



# YORKTOWN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

P. O. Box 355 - Yorktown Heights, NY 10598

<http://www.yorktownhistory.org>

## NEWSLETTER

Preserve the Past - Enlighten the Future

Winter 2005

### Images of Yorktown - Chapter Four "The Old Put"

By: Joan J. Fyfe, Editor

Welcome back! Remember the children's story about the train that could? It made it to the top of the hill, pulling its load, by will power, courage, strength and thought, "I think I can, I think I can". Well this story is about another train that could and did. The fourth Chapter of "Images of America Yorktown" The "Put"

A special thank you to Alice Roker, Yorktown Town Clerk for permission to excerpt the book, "*Images of America Yorktown.*" And Otto M. Vondrak for his composition of this chapter.

Local residents and rail buffs speak nostalgically about "the Old Put," which once ran through town. The railroad ran for almost 90 years in Yorktown and served well, despite its false starts early on. ...The New York, Boston & Montreal Railroad was a far-flung empire that made sense on paper only. The Panic of 1873 put any grand plans on hold. In 1878, the New York, Westchester & Putnam was formed to hold any assets of value, namely the unfinished railroad running from High Bridge in the Bronx, all the way up to Carmel. The NYC & Northern Railroad was formed in 1879 to complete the railroad.

At the time, Crompond Corners was a small community consisting mainly of a Presbyterian church, cobbler's shop, slaughterhouse, tannery, tavern, an inn, and post office. Most of the town was centered on what is today the intersection of Rout 202 and 132. The arrival of the railroad spurred the growth of today's downtown area. In 1870, land was purchased from Edward B. Underhill and Silas C. Whitney for railroad construction. The hamlet of Underhill rapidly developed round the tracks after regular service began in 1877. Aaron Clark opened the first shop south of the depot on August 27, 1877. By then, the town consisted of five stores, more than a dozen homes, a schoolhouse, a hotel, two blacksmiths, a wheelwright and two churches. This growth continued through the 1880s

Regularly scheduled service commenced in 1880. The railroad changes its name to New York & Northern on October 11, 1887. With frequent and reliable service to NYC, it was now possible for farmers to inexpensively transport large quantities of their milk and produce to the markets of NY. The railroad was generally responsible for the development of Yorktown as an agricultural breadbasket of Westchester County through the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.....The New York Central took over the line in 1896 to keep it out of any future competitor's hands. The NY Central officially named the line the Putnam Division, but locals endearingly referred to it as the Put.

In 1902, land was acquired in Yorktown from Henry C. Kear for the construction of a storage yard and light-engine servicing facilities.....today, the town highway department occupies the site. Also in 1902, a spur was planned and constructed to serve the newly formed New York State training school for boys, located at the south end of the lake. The Mohansic Spur branched off from the main one at the Yorktown depot, curving northwest through town before heading west and terminating alongside the main administration building for the school.

### ***DEPRESSION AGAIN***

The "Old Put" would still be with us today if a 1928 plan proposed by the Westchester County Transit Commission was completed. The plan consisted of connecting two tracks of the Hudson division with the Putnam's, enter a tunnel under the Harlem River at 149th Street, and reach the foot of Manhattan via express tunnel under Madison Avenue. Estimated cost was \$150 million dollars. The 1929 Depression put a quick demise to any expensive proposals.

But in 1929, a "first" did occur. The "Put" main line was chosen because of its curves and grades as a proving ground for diesel power. On March 18 at 9:20 A.M., America's first diesel-power passenger train left High Bridge. It was so successful, that in June, NYC tested a different diesel for over-the-road freight service. It only mishap was on a sharp curve as it approached Carmel. The engine tore off a ten-foot sliver of rail.

### ***MAKE WAY FOR ROCKEFELLER***

The depression came in 1929, but it had no effect on John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Mr. Rockefeller was annoyed by the Putnam division main line for it went through his Pocantico Hills property. Being a man of means he paid to have the railroad moved. He purchase the entire village of East View to make way or a new right-of-way. On April 15, 1930, a construction crew of 500 men began work on the railroad relocation. That same day, the Herald Tribune reported the sale of the Christian Brothers vineyards to the Rockefellers for a million dollars. The winery relocated from Pocantico Hills to Barrytown in Putnam County.

On March 15, 1931, the new route removed three stations, Tarrytown Heights, Tower Hill, and Pocantico Hills from the Putnam division. The new route served fewer people and no freight traffic. Plus it put it within a half a mile of the Harlem division.

### ***ANOTHER PIECE ABANDONED***

The New York Central which had saved the line in 1894 no longer exists. It had merged with the Pennsylvania and the New Haven to form the Penn Central in 1968. That ailing enterprise became a principal component of Conrail, a federally-backed corporation that began on April 1, 1976. Today Conrail is making headlines in the battle between CSX and Norfolk Southern on which railroad will merge with it and become the third largest railroad in United States. So perhaps the "Old Put" will rise again. A high-speed rail link may rejuvenate the "Old Put."

At the end of 1942, the New York Central filed for abandonment of the Yonkers branch, citing annual losses of \$71,000. Despite opposition from Yonkers, the ICC approved of the petition. The fight went all the way to the United States Supreme Court. The court refused to stay the cessation of service, but it did stop the rehearing and scrapping began 9 days later for the war effort. So even World War II added to the demise of the "Old Put." where increased highway congestion and decreased, deteriorated rail service would lead to a serious transportation crisis. The RPA recommended that the city's commuter lines be taken over and operated by a public agency. But the plan was vetoed by Robert Moses, the adamantly pro-highway planner and builder who dominated New York's public works. The Putnam division faced the postwar period as a monument to railroading's past.

Source: Internet - History of the Old Put

Contd. from cover page

In 1911, plans were drawn to establish an insane asylum along the Mohansic lake. Preliminary work had begun when problems arose. Some inmates had been transported to the site before any structures were built. They had managed to kill the guard assigned to watch over them. Support for the plan quickly waned.

...The stop at Croton Heights, off Route 118, was little more than a flag stop with a single structure of three walls and no agent.... The present passenger station in Yorktown Heights was built by the railroad in 1888. Today, it is listed on the local, state and National Registers of Historic Places. It was put up for sale by the Railroad and was purchased by the Town in 1966. In 1974, the town fathers considered moving the depot to the center of town for use by commuters riding the bus. This idea was abandoned in 1974, and steps were taken to preserve the depot in its original location for the bicentennial celebration. A later fire damaged the interior and the Town in pursuing architectural services for restoration.

.....The Put remained a testament to the older times in a world of modern railroading. Small steam engines ran trains on a single-track main line, on timetable and train order authority passed stations lit with kerosene and equipped with Morse Code telegraph keys. Through the postwar years, many railroads sought to realize savings by switching from steam to diesel locomotives. Diesel did not require the extensive servicing facilities and numerous employees that kept steam trains running.

.....On Saturday, September 30, 1951, the last steam run on the Putnam Division departed from Yorktown Heights. Charles H. Baker, the Yorktown Heights stationmaster, handed up the order to engineer Washburn. At exactly 4:05 p.m., the last steam train headed south toward the Bronx. Once steam had left the Put, the service facilities at Yorktown were dismantled.

When the Railroad announced its intention to end all commuter service on the Put, concerned commuters spend \$35,000 in legal fees fighting the decision. The New York State Public Service Commission refused to hear any arguments on its decision to allow the New York Central to discontinue service

The railroad remained intact for several years after 1958, serving the few freight customers along the line.

Declining traffic spelled the end for the Put...After September 12, 1962, the railroad left Yorktown forever.

Today, almost the entire length of the former Putnam Division can be hiked or biked as part of the North County Trailway. Markers are posted along the way, pointing out locations of depots and other items of historic interest. While the rails are long gone, one can still enjoy the idyllic splendor along the routes of the Old Put and imagine what it was like to hear the whistle echo through the valley.



Today's renovated Railroad Park and Station, exterior by the Town of Yorktown and the Yorktown Historical Society

***Please renew  
your membership***

***Type of Memberships***

Individual	\$ 10
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Sustaining	\$ 25
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Please mail checks to:  
Yorktown Historical Society  
P. O. Box 355 - Yorktown Heights, NY  
10598

About the organization: The Yorktown Historical Society is a not-for profit organization with a 15-member Board of Trustees. It was established in 1976 for the purpose of identifying and preserving local historic sites and structures in and around the town of Yorktown. and researching, interpreting and sharing local history. It meets once a month either in committees, board meetings or special programs; all are open to the public.

*All programs are open to the public and free of charge.*

Yorktown Historical Society Programs for 2005

January 25, 2005 – Tuesday @ 7:00 p.m. - The Nutrition Center at the Yorktown Community and Cultural Center.

**America The Beautiful. Women and the Flag**, presented by Judy Grace. This is a joint program sponsored by The Taconic Post Card Club, Friends of the Yorktown Museum and the Yorktown Historical Society. This program is based upon the Richard Sanders' collection of images on posters, sheet music, tobacco bales, postcards, etc. of women draped with American flags. The talk relates to historical markers and pictorial symbols referring to patriotism and linked to American history and the clothes that women wore.

February 23 or 24 (date to be confirmed) Yorktown Community Center Senior Room.

Waymond Brothers will present a slide lecture presentation about **the Museum of the Underground Railroad in Peekskill.**

April 21, 2005 – Croton Free Library – Paul Martin.

### A GIFT FOR ALL SEASONS



#### **"Eternal Vigilance"**

June 1779, Crompond

(Yorktown) NY

Image size 11" x 17"

Release Date: October 2002

Edition size 500: 50 A/P: 25

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You can view the artwork of Paul Martin at the Yorktown Historical Website:

<http://www.yorktownhistory.org>

and also place an order for a limited edition of this terrific print.

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