

Getting There: Early Roads and Rails to Oneonta,

Courtesy of Eliakim R. Ford

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Introduction

Oneonta. To every point on earth one can ascribe meaning. In 3-dimensional space, the position of every point is specified by 3 coordinates, for example, latitude, longitude, and altitude. Albert Einstein added a fourth coordinate: time. When I look at a place, I am compelled to consider not only what is there now, but what occurred there at key times in the past. I live in four dimensions; I am a historian of science and business. To look at key locations in Oneonta at present and understand how earlier events influenced how life is lived today requires the need to tell stories. This paper tells the story of Eliakim Reed Ford, who greatly improved commercial and personal access to Oneonta by road and rails. Later tales will tell how other individual Oneonta natives shaped transportation and information industries on a national scale. The goal of this series is that whenever one speaks about Oneonta, he or she will do so with a sense of pride in the existence of something we call the American dream.

Physically, Oneonta is located on the Susquehanna River, the second oldest river on earth. It is also located in the midst of a bowl of mountains, from whose heights streams descend to the Susquehanna. Personally, Oneonta is where my grandfather operated a tailor shop on Main St. in the 1930's, and where my mother, working as a secretary at her Uncle Bill's business, ordered gondola cars from the Delaware and Hudson Railroad (the D&H) to pick up scrap metal. Through this period, my mother and her brothers lived with my grandparents at 166 Chestnut St across from the D&H Roundhouse, largest in the world. (I guess that's why I get a special thrill when I see a movie of a huge 1500-class steam

locomotive in action!) In 1939, my parents married and settled in their hometown of Syracuse. After my father joined the Marines to fight in the Pacific in 1943, my mother would visit Oneonta and always remembered having to change trains in Binghamton, two little girls and luggage in tow, across exposed tracks.

As one approaches Oneonta from Sidney on I-88, the ride is 20 miles of driving along an almost imperceptible curve to the left. Taking the first exit, one ends up on Chestnut St. Where the former intersects Main St. is the focal point of Oneonta today, as it was almost 200 years ago, when the stories told here began. The Chestnut - Main St combination is the rib called NYS Rt. 7 penetrating west-to-east. North of this rib is the residential part of town, along with the hillside campuses of two colleges: SUNY Oneonta and Hartwick. South of the rib are the flatlands, drained swamp land which at one time housed the shops and roundhouse of the mighty D&H. We are fortunate that the stations of both the D&H and the Ulster and Delaware (U&D) are still extant and perform admirable service as local watering holes.

Pathways to Central New York

In December 1959, my mother and I accompanied my sister on a slow D&H milk train from Binghamton to Albany so that she could interview at SUNY Albany. But In 1800 central New York state was literally the wild west. Adventurous trailblazers from New England would cross the Hudson at Catskill, NY to begin trekking west on Indian paths or ones they cut themselves. In 1800 there was no New York State Department of Public Works. The state government gave private companies the right to buy land at a fair price, build roads into the interior, and charge tolls to cover costs. For Central New York a largely stone-covered toll road called the Catskill Trail was the most important. The trail continued west through Cairo, Manorkill, Gilboa, Stamford, West Harpersfield, Treadwell, Franklin, Unadilla, Greene, Whitney Point, Ithaca and ending at Bath, NY. ^{i ii}

It took a stage coach four days and nights to cover the 160-mile trail between Ithaca and Catskill.ⁱⁱⁱ It was hard on the animals, horses and oxen, to pull over the

often-rutted trail. Entire herds of cattle, sheep, and goats also traveled by trail. Imagine hauling an iron stove by wagon from Catskill to Ithaca! Besides the stage lines, another business, tavern/ hotels, flourished serving the trail trade. Reverend Timothy Dwight, president of Yale University, traveling in 1804 observed that most of the taverns were "mere dram shops; of no use other than to deceive, disappoint, and vex travelers, and to spread little circles of drunkenness throughout the state."^{iv}

As far as it was concerned, there was another key drawback for Oneonta: the Catskill Turnpike bypassed it by 3 miles. This defect was corrected by Eliakim Reed Ford in the years after it opened in 1806.^v

Early Days of Oneonta

A Dutch immigrant named Joachim Vanderwerker built a log cabin in 1775 somewhere near the entrance of Neahwa Park and is credited as the first settler of Oneonta^{vi}. Between 1773 and 1779 he bought 300 acres of land which encompassed Oneonta.^{vii} In 1798, a man named Frederick Brown arrived in Oneonta and bought a large farm from Vanderwerker which became Oneonta's core. Brown also operated a store at the corner of Maple and Main St.^{viii} When Eliakim Reed Ford arrived on May 11, 1822, he boarded with Brown and worked at the store. Having \$500 savings on his arrival, E.R. bought out Brown's store on May 20, 1824. With his growing wealth, Ford bought three farms including Brown's. He earned more capital by selling parts of these farms to others. Clearly, E.R. was coming on strong in early Oneonta.

Meanwhile, Oneontans were eager to be located on the Catskill Turnpike. In 1835, a 3-mile connection to Franklin was completed^{ix}. A 20-mile connection to West Harpersfield was opened in 1834 along the valley of Charlotte Creek, following the path of Chestnut and Main Sts.^x It replaced the Catskill Trail because of its gentler path. This left Oneonta where it wanted to be: directly on the Catskill Trail and able to profit from its passengers and trade. So now stagecoaches and cattle drives passed directly through Oneonta. In 1841, E.R.

Reed became principle stockholder of the Charlotte Pike, so his fortune continued to grow.^{xi}



Mile post of the Catskill Trail along S. R. 357 near Treadwell (Photo by Author)

What were the drawbacks of the trail? As we have seen, the roughly 200 miles between Bath and Catskill required 96 hours to traverse, for an average speed of 2 mph. This is moderate walking speed. The gravel path was susceptible to rain, snow, ice, and the ravages of uneven maintenance. What alternatives existed?

Canals could carry heavier cargo but still at animal speed. The state-owned Erie Canal had opened in 1825 but was 50 miles away from Oneonta. The Delaware and Hudson (D&H) Canal was built in 1828 from Honesdale, PA to Kingston, NY to ship anthracite coal.^{xii} But canals were useless in the winter ice.

The Erie Canal afforded farmers along its route a channel for receiving manufactured goods as well as bringing their produce to market. Farmers in southern New York felt left out. Some responded by supporting the development of lateral canals from their locales to the Erie. Some laterals, like the Chemung Canal from Elmira to Watkins Glen were successful. Others, such as the Chenango Canal from Binghamton to Utica, were not. The D&H Canal profitably shipped coal from Honesdale, PA to Kingston, NY on the Hudson until 1898.

The Railroad Alternative

Oneonta merchants like E.R. Ford, and others saw the benefit of a railroad named the Albany and Susquehanna (A&S) which would follow the Susquehanna and Schoharie Rivers between Binghamton and Albany with a midpoint at Oneonta. This would allow goods to be shipped in and out at railroad speed (40mph) on longer trains than animals could power at concomitantly lower cost. When the railroad was incorporated in 1851, E.R., a director of the A&S, and other Oneontans sold shares of stock to towns along the proposed route.^{xiii} (The population of the village of Oneonta was 275 in 1850)^{xiv}. Not nearly enough shares were sold to begin construction of the road, but a state appropriation of \$500,000 in 1863 was enough to begin building the road west from Albany. The A&S reached Oneonta (pop. 774) on August 29, 1865 pulled by a locomotive named "E. R. Ford" after one of its most esteemed directors.^{xv}

Strategic and Tactical Implications of the A&S

The A&S reached Binghamton on January 12, 1869.^{xvi} Here it connected to the Erie Railroad, which, when completed between Piermont-on-Hudson and Dunkirk, NY, was the longest in the world.^{xvii xviii} At Albany, Oneonta shippers gained access to the Hudson River as well as the railroads being built on each side to New York City. Remember the D&H Canal? The owners built a rail line connecting

Carbondale, Pennsylvania with Nineveh, New York on the A&S. They leased the A&S in February 1870 and the road became known for the next century as the D&H.^{xix} In 1900 (two years after the Canal closed), the U&D Railroad reached Oneonta from Kingston.^{xx} Finally, there was an all-rail replacement for the D&H Canal. Animal locomotion had been replaced by steam power able to pull far larger loads at far higher speeds for the most part all year around. The result was lower shipping and passenger costs due to higher efficiency and economies of scale.

But there were even more benefits for Oneonta. The D&H directors logically decided to locate the shops for the railroad in the flatlands of Oneonta, its midpoint. The central roundhouse was built. Jobs in the thousands became available. In the 1870's the population of Oneonta tripled; in the 1880's, it doubled to 6272.^{xxi}

The passage of coal between Carbondale and Nineveh crossed the Endless Mountain range at Ararat, Pennsylvania. In order to pull and push massive coal trains over this obstruction, the D & H bought a number of steam locomotives of the articulated 1500 class. These were essentially dual locomotives which rotated in the middle to negotiate larger track curvatures.

E.R. Ford remained a director of the A&S until his death in 1873.^{xxii} His oldest son Dewitt had two daughters named Julia and Ada.^{xxiii} In a follow-on story, these two sisters will reappear when we consider the impact of Oneontans on the data processing industry in nearby Binghamton, N. Y.

ⁱ Kubik, Dorothy, *West Through the Catskills-The Story of the Susquehanna Turnpike*, Fleischmanns, NY (2001), flyleaf map.

ⁱⁱ Morgan, Almyra *The Catskill Turnpike: a Wilderness Path*, Ithaca, NY (1971) p. 5.

ⁱⁱⁱ Morgan, p. 15.

^{iv} Kubik, p. 29.

^v After 200 years, there are still portions of the Catskill Trail drivable by auto. Taking SR 206 from Greene to Whitney Point, there are marked sections of the Catskill Trail. The first is on the right about a half-mile out of Greene. The second is on the left just to the west of the Town of Triangle. On I-88, take Exit 11 to SR 357 toward Franklin. There are about 8 mileage markers

first starting on the right side of the road and then on the left. They resemble tombstones surrounded by a brick structure topped by a peaked roof. Continue on to Treadwell, where a marker on the left side reads "73 miles to Catskill".

^{vi} Milener, Eugene D. *Oneonta - the Development of a Railroad Town*, Oneonta, NY (1997), p. 13.

^{vii} Milener, p. 13.

^{viii} Much of the data for this paragraph came from Milener, pp. 59-60.

^{ix} Milener, p. 12.

^x Milener, p. 24.

^{xi} Milener, p. 64.

^{xii} LeRoy, Edwin D, *The Delaware & Hudson Canal*, (Honesdale, PA (2006), p.21.

^{xiii} Notable is that individually Reed appears to have sold \$50000 of stock (Milener, p. 79).

^{xiv} Milener, p. 120.

^{xv} Milener, p. 113.

^{xvi} Milener, p. 110.

^{xvii} At Piermont, the Erie extended on filled-in land to the middle of the Hudson River. Here cargo and passengers were transferred to boats bound for NYC. The path is still visible (and walkable) from the eastbound lane of the (old or new) Tappan Zee bridge.

^{xviii} A museum panel at the Steamtown National Historical Site, Scranton, PA gives this record distance at 450 miles.

^{xix} Milener, p. 133.

^{xx} Milener, p. 163.

^{xxi} Milener, p. 175.

^{xxii} Milener, p. 61.

^{xxiii} Milener, p. 538.