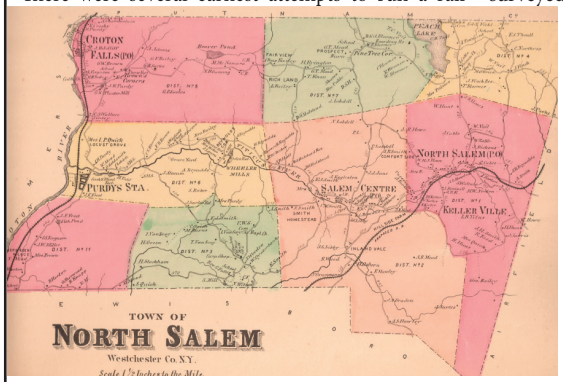
The Tracks To Nowhere

by Hoagy B. Carmichael

While standing on the old raised roadbed that runs parallel to Finch Road I could almost hear the whistle of the electric train that was planned from Golden's Bridge to Danbury via Ridgefield. Johnny Mercer's lyric ran through me as I was surrounded by the smell of the spring buds that dotted the swamp maples:

Do you hear that whistle down the line?
I figure that it's Engine Number 49.…
See the ol' smoke risin' 'round the bend,
I reckon that she knows she's gonna meet a friend

There were several earnest attempts to run a rail line through North Salem, thus linking southern Connecticut with northern Westchester and the railroad that fed New York City then known as the New York & Harlem. The pastures near Brewster, Purdys and Croton Falls were important producers of milk (estimated to be 90,000 quarts a day) bound for New York that were first processed by the four major plants (one next to King Lumber in Golden's Bridge) in the area. In 1864, a company called The New York, Housatonic and Northern Railroad filed a stock offering prospectus, laced with pre-SEC hyperbole, for a proposed passenger and freight line that was to run southwest from Brookfield, Connecticut through Danbury, Ridgefield, North Salem and then on to White Plains, ending in Mount Vernon. A shorter route to New York in the days before the automobile may have sounded attractive, but those who had invested $775,000 in the failed offering were forced to sell under foreclosure in the spring of 1870.

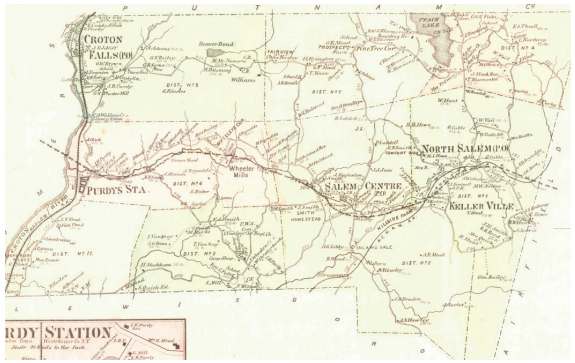


THE 1868 BEERS MAP SHOWS ONE OF THE PROPOSED LINES RUNNING FROM LEWISBORO TO RIDGEFIELD BETWEEN SALEM CENTER AND KEELERVILLE.

By 1872, another company, the New England Railroad, proposed an electric trolley line that would have run from Ridgefield along the northern side of "Keelerville," through Salem Center then passing along the Titicus River to Purdy's Station. Land was surveyed, and rights-of-way were granted, but the effects of "The Panic of 1873," (see The Coinage Act of 1873) undoubtedly cast uncertainty on the enterprise. Maps were drawn, money was raised and squandered, but by the mid-1870s residents of North Salem had little reason to rejoice.

In 1893, the newly-formed Danbury and State Line Railroad surveyed a proposed 14-miles of track that was to run from Golden's Bridge to Danbury, again passing through North Salem along a similar roadbed.

In the days before graded roads and automobiles, businessmen in Danbury, an important maker of felt hats that were in stores all over the eastern seaboard, needed reliable access to their customers in New York. Land was again carefully surveyed, and many of the names on the prospectus had a familiar ring to them. Several other upstart rail proposals came and went, including a company called the Golden's Bridge Electric Railway Company, chartered in 1901, that was in particular trying to gain a competitive edge over the New Haven line by connecting to New York City via the New York and Harlem Railroad that ran through Golden's Bridge. This new line,



THE 1868 BEERS MAP SHOWS ONE OF THE PROPOSED LINES RUNNING FROM LEWISBORO TO RIDGEFIELD BETWEEN SALEM CENTER AND KEELERVILLE.

claimed that they owned about 15 miles of 50-foot wide right of way from Danbury to Golden's Bridge, stating that: "the road is laid with 80 pound rail on standard chestnut ties… with two overhead 2/0 trolley wires…" The prospectus also claimed there was an existing one-mile spur (one way fare -15 cents) to a 250 acre resort community, known as Peach Lake, that was to feature a proposed large waterside hotel, amusement park and building lots as incentive. They further stated that each of the three cars, powered by four 45-horse power motors, would be fully operational by February 15, 1902.

Local historians have confirmed that tracks were laid, and electrified, from Danbury through Ridgebury and into North Salem, conveniently ending at one of the promoter's property, William H. I. Howe, at a point just short of Salem Center. Tracks were laid to Peach Lake from the west side of the present Salem Golf Club, with reports of a test train that at least once successfully made the one-mile run. With money, and professional expertise in short supply, it is not surprising that the project fell short of its lofty projections. A cadre of new investors from Philadelphia appeared in 1903 willing to underwrite the company with promises "that the road will be pushed to an early completion."

The Senate of the State of New York agreed to a further mortgage of $500,000 in June 1903, and yet by the spring of 1904 there was still no sign of those fancy new rail cars running past North Salem Center. Several other attempts were made to resurrect the idea, but by 1915 it was clear that there was no longer the economic incentive to go to the trouble. Many of the pasturelands that once stretched for miles in northern Westchester had given way to the insatiable need for fresh sources of water by the city of New York. Well-graded roads were being built to service the automobile, and refrigerated trucks were able to deliver goods to stations on the Harlem Rail Line.

It is the members of the Golden's Bridge Hounds and North Salem Bridle Trails Association that probably know better than most where the existing rail beds remain in North Salem. Many are conveniently used as riding trails today. Whether there were any overhead electric lines in our community is an open question, but it is clear that by 1915 what track was laid had been removed and the idea of a rail line coursing through North Salem forever abandoned.

This article was reprinted with permission from the North Salem Historical Society. It appeared in their Summer 2014 Bulletin. If you would like a full copy of the article or any other documents in their archives, please email northsalemhistoricalsociety@gmail.com.



THE 1911 BROMLEY MAP SHOWS TWO VERY DIFFERENT PROPOSED LINES. THE WESTCHESTER NORTHERN RUNNING NORTH-SOUTH THROUGH SALEM CENTER AND TO THE WEST OF PEACH LAKE. THE DANBURY AND HARLEM RAILWAY RUNNING FROM NORTH SALEM CENTER TO RIDGEFIELD IS ALONG TODAY'S FINCH ROAD.