

# When the smell of horse blankets mingled with coal smoke

This article was written by Westford railroad historian Arnold H. Wilder in 1974 and updated by June Kennedy for the year 2000.

## Nashua, Acton and Boston RR

This line, familiarly known to Westford oldsters as the "Redline," 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 principle 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 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. Such service prevailed from pre-World War 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. More than 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.

Interesting local activity prevailed at these stations. Being somewhat adjacent to a number of old-fashioned grocery stores of the day, Holbrook-Marshall, a wholesale grocer from Nashua, served such old-time 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, periodically visited each of these stores taking orders for

grocery 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 & Fletcher delivered coal from a storage shed at Pine Ridge.

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Conant and 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. Similarly, Pine Ridge station and freight house, retaining all its former railroad architecture, is today the Frazier/Sholtis home, at 56 Forge Village Road.

In retrospect, it is obvious that Westford was unique, in that prior to 1926, the town had eight railroad stations within its borders. Four were on the Stony Brook line, three on the Nashua and Acton and one on the New 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 heavy 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 mail and merchandise exchanged between bag-

gage 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 machinery and parts, sacks of seed, and household items from Sears-Roebuck and Montgomery Ward were common freight. Horse-drawn teams from Westford Center 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.

The section crews who maintained their portion of track were also important parts of the railroad community. Both the Stony Brook and 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 buildings so that traffic could move. It's a sharp contrast to today's highly mechanized methods.

## H.E. Fletcher Industrial Railroad

Herbert E. Fletcher opened and developed stone quarries in the northeast section of the town of Westford in 1880. Here granite of high quality for a wide variety of building purposes such as railroad stations, terminals and commercial buildings could be obtained. Movement of this heavy material was a ponderous, tedious effort, carried almost entirely by ox-team, two or three miles distant, to the nearest railroad siding at Brookside or west Chelmsford. This strenuous effort, by manpower and ox-power, must have been accepted in those early days as the means to an end, it being the only mode at hand.

The H.E. Fletcher Company apparently determined that to be competitive, a more sophisti-

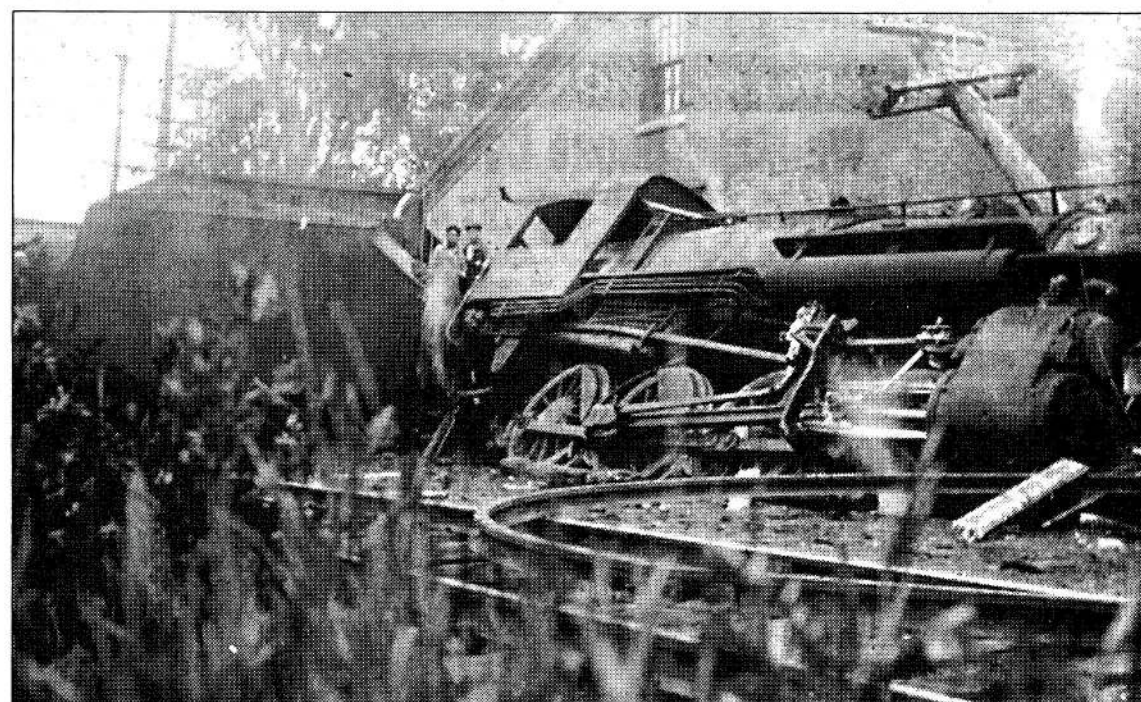


PHOTO COURTESY OF JUNE KENNEDY

Railroad travel didn't always provide a smooth trip, as shown by this 1920s photo of a train wreck in Forge Village.

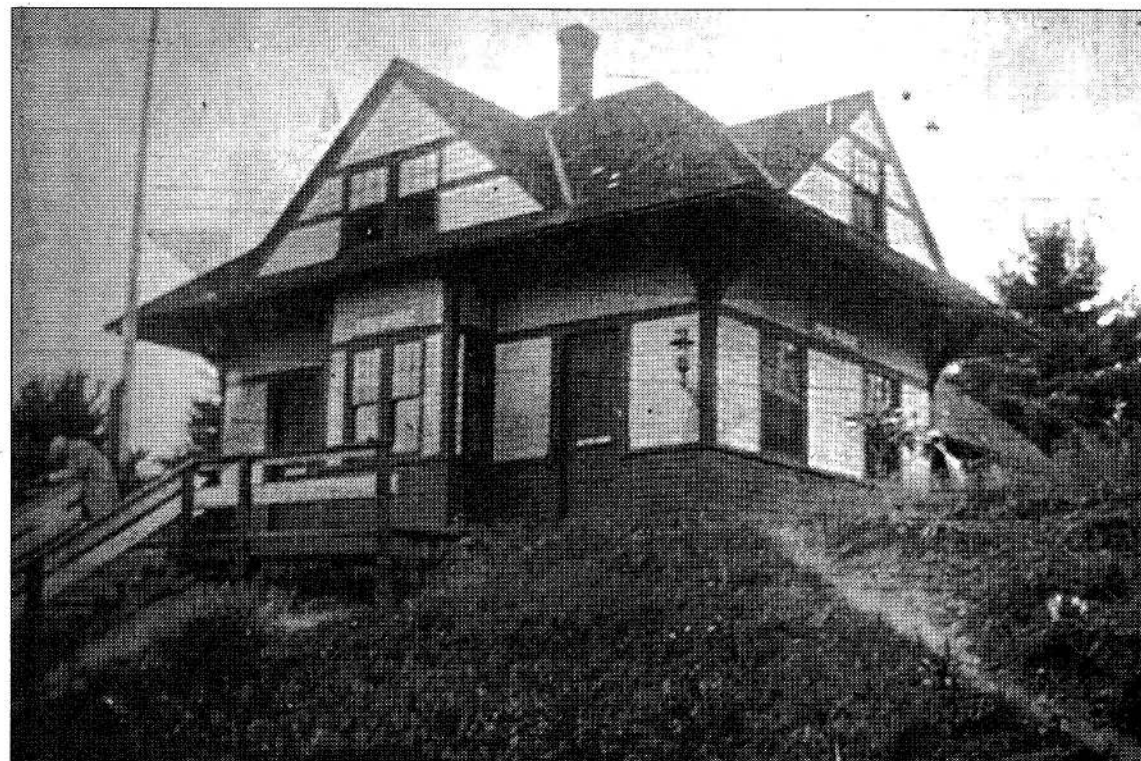


PHOTO COURTESY OF WILDER FAMILY.

Prior to 1926, Westford had eight railroad stations for passengers and freight. The Pine Ridge Station shown here is now the site of the Frazier/Sholtis home, at 56 Forge Village Road.

cated means of granite transportation was required. In 1895 the Company constructed a standard gauge railroad from a point on the Stony Brook line of the Boston and Maine, just east of the Brookside Road near the old Gilson's Store. It continued due north up a moderate grade to cross Groton Road into the quarry area. A considerable amount of track was then constructed on the property to facil-

itate handling of the stone through various cutting and finishing operations. Perhaps the most spectacular is the line which circles down the outside perimeter of the quarry to reach the bottom workings.

Early motive power was a small four-wheeled steam locomotive without benefit of coal tender, but adequate to move wooden cars about the quarry area. Later, second-hand switch

engines were purchased from the Boston and Maine Railroad. From the mid-'20s, a Number 5 six-wheel B&M engine was to be followed by four similar, but increasingly larger steam engines. By the summer of 1953, the 444 was replaced by a 470 horsepower General Electric diesel-electric engine.

— This is the 12th article in the ongoing Westford Recollection Millennium Series.