

Introduction

Few casual visitors to the Town of Milton would guess that at one time it was one of the busiest industrial centers in New York State. Fewer still would perceive that a small railroad that ran from the town's principal village of Ballston Spa to Middle Grove operated along the Kayaderosseras Creek for three decades. Residential development and the ravages of time have all but obliterated most of the industries and the railroad that served them.

Fortunately for fans of history, traces of the paper mills that created significant wealth for the area, and even of the railroad, still exist. Old newspaper articles, historic publications, and Public Service Commission reports aid the historian in finding these traces, as well as matching old photographs to present-day locations.

In the years following the American Revolution, Ballston Spa became the premier tourist destination in the country after the discovery of mineral springs in 1771. Native Americans believed these springs to have healing powers, and it is said that these lands were so sacred to the Mohawk Nation that fighting was forbidden there. Word of the mineral spring spread across the young country soon after their discovery by English surveyors, and those who were seeking a cure for some affliction or merely good health flocked to the site.

Just when the tourism business was starting to produce real wealth, several of the springs failed, and by 1850 the thriving village had been eclipsed by the more robust springs of nearby Saratoga. But during those years of growth, some noticed another resource – the rushing waters of the river that flowed right through the center of town. The creek was given the name “Crooked Stream” by the Native Americans who used the area as their hunting and fishing grounds, or Kayaderosseras in their language. Its winding course and series of rapids provided an excellent power source for the industries of the day, most notably paper mills. As the tourism trade died out, industry took its place and continued prosperity was assured.

Soon almost two dozen mills were operating along the creek from Ballston Spa to Middle Grove. With hundreds of tons of finished goods being produced each month and just primitive roads over which to transport them, the idea of building a railroad was only natural. A short-line railroad could provide a reliable and inexpensive method of delivering raw materials to the mills and bringing their finished goods to the Delaware & Hudson Railroad interchange. The various communities that developed around the mills would also be able to travel easily to work, school, or leisure.

After several false starts, the dream of a local railroad serving the Town of Milton became a reality when construction began in 1896. It was unique for being one of the smallest railroads ever built in the United States, with a mainline run of only twelve miles. It was also one of the few electric lines designed primarily for handling freight (the trade magazine *Electrical World* called it a “novelty”). Despite its small size, the railroad played a critical role in the further economic development of the area. At its height, the railroad served twelve paper mills and eight other industries. These included the Union Bag & Paper Company (the largest manufacturer of paper bags in the world), the American Axe & Tool Company (makers of the famous I. Blood axes and scythes), and the Bull’s Head Tannery (the largest tannery in the country).

There was a great deal of enthusiasm and support for the railroad when it commenced operations in the summer of 1898. However, the promise of perpetually high freight revenues from the mills and throngs of year-round passengers never met expectations, and the railroad failed to produce profits for its investors.



The only surviving railroad bridge can be seen off Heisler Road in Rock City Falls.



Here in West Milton, the railroad bed is cut into a hill overlooking the Kayaderosseras Creek. Some of the best views of the trip were enjoyed along this stretch, with the creek below and the Adirondack Mountains in the distance.

There were actually three railroads in succession – all using the same track – as each declared bankruptcy and reorganized under a new name and a new infusion of capital. In between bankruptcies, the small line spent a significant amount of time in receivership as well under the able guidance of Frederick Beach. Through it all the line kept running, bringing students to high school, tourists to Middle Grove Park, employees to their jobs, mail to Rock City Falls, and travelers to the Delaware & Hudson passenger station in Ballston Spa.

But as the saying goes, all good things must come to an end. The wonderful waterpower provided by the Kayaderosseras Creek slowly became obsolete as businesses around the country switched to more efficient steam or electrical power. Industries utilizing these new sources of power, often located in large urban centers, created competitive pressures that the local mills could not overcome. One by one the mills were shut down or destroyed by fire, until by 1929 only three mills along the creek were left.

The rise of the automobile sealed the railroad's fate, ensuring that passenger traffic would never again reach the highs of the early 1900s. Americans preferred the freedom of having their own transportation rather than depending upon the schedules and uncertainties of public systems. New roads were being built, such as

Route 29 that linked Rock City Falls with Saratoga Springs and provided residents and mills with an alternative route to that city.

The railroads of the Kayaderosseras Valley were an important part of daily life for the thousands of people they served. For many residents “up the river,” the little electric railway was their only mode of transportation to Ballston Spa and its railroad connections with the rest of the country. If the line had never been built, it is likely that the mills would have shut down years sooner and the future of the village may have been radically different.

Although the line never generated profits for its investors, it was much loved in the community. School children riding the trolley to the high school in Ballston Spa affectionately dubbed it the “PP&J” (short for “Push, Pull, and Jerk”) for the rocking motions that the trolley made as it rolled along the tracks. Others called it the “Toonerville Trolley,” after Fontaine Fox’s popular comic strip about a rickety trolley line. Whatever they called it, local residents have fond memories of the railroad even to this day.