



The Struggle for Decent Transportation in Western Rutland County, 1820–1850

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canals and railroads.*

By GWILYM R. ROBERTS

Like those of other frontier areas, roads were terrible in western Rutland County in the closing years of the eighteenth century. Narrow paths at first, they were widened a bit later, and marked by large rocks in the way and especially deep mud in the spring-time. Post riders made their way along these difficult passages, usually once per week, delivering newspapers and running errands for customers.

Jeremy Dwyer, one of several post riders in the area, had advertised in 1795 that he would travel north to Middlebury Falls from Castleton once each week, returning by a slightly more westerly route.¹ Two years later, while poetically reminding his customers of the world and national news he had brought them, Dwyer presented a picture of travel conditions in 1797:

Old customers and neighbors all
I pray attend unto my call;
Now hear me chant my doleful ditty
Which calls for patience, and your pity;
'Tis two years now and something more
Since I began my northern tour;
In rain or shine I weekly go
Nor mind the vain assaults of snow.
In fair or foul, in dry or wet;
In winter's cold or summer's heat,
I climb your hills, as steep or steeper
Than roof of house, then sink much deeper.
And find myself involved in mire

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Up to old Jacob's hips or higher.
 These services you can't deny,
 As Jacob's bones will testify
 In spreading this important news
 I've spoilt my clothes, my boots and shoes.

In a request very common in advertisements of post riders, he urged his customers to pay the money due to him,

Or else I fear that our next meeting
 Will by authority be greeting
 Signed by his worship,———, Esquire.
 So then you'll know that I am
 J. Dwyer²

Travel conditions in that same year were further illustrated by the United States postmaster general's call for bids for transporting mail. For the eighty miles from Rutland to Lansingburg (now part of Troy, N.Y.), the successful bidder was to leave Rutland at noon on Monday and arrive in Lansingburg by 10 A.M. on Thursday—about 34 hours of travel time, or somewhat less than 2½ miles per hour.³ By 1802, matters had improved only slightly: bidders for a mail route including Rutland and Fair Haven were to cover the fifteen miles between those villages in four hours at the start of their route and in six hours on the return trip.⁴

The account books of William Ward of Poultney reflect the difficulty and cost of transportation in this period. Between 1807 and 1823 he hauled tons of goods from Poultney to the Hudson River port of Troy in his heavy wagons. From Poultney he carried hundreds of pounds of pork and such items as “1,714 pounds of cheese and whiskey” for a Poultney storekeeper and “a load of machines” from John Stanley's foundry. On the return trip he brought bushels of salt, barrels of fish, and kegs of molasses. The cost of hauling these goods somewhat less than eighty miles was one-sixth of the value of the pork and 37 percent and 23 percent, respectively, of the value of the salt and whiskey.

The turnpike craze of the first decades of the nineteenth century, in which groups of individuals improved or built sections of road in return for being allowed to charge fees from the public, offered a controversial solution to difficult travel conditions. In November of 1804, it was reported that twenty-seven petitions to establish turnpikes had been submitted to the Vermont legislature, along with five remonstrances against them. The turnpike opponents did not mince words, saying that when a turnpike proposal was beaten “there's ten that smiles to one that cries” and comparing a turnpike to a harlot, “crying out to the unwary, ‘turn in hither.’”⁵

In 1805 the Vermont legislature granted charters to two turnpikes that especially affected western Rutland County. The Fair Haven Turnpike

ran from the state line in southwestern Fair Haven some 27 miles northward to the south line of Benson; the Poultney Turnpike (in which foundry owner John Stanley was a key figure) ran from the end of the Hubbardton Pike in Castleton about 12 miles to the Northern New York Turnpike, which it met at the state line between Poultney and Granville.⁶ How much the turnpikes did to improve transportation is uncertain, but a steady flow of petitions to the legislature for relief suggests that those projects failed to meet the hopes of the entrepreneurs who established them.

One particular problem was the Vermont law that allowed any person to pass through a turnpike gate without paying if that person lived within eight miles of that gate. (Persons traveling to or from church, or military duty, or a grist or saw mill, were also exempted.) In 1808, the owners of the Fair Haven Turnpike, pointing out that too many travelers claimed to live within eight miles of a gate, claimed that this provision would prevent them from finishing the turnpike in the allotted five years (by 1810), and asked for an extension. The extension apparently was not granted, and in 1814 the turnpike proprietors, stating that a court had nullified their charter because they did not finish the pike until June 2, 1811, asked the legislature to reinstate the charter and repeal the eight-mile law. The Poultney Turnpike had similar problems, and in 1810 its proprietors asked that they be given two more years to finish their pike.⁷

In 1817 the Fair Haven Turnpike group petitioned again, stating that they had used all the receipts of the company to maintain the road, and asking that residents living along the pike be allowed to work off their town taxes on that road, as they sometimes did on town roads. The proprietors also asked again for repeal of the eight-mile law. Four years later, the owners of the Poultney Turnpike reported similar difficulty, stating that they had spent about \$12,000 on the pike but that the receipts had never kept the road in shape. The only dividend, they claimed, had come from some money returned to them by an individual who had failed to build a section of the road as promised. Stating that they must have relief or give up, they asked permission to surrender the southern part of the pike, and to raise enough tolls on the remainder to give them some income beyond their expenses. The petition was rejected.⁸

In 1828, Dan Orms, clerk, reported that the Fair Haven Turnpike had paid out \$700 more than it had taken in at its two tollgates since 1818, and asked permission from the legislature to move the north gate. This petition failed. In 1829 he again detailed the difficulties faced by that pike. He stated that an 1819 law had established the north gate just north of the Orwell line due to the influence of persons opposing the turnpike, and that those persons had built a shunpike bypassing the gate by a road meeting the pike 100 rods north and 100 rods south of it.

Since the shunpike was built in 1821, he reported, the chartered pike had averaged about \$30 profit yearly from that gate after paying the gatekeeper. He requested to move the gate, and petitioned to change the eight-mile rule to a two-mile rule.⁹

Within six years of this petition, the Fair Haven and Poultney turnpikes ceased to exist when the legislature repealed their incorporations in late 1833 and late 1834, respectively. By this time, the roads were largely irrelevant. Ten years earlier, a letter writer had complained that the free road to Granville was in better condition than the turnpike upon which the traveler must pay ten cents to ride.¹⁰

At least some improvement in the public roads resulted from channeling part of the energy expended each year in giant celebrations of the Fourth of July into public work on the roads. For example, in 1823 the citizens of Wells assembled at 8 A.M. on the Fourth with provisions, teams, ploughs, scrapers, and shovels to work on town roads under the direction of a committee of arrangements, gathering eight hours later for a “sumptuous repast.” Poultney residents met an hour earlier to work on two sections of roads in their town, with a dinner provided by people of the areas whose roads were being improved. Noting that a Whitehall man had both arms blown off while celebrating, the editor of the Poultney newspaper stated that work on the roads was much better than a day of “rioting and debauchery.”¹¹

In the following year, more than 100 men worked on the road from Poultney to Castleton, resulting in a road that was proudly labeled “as good as any in the county.” After their community dinner at four, sixteen toasts were drunk; along with “Washington’s Memory” and “Lord Byron’s Memory,” subjects of toasts included “Patriotic Diggers,” “Good Roads,” “Ladies Who Got the Meal,” and “Our Castleton and South Poultney Friends Who Helped.”¹²

Long before the toll roads limped to their ignominious end, the people of western Rutland County had become aware of two developments that would revolutionize transportation—canals and railroads. In 1817 subscribers to the *Rutland Herald* could read of the plans of New York State to build two canals—the “western” (Erie) and the “Great Northern” (Champlain)—and of the plans for digging the latter (thirty feet wide at the top, twenty feet wide at the bottom, and three feet deep). “The idea, indeed, may seem visionary, but we believe the period is not far distant, when our present toilsome method of transporting to and exporting from market, will be rendered in a great degree unnecessary, by the more easy conveyance of boat transportation.”¹³ Work on the Northern Canal commenced a few months later.

Six years later, on September 17, 1823, the *Poultney Gazette* reported

that the first ocean-going vessel, the Vermont sloop *Gleaner*, had reached Troy from Lake Champlain. Its departure from Troy for New York City was hailed by cannon, musketry, and three companies of volunteers; a similar celebration greeted it in New York City. The boat contained 1,000 bushels of wheat and 35 barrels of potash, marking a new day in the export of Vermont products. "Verily, anticipation in our country can scarcely keep up with reality," the Poultney editor wrote.¹⁴

For many years, Poultney merchants had hired teams to carry tons of goods to Troy on the Hudson in the fall after the farmers had brought their cheeses to the stores. The advertisement by S. W. Dana for thirty teams to haul goods "to the canal" on October 21, 1824, three weeks after his "cheese fair," illustrated the change in the trade routes of western Vermont.¹⁵

The tremendous success of the Erie Canal, completed on October 26, 1825, launched a "canal craze." Throughout the settled parts of the United States, a rush was on to build canals to imitate the success of New York State. Rutland County was no exception, and within four months of the completion of the Erie Canal a charter for the "Otter Creek and Castleton River Canal Company" had been granted. The group that met in Rutland to act upon this charter heard of the plans for a canal from Rutland to Whitehall, and for another canal along Otter Creek from Middlebury to Wallingford that would meet the first canal at Rutland. The meeting put into effect plans to get a charter from the New York legislature for the section of canal that would lie in that state, and to survey the Vermont portions of the canal.¹⁶

Soon Vermonters were reading of the great advantages of the proposed canal. It should be comparatively easy to build, the *National Standard* stated, with no great differences in water levels, and should not cost over \$200,000. The *Rutland Herald* editor listed the many products that would pour out of Vermont's hills and valleys, and waxed poetic about "mingling the waters of the Atlantic with our pure fountains which flow from the proud hills which surround us."¹⁷

By August 1826, a survey showed that the difference in the water levels was "somewhat greater than had been anticipated," but the Rutland editor urged everyone to support this canal, which would bring so much wealth to the people of the area. Six months later, it was reported that a committee had found a rather unfavorable reception in Albany, where the New York legislature was flooded with requests for canals. The legislature agreed to charter the Otter Creek and Castleton River Canal, but not to give financial support.¹⁸

This failure, combined with the survey showing a greater water level drop from one end of the canal to the other than had been expected,

apparently doomed the Otter Creek and Castleton River Canal; an 1835 article mentioned that the project had failed “two or three years ago” when its stock failed to sell. As a practical matter, this canal project probably was doomed from the start. A month before the first meeting of its promoters, the Rutland paper had carried an article on the success of the Stockton and Darlington Railroad in England, with predictions of widespread use of railroads in the United States. By 1830, the Rutland editor was reporting that, contrary to expectations, it had been proven that steam power could move a car eighteen miles per hour on rails, while canal boats could move at fifteen miles per hour, but only at four to six miles per hour without risk of destroying the canals.¹⁹ For northern New England, the fact that canals were frozen four months of each year was an additional handicap.

In late 1831, plans for two railroads for western Rutland County appeared, starting a rivalry that was to continue for many years. In September, a group consisting largely of Rutland men announced that they would petition the Vermont legislature for permission to build a railroad from Rutland to the New York line in the direction of Whitehall, and would petition the New York legislature for permission to continue the line to Whitehall. The Vermont legislature granted this charter in November. In December, a group consisting largely of Poultney men, including Amos Bliss, storekeeper and newspaper owner, and Henry Ruggles, foundry owner, met in Poultney to announce their plans for a rival railroad. Their line would run from Rutland through Castleton and Poultney in Vermont and Granville, Salem, and Greenwich in New York to the Hoosick River.²⁰

Action was slow with the Rutland and Whitehall promoters. Announcing a meeting at which some steps might be taken, the Rutland editor stated that the group seemed to have been asleep since receiving the charter more than a year earlier. He pointed out, in a statement similar to previous comments about the canal, that farmers could expect to see their real estate increase in value by perhaps 100 percent, and that the value of their goods sold would increase while items purchased would decrease in price. Nearly three months later, the paper announced that a survey of the railway route would be made. After two years, the editor urged action in selling the company’s stock, but one week later he had to report that an emissary to Albany had discovered that their charter had expired.²¹

In July 1835, nearly four years after the chartering, an engineer’s optimistic report on the proposed Rutland and Whitehall railroad was published, estimating the total cost of building the road at \$262,500. This included building 25 miles of horse path at \$200 per mile, \$5,000 for

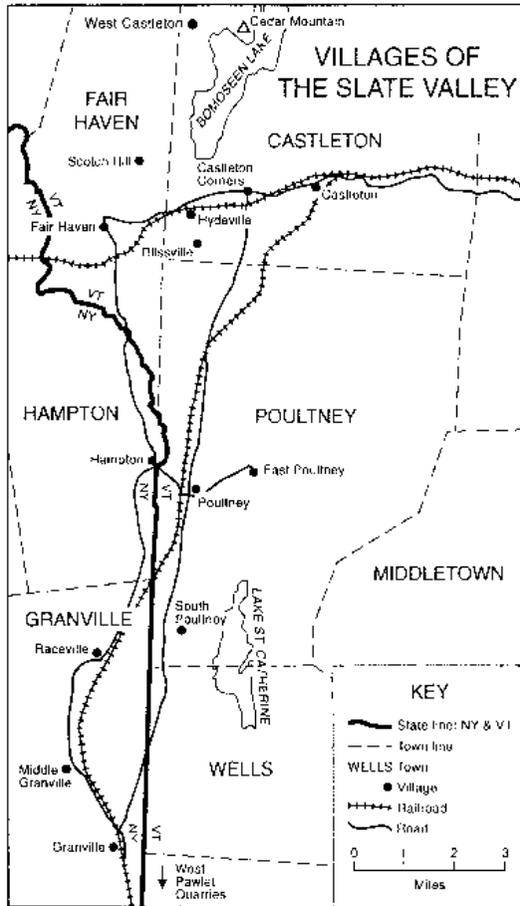
carriage houses and stables, and the cost of 25 freight horses and 16 passenger horses. He estimated annual receipts at \$56,160.75 and annual costs of \$18,944.80, including \$12,000 for wages, feed for horses, and fuel for engines, resulting in an estimated annual profit of \$36,206.25, or 14.5 percent of the cost. Now, the editor wrote, all the project needed was a helmsman who would win “imperishable fame” by taking charge of this great project and succeeding.²²

When it was announced that the Rutland and Whitehall stock (2000 shares at \$100 each) finally would go on sale in September 1835, the editor warned that it probably would not all be sold immediately because there just was not enough money in the area, but that residents should not despair, because it surely would be built eventually. A year later, he opposed as visionary a plan to use Vermont’s share of the National Revenue Surplus to build railroads through Vermont, and another to tunnel through the Green Mountains, urging concentration instead upon the Rutland and Whitehall line.²³

A new proposal to sell that railroad’s stock came in 1836 when the Vermont legislature established the Rutland Railroad Bank. Each subscriber was required to buy stock in the Rutland and Whitehall Railroad in order to buy an equal amount of stock in the bank, and the bank could not start doing business until \$100,000 had been spent on the railroad. The timing could hardly have been worse; in the spring of 1837 when the stock was offered for sale, the Panic of 1837 was upon the country. Reports of financial collapse were everywhere, with railroad stocks falling lower than ever known before. On May 5, 1837, the *Herald* reported that “this has been the gloomiest week that New York has ever seen,” and that “internal improvements all over the country are suspended. . . . Surely this is a DARK AGE.”²⁴

With railroad developments stymied by the depression, lines of stage routes continued to provide the only reliable passage to the area. Post riders were advertising their routes at least as late as 1836.²⁵

Ten years after the Panic of 1837 disrupted their plans, the two rival railroads seemed to be starting from scratch. At a meeting in Hydeville in 1847, sponsors of the Whitehall plan decided to petition the Vermont legislature for a charter allowing them to build to the New York border in the direction of Whitehall. Within two weeks, a Poultney meeting expressed approval of a railroad to the south and west of Poultney, probably meeting the Saratoga and Whitehall at Ft. Ann. In January 1848 stock for this “Rutland and Washington Railroad” went on sale, and was reported to be oversubscribed. (Under pressure from Salem-area interests, this road shifted its plans, deciding to go to Troy via Salem rather than to Ft. Ann). Later that year, stock of the Rutland and White-



“Villages of the Slate Valley.” Map by Stacey Hodges, University of Maine at Farmington Instructional Media Center. Whitehall, N.Y., is six miles west by railroad from the left edge of the map; Rutland, Vt., is six miles east from the right edge of the map; and Troy, N.Y., is sixty-one miles south from the lower edge of the map.

hall was offered to the public. The bitterness between the two railroad groups was evident in a letter of February 9, 1848, in which a sympathizer with the Whitehall group charged that the Poultney-centered group had included names of convicts in the state prison and privates in service in the Mexican War in order to gain enough signatures.²⁶

The Vermont legislature originally had planned for one railroad to go

from Rutland to the New York border at either Fair Haven or Poultney. After a decision was made for Poultney, according to the *Rutland Herald*, the Fair Haven group got a charter to build from the New York state line to Rutland through Fair Haven. The act provided, however, that if the Rutland and Washington group should spend \$10,000 on their railroad in one year, the Rutland and Whitehall could go east only as far as Castleton. By 1849 the Rutland and Washington had spent much more than \$10,000 in one year, having finished the Rutland–Castleton section and completed part of the Castleton–Poultney section. This nullified the right of the Rutland and Whitehall group to build east of Castleton. In 1849, and for at least ten years thereafter, the Rutland and Whitehall had a bill in the legislature each year to let them build to Rutland—but these efforts all failed, leaving the Rutland and Whitehall with no way of getting their passengers to Rutland except by stage or by the rival line.²⁷

In October 1850, the Rutland and Washington Railroad ran its first passenger cars: a special trip to the Rutland County Agricultural Fair in Castleton. One passenger was not too pleased by the one open car (smelling of sheep) and by the two small passenger cars with unplanned hemlock benches on steel springs. A railway official responded that this was a special train, run at a return-ticket cost of fifty cents per person, with cars procured on an emergency basis; on the second day, the passenger cars had fine velvet seats. The 9-mile trip took 40 minutes in the morning, and 30 minutes on the return trip. (Unable to run a competing train, the Rutland and Whitehall ran a stage starting from Rutland at the same time; the horses soon fell behind the train.)²⁸

While one letter writer told of the excellent railroad from Rutland to Castleton, another complained about the lack of fences around the railroad lines (a situation soon to be corrected by the legislature), and about the fact that the big white signs saying “Look Out While the Bell Rings” were not much help. The Rutland and Washington now made connections with the Troy and Rutland at Eagle Bridge, but the unfinished section from Castleton to Salem added an extra six hours by stage to the time of the trip to New York. Meanwhile, the Rutland editor complained that the Rutland and Whitehall line refused to make a connection with the Rutland and Washington trains at Castleton.²⁹ Thus, the Rutland and Whitehall ran trains from Whitehall to Castleton and conveyed its passengers to Rutland by stage, while the Rutland and Washington ran trains from Rutland to Castleton and conveyed passengers by stage to Salem, without a formal connection between the two lines.

In July 1851, the Rutland editor rode the not-quite-finished route from Castleton to Poultney, on a special train run for the Castleton Seminary and Troy Conference Academy public examinations. He also

reported that a train from the Rutland and Whitehall was making connections with the Rutland and Washington at Castleton. On March 11, 1852, the first train of the Rutland and Washington ran all the way to Troy, making a connection at Eagle Bridge. In September, 13,850 customers traveled on the Rutland and Washington line to the state fair in Rutland during a three-day period.³⁰

Financial problems and bankruptcy for some of these railroads lay ahead in the 1850s. However, by 1852 western Rutland County finally had a transportation system on which its developing marble and slate industries could ship their heavy products to all parts of the country, which could cover the distance from Rutland to Castleton at about a mile-per-minute pace, and which would transport its people the 468 miles round-trip to New York City and back in one long day of travel. To people who had traveled the county's horrible roads at a snail's pace fifty years earlier, the transformation was truly amazing.

Some old-timers must have felt like the Boston writer quoted in the *Rutland Herald* several years earlier: "What a terrible hurry the world is in! But a few years ago eleven or twelve miles an hour in a steamboat was considered the *ne plus ultra* of speed in traveling; now we are scarcely satisfied with thirty in those flying machines called railroad locomotives! We begin already to talk of one hundred miles per hour! The brain grows dizzy at the very thought of it! . . . Soon we'll outstrip time herself, and get there before we leave."³¹

NOTES

- ¹ *Farmer's Library* (Fair Haven, Vermont), 28 December 1795.
- ² *Rutland Herald*, 11 September 1797.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 10 July 1797.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 7 June 1802.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 3 November 1804.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 1 February 1806.
- ⁷ *Vermont State Papers* (Petitions), 8:97; 80:146; 80:129.
- ⁸ *Ibid.* (Petitions), 52:181; 55:189.
- ⁹ *Ibid.* (Petitions), 60:71; 60:251.
- ¹⁰ *Rutland Herald*, 12 November 1833; 27 October 1834; 26 May 1824.
- ¹¹ *Poultney Gazette*, 2 July and 9 July, 1823.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 7 July 1824.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 9 April 1817.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13 November 1817; 17 September 1823.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 22 September, 1824.
- ¹⁶ *Rutland Herald*, 28 February 1826.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 28 March and 4 April, 1826.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 22 August 1826; 27 February 1827.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4 August 1835; 31 January 1826; 2 February 1830.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 20 September, 22 November, 20 December, 1831.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 22 January and 7 May, 1833; 27 April and 4 May, 1835.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 7 July 1835.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 11 August, 1 September, 1835; 11 October, 1836.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 12 December, 1836; 4 April, 18 April, 15 May, 16 May 1837.

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²⁵ Ibid., 6 May, 1846; 19 July, 1836.

²⁶ Ibid., 30 June, 7 July, 8 December 1847; 26 January and 13 December 1848; 17 January 1849; 13 December and 9 February 1848.

²⁷ Ibid., 21 November 1849.

²⁸ Ibid., 17 October 1850.

²⁹ Ibid., 21 and 28 November 1850; 16 and 30 January 1851.

³⁰ Ibid., 24 July 1851; 18 March and 4 September, 1852.

³¹ Ibid., 18 August 1834.