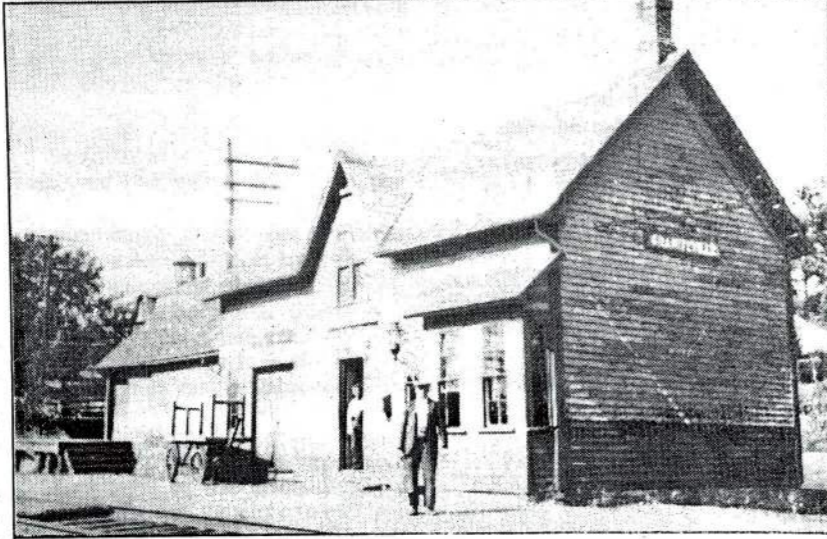
When the line was to be abandoned, a curious situation existed at East Littleton. Over 30 old wooden box cars, unfit for service, had been stored on the siding. Rather than scrap them there, it was evidently decided to move them to Nashua. Air brakes had to be made operative, new air hose applied, journals oiled and examined.

A train crew spent many hours moving these old cars from a weedy siding to a Nashua yard where they were then scrapped and burned.

## Stations as hubs

Interesting local activity prevailed at these stations. Being somewhat adjacent to a number of old fashioned grocery stores of the "teens and twenties", Holbrook-Marshall, a wholesale grocer from Nashua, served such oldtime stores as LeClere in Forge Village, Blodgett's in Graniteville, Wright & Fletcher's in Westford and Conant and Company at Littleton Common.

A "drummer", or traveling salesman with sample trunks, visited each of these stores periodically taking orders for grocery



THE GRANITEVILLE STATION (top) for Stony Brook Railroad was the focal point for wool shipments for Abbot Worsted Co., steel and similar material for C.G. Sargent and Son Corp., coal and heavy merchandise for Healy's, and granite for Palmer and Hildreth quarries. Built in 1848 opposite J.A. Healy and Sons Funeral Home, it was abandoned in 1955. The Westford station (above) on the Nashua, Acton and Boston Railroad was changed to Pine Ridge after the B&M takeover.

(Photos courtesy of June Kennedy)

and related items. Shortly thereafter, the southbound local would unload cases, barrels and bundles for pick-up via horse-drawn teams. For many years Wright and Fletcher delivered coal from a storage shed at Pine Ridge.

Conant & Company maintained a grain storage shed at East Littleton. With the abandonment of this line the station at West Graniteville was sold and converted to a private residence.

## TRAIN

Continued from page 7

Haven, all catering to the townspeople's freight needs as well as their travel requirements.

They served a period of our history when travel by train was the accepted mode, an unhurried period which featured the local station as a gathering place around a pot-bellied stove in the waiting room.

Here, at these country depots, especially on wintry or rainy days, the heady smell of horse blankets and felt boots mingled with soft coal smoke to provide a pungent atmosphere wherein to discuss local politics and country gossip. The station agent, master of the clattering telegraph, presided over ticket case, waybills and other tools of his trade.

This tranquil scene was interrupted periodically by the arrival of the local mail team from

the post office, the transfer of mail bags, express and milk jugs to four-wheeled trucks, and the whistle of the approaching local passenger train.

With noisy bell and hissing brakes, the station stop would be made, passengers assisted on and off, and a variety of a mail and merchandise exchanged between baggage car and platform truck. An "All Aboard" from the conductor, a wave of lantern or hand, and the train was off to its next stop.

A small freight house on an adjoining siding provided shelter for assorted items unloaded from a daily local train. Farm ma-

chinery and parts, sacks of seed and household items from Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward were common freight.

Horse-drawn teams from Westford Centre and the "villages" brought loads of milk and crates of produce for the city, and loaded express and freight items for homes, stores and local industry.

## Section crews

The section crews who maintained their portion of track were also important parts of the railroad community. Both the Stony Brook and the Nashua and Acton had "section houses" (small buildings to house tools

and track cars) at Graniteville and at Pine Ridge. Guardians of the track in all kinds of weather, such men often spent a lifetime changing rails, installing new ties, and jacking and tamping ballast under the track for safe passage of trains.

In winter, a constant battle

seemed to be waged against snow and ice, with grade crossings to shovel, switches to sweep, and the clearing of heavy accumulation around cars and building so that traffic could move.

This is all a sharp contrast to today's highly mechanized methods, what the senior citizens of

1988 refer to as "The Good Old Days", times not to be again known in our lifetime.

Arnold Wilder is a Westford native and a railroad buff. His recollections of the town's early rail days are included in "Westford Recollections", a series of historical vignettes and photos compiled by June Kennedy.