

*Technological Innovation in the Victorian Mohawk Valley:
Railroads, Modernity, and the Establishment of a National
Character*

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For the Mohawk Valley, the Victorian Era was a time of change and forward thinking. It brought about a push toward a more modern way of life, a strong sense of nationalism, and a desire to prove ourselves as equal to, or even better than, other countries that already had the technology that the United States was striving to procure.¹ Many great inventions came out of this time period, but the railroad was the most important. The development of the railroad revolutionized social interaction, activities, and attitudes toward a forward moving society, and strongly enhanced feelings of modernity. Through this, people in the Mohawk Valley, as well as throughout the rest of United States, began to witness the establishment of a strong national character brought about through technological progress.

What are some of the things that make a country “modern”?² During the Victorian Era, the railroad was the symbol of modernity and incorporated essential features necessary for a “modern” society, such as speed, mechanized power, the substitution of metal for wood, and an emphasis on precise timing.³ Any country that possessed a railroad was considered among the most technologically advanced and forward thinking in the world. Modernization was the key to development and went hand in hand with urbanization, industrialization, and social mobility. According to historian Amy Richter, “For nineteenth-century Americans, the railroad was the apotheosis of their age- the ultimate realization of Victorian faith in hard work, discipline, order, and

¹ Amy G. Richter, *Home on the Rails: Women, the Railroad, and the Rise of Public Domesticity*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005,) pp. 1-4.

² For the purposes of this project, the word “modern” will be placed in quotations marks for the duration of this paper. This signifies a reference to the cultural implications of modernity to New York and the United States, rather than something that is merely new or advancement in a particular technology.

³ Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989,) p. 222.

national progress.”⁴ There were many characteristics of the Victorian Era that the railroad encompassed and celebrated such as nationalism, efficiency, discipline, as well as urbanization and rationalization.⁵ Railroads were quickly seen as the prime movers of industry, in an age when speed, time, and efficiency created the worth of a nation.⁶

The economic and social revolutions that the railroads were creating in England quickly found their way to New York. It was from there, and specifically through the Mohawk Valley, that feelings of modernity and a more industrialized way of life made their way to the rest of the country. The railroads were exactly what the American people were looking for to create a strong national character; one based on a thriving economy and a fast moving and forward thinking society, rather than the incapable and inept country the rest of the world thought them to be. National character refers to a sense of identity, personality, culture, and pride that allowed the people of America to be set apart from the rest of the world, and also established their confidence as Americans and members of a unified nation. This movement toward modernization would lead to a competition between the United States and the rest of the world, during which the country truly began to develop its national character.

As the movement toward modernization began to find its way to New York, it led to competition between the United States and the rest of the world, i.e. Great Britain and Western Europe, where Americans began to have a great deal of pride in who they were as individuals, and as a unified nation. In the early 1800s, Great Britain was leading everyone else in an industrial revolution. Equally as important, Britain was united and

⁴ Richter, p. 4.

⁵ Ibid., p. 4

⁶ Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: the Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century*, (California: The University of California Press, 1977,) p. 2

had a strong national character. With a successful transportation system, and industry, Britain had the ability to become the most successful country in the world. For the United States, the railroad was the innovation that was going to put them on an equal footing with Great Britain in creating a “modern” American nation. Originally, the purpose of the railroad was to extend transportation into areas where no natural waterways existed, thereby connecting the east and west coasts to gain new territory.⁷ With the country united by a single transportation system, there was even a chance that America could surpass Britain and Western Europe in technological innovativeness.

Americans knew that if they wanted to industrialize the entire nation, they would have to have reliable transportation. “Transport technology is the material base of potentiality, and equally the material base of the traveler’s space-time perception.”⁸ There was this idea that the railroad “annihilated space and time,” making it possible to unite the whole country into one large productive city, and multiply speed and the capacity of travel.⁹ In the early 1800s, much of the United States was untouched wilderness. All of the territory west of the current state of Illinois was open and virtually inaccessible. Land was abundant and labor expensive with few people capable of doing the work, whereas in Great Britain, the exact opposite was true. The landscape of America with its mountains, canyons, and other natural barriers made the construction of the railroad twice the achievement that it was in Britain. Previously in Great Britain, railroad tracks were laid in a straight line. In the United States, railroad tracks had to be adapted to suit their natural surroundings. Laying curved railroad lines became a

⁷ Ibid., p. 111.

⁸ Ibid., p. 36.

⁹ Ibid., p. 45.

signature characteristic for American railroads,¹⁰ demonstrating American innovativeness and setting the United States apart from other countries that had already begun to industrialize. The railroad ultimately began the industrial revolution in America, whereas in other countries such as Great Britain, it was a product of it. The railroad was not seen as simply advancement in transportation, but as a way to gain a new civilization out of a vast and inaccessible wilderness.¹¹

It is important to remember that the industrial revolution in Britain was receiving a great deal of attention, both there, as well as internationally. New York newspapers kept people up to date on new “modern” advancements that were taking place, including the development of the railroad. People living in England would write letters to the *American Railroad Journal*, discussing the wonders of the railroad and the great benefits that their country was reaping because of them. They would discuss the construction of new and improved railway cars and methods of laying tracks. Many letters to the editor also provided ideas for brand new trains that would be faster and more efficient.¹² In one letter written to the editor, the author states that “this is truly the age of invention and originality; but unfortunately we are still wandering in the green fields of imagination.”¹³ He goes on to provide some of his own ideas for creating new and improved railway systems for his country and the United States as well. People writing into this journal may have inspired many people to take a more active approach in making their own state “modern”. Seeing Great Britain benefit so drastically from this technology gave New York that extra incentive required to attempt to build its own railroad system with the

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 96-97.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 91.

¹² Published by DK Minor, “Pneumatic Railways.” *American Railroad Journal*. Vol. 5 No. 28 (Saturday, July 18, 1835) pp. 1-5.

hope that it could help its own country prosper.

The first railroad charters in America were constructed and run in New York. During this time, short lines were created but as the railroads began to expand westward, the rail lines continued to get longer.¹⁴ In 1831, the first trial trip was made on the Albany and Schenectady railroad.¹⁵ Within six years, railroads began passing through Utica and were met with mixed reactions. As more companies began to construct railroads throughout New York, the option of uniting all of the smaller railroad lines into the great New York Central was beginning to look like a real possibility. Many people in Utica and the surrounding areas feared this because, they worried that it would eliminate the need for a railroad in their town, and with the railroad bypassing them, it would severely hinder business and prevent Utica from continuing to thrive financially. Railroads brought business and commerce everywhere they went, becoming either the saving grace or a death sentence for surrounding cities. A city that was bypassed by the railroad often disappeared from the map entirely.¹⁶

By 1869, Cornelius Vanderbilt had united all the local New York railroads into the NY Central and Hudson River Railroads. This unification was responsible for uniting New York with the rest of America, which would become essential for the establishment of national character.¹⁷ People quickly began to realize the enormous benefits of such great technological advancements, and the railroad became the prime method of communication and travel throughout New York, as well as the rest of the country.

¹³ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁴ Schivelbusch, p. 103.

¹⁵ Albert Perry Brigham, *From Trail to Railway through the Appalachians*. (Port Washington NY/London: Kennikat Press, 1907, reissued 1970), p. 53.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 57.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 58.

Newburg, Albany, Schenectady, Utica, Rome, Syracuse, Rochester, and Buffalo became thriving cities and hotbeds of commerce, trade, and social interaction.¹⁸ With so many different railroads being built, a great deal of competition began to rise among the different lines. There were those who felt the railroads were going to be particularly beneficial in modernizing and developing the state of New York. They believed that competition among the rail lines was not necessarily negative, and would aid in the mission of New York railroad companies to open up the great western frontier. In the *American Railroad Journal*, a letter was sent pertaining to the railroad route being established from New York to the West. Its author noted that:

A proper competition, checked by physical laws, which are the only rational restraint among intelligent men, would ensure the proper development of the western country, to the great advantage of the city, and to the benefit of our state.¹⁹

As local cities continued to develop and become more prominent, America was finally put on track to becoming a strong industrialized nation, capable of holding its own among Europe's already well-established countries.

It became obvious to people that railroads were not the threat they had originally feared, but a tool to use on their way to greatness. Despite the initial resistance and fear in Utica brought about by the talks of uniting the railroads, people began to realize that their city would be one of the few leading the state of New York, as well as the rest of the country, in "modern" developments and manufacturing. New York quickly became the best place in the United States for iron manufacturers because of its new technological

¹⁸ Sam Bass Warner Jr., *The Urban Wilderness: A History of the American City*, (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1972), p. 59-60.

¹⁹ Published by DK Minor, "Railroad Route From New York to the West." *American Railroad Journal*. Vol. 18 (Thursday, July 3, 1845) p. 428.

methods and evolving society. As a result, New York led the country in coal and iron production. The mobility that the railroads provided the people of New York, was one of the most significant factors in creating the ties that bound all of the states of America together.²⁰ The city of Utica, and by extension the state of New York, could never have done as well as they did “without the ready access to raw materials via the rail lines to the west and ready access to markets via these same routes.”²¹ New York became easily linked with Pennsylvania, its primary source of material for iron production, and with the western states, its primary consumers. This created a codependency between the states that was largely responsible for the newly developing national character and unity of the nation.

According to an article in the *Utica Herald* in 1869, building longer and more numerous lines would allow New York to connect with the rest of the country and be the first step in unification and the spread of industrialization and modernism. Actions such as extending the Utica and Black River Railroad, and construction of the Chenango, Susquehanna Valley, and Midland Railroads would all mean prosperity for Utica, and by extension the rest of the country. According to this article, “It would open a shorter route for trade and travel to the southwest.”²² With the addition of new railroads, Utica would be able to meet the demands of freight and the rapid growth of goods and passenger travel in their increasingly industrialized state.²³ Many people saw that “clearly Central New York has reason to congratulate itself on the recent progress of railroads upon its

²⁰ Maurice Moffat and Stephen Rich, “The Railroads in a Changing Society.” *Journal of Educational Sociology*. Vol 27, No. 7, (Mar., 1954) p. 316.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

²² “Railroads, Iron, Coal.” *Utica NY Weekly Herald*. Tuesday, December 28, 1869, p. 2.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

territory.”²⁴ Central New Yorkers saw their cities as the gateways of success, and Uticans began to see themselves as major players in the construction and outcome of the new and improved United States.

For the people of New York, the railroads took on a romantic notion of travel and leisure. Excursions were held to celebrate the opening of new railroads. These were huge events where people would line up along the tracks and come from surrounding areas to ride the new trains.²⁵ These grand openings helped companies gain the interest of the people, as well as their support, which was essential to the livelihood and continued expansion of the railroad. Obviously travel became easier for people, but more importantly, they brought excitement and a belief that the future of America would be long and prosperous.²⁶

For the first thirty years, railroads inspired many authors to write about their contribution to the national character of America. To once again quote historian Amy Richter,

Despite their number and variety, when taken together, nineteenth-century railroad stories convey wide-ranging preoccupations with the nature of American national life, the influence of new commercial relationships, and the shifting boundary between public and private life.²⁷

One of the most important things that the railroad gave people in New York, was a way to realize their dreams. People viewed railroads as saviors of the nation, which had previously been seen as militarily weak and unable to compete with the rest of the world’s “modern” nations. Americans knew that in order to succeed, the country could

²⁴ Ibid., p. 2.

²⁵ Fred B Abele, *The Mohawk and Hudson Railroad Company: 1826-1853*, (NRHS: Mohawk Hudson Chapter., 1981,) pp. 14-15.

²⁶ James Arthur Ward, *Railroads and the Character of America: 1820-1887*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986,) pp. 4-13.

no longer stand still, but instead must change and evolve as countries in Europe already had.²⁸ At first, railroads inspired many authors to promote and advocate their resources and usefulness to the public. These writers were detrimental to gaining the support necessary to finish the construction of the railroads. With this new and improved technology that the United States was now capable of harnessing, it meant that the nation was growing and able to display, through the railroads, a sense of national unity.²⁹

There was a certain amount of mystery and romance surrounding the idea of the railroad. Owners of companies were rich and well known. Those of standing were provided with private cars, which added to the mystery and had people attempting to catch a glimpse of them. Railroads provided people with a “modern” form of passenger travel. People from many different classes and races traveled by train, which encouraged contact and intermingling between them. This was something that had previously been unheard of.³⁰ During this time, weekend getaways became extremely popular and allowed small towns such as Sylvan Beach to prosper. People who lived in the city could hop on a and train and leave for a weekend on a mini vacation. New Yorkers had quick and easy access to things that were done infrequently before the railroads were introduced.³¹

A great deal of entertainment was brought about and a social revolution of sorts began to take place. The circus became mobile and moved into different cities, and people had easy access to cities like Rome, which was known for its shops. Train depots

²⁷ Richter, p. 17.

²⁸ Ward, pp. 4-7.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 8-10.

³⁰ Richter, p. 14.

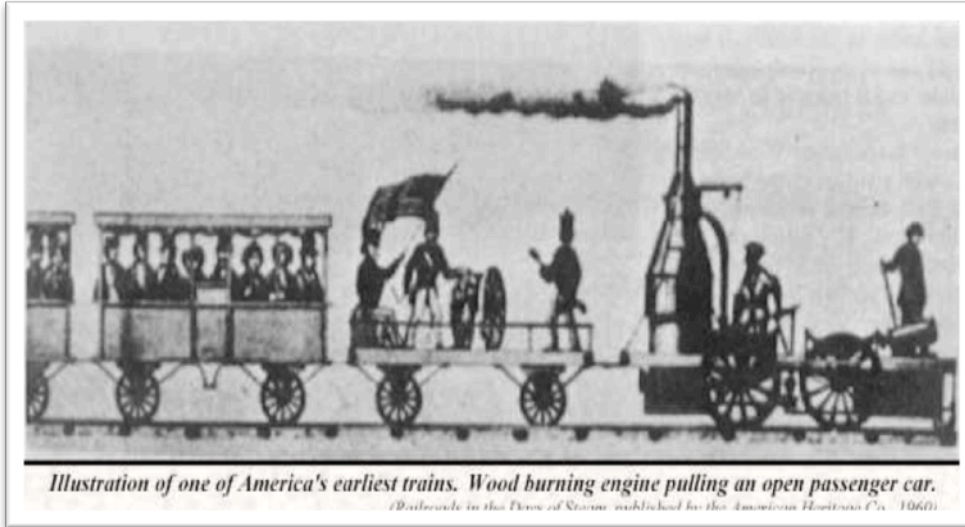
³¹ Coe, Arden. “The Ontario and Western in Oneida County.” *Oneida County Historical Society*, 2010. www.oneidacountyhistory.org/Transportation/O&WRailroad/O&WRail.asp.

quickly became the social centers of the community. All telegrams, baggage, and packages were sent to and through them. The train station was the place that people went for entertainment and to socialize. They would watch the mail and freight trains come and go, meet with friends, and make new acquaintances. Train stations also housed the latest news and gossip for the community.³² Before telephones, railroad stations were the center of communications. The telegraph office and the post office were located at the train stations as well, usually with the station agent running both.³³ New York was enjoying a new fast paced lifestyle with many more opportunities for social interaction than had been possible before. As railroads began to push westward, a whole new world opened up to the people of this area. For the first time, Central New Yorkers had easy access to the rest of the country. One of the most important impacts the railroads had for the United States was the unification of the states and the people into one nation.

With the expansion of the railroads, a stronger national character began to be further promoted. This new technology gave Americans a way to realize their dreams of an industrialized, independent, and technologically advanced country. Many believed that railroads would lead to greater advancements that would eventually cure American poverty, ignorance, and poor health.³⁴ The fears that the American people had for their country were quickly eliminated as the United States began to develop the resources and ability necessary to compete with more industrialized nations.

³² Ibid., p. 1.

³³ Maurice Moffat and Stephen Rich, p. 315.



The first railroads in New York consisted of open passenger cars and were the newest form of “modern” technology the state had to offer at the time.



Sylvan Beach quickly began to prosper as a result of the railroad’s new and efficient means of travel. People from all different classes traveled to the beach for weekend getaways and the area quickly became the most popular vacation spot in the Mohawk Valley.

Photo from: John Taibi and Bruce Tracy, *When the Railroads went to the Beach*. Depot Square Publishing, 1999.

³⁴ Ward, p. 4-13.



Railroad excursions quickly became a popular form of entertainment for people. Daisy picking in the countryside, (as depicted to the left) was one form of daily entertainment for those who wished to escape the hustle and bustle of city life during the early 1900s.



Train depots became the social centers for the community, where people went for entertainment and socialization. All sending of telegrams, baggage, and packages were done at the stations.

Photos from: Fred Abele, *The Mohawk and Hudson Railroad Company: 1826-1853*, (Mohawk Hudson Chapt., NRHS, 1981).

As technological developments began to surface as part of the new “modern” society, Utica was among the first cities to benefit from them. Street railroads were an advancement that made Utica one of the most prosperous cities in the state. A newspaper article in the *Johnstown Daily Republican* in 1898, discussed the advantages that the street railroads brought to the city of Utica in particular. According to the article, “One of the most important features of the modern city is its street railroads, and as in other lines of progress Utica is well at the front.”³⁵ It was firmly believed that any advancement made by the railroads would certainly push Utica into the thralls of “modernity”. “The success and popularity of this enterprise contributed very largely to the growth and prosperity of the city.”³⁶ The article goes on to say that street railroads provided Utica with connections to surrounding cities, and that plans to expand the network would put “Utica... far in the lead of her sister cities... as regards this important feature of the modern city.”³⁷ Railroad leaders quickly took on an entirely new importance in New York as well as throughout the rest of the United States. These people were a commodity to the American people according to James Ward,

Railroad leaders were such successful promoters and managers and they amassed so much political, social, and economic influence that their assumptions about the character of their nation became important. In many Americans’ minds the industry became a vital metaphor representing the nation’s hopes and aspirations.³⁸

These people were a part of a growing industry that was vital in representing American

³⁵ “Utica’s Street Railroads” *Johnstown NY Daily Republican*, 1898, p. 1.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

³⁸ Ward, p. 11.

hopes and aspirations.³⁹ Those who resided in the Mohawk Valley were among the first to develop these feelings of national unity and “modernity”, directly aiding in the creation of a new national character.

Ultimately, the purpose of this paper has been to demonstrate how the development of the railroad in New York, and specifically in the Mohawk Valley, created a push toward modernization that quickly spread to the rest of the United States. The people of New York also experienced the beginnings of the development of a new united and national character, which showed the world that America had become a strong and independent country, capable of holding its own among the great nations of Europe. America became the example that countries that had not yet modernized looked to for inspiration.

America’s path to political stability and prosperity through the rational management of its resources, through the application of science and technology to mass production, and through efforts to adapt the principles of scientific investigation to the study of human behavior was increasingly held up as the route that ‘underdeveloped’ and unstable societies were destined to travel as they ‘entered the modern age.’⁴⁰

This new sense of importance, intelligence, and capability felt in New York quickly spread to the rest of the country as the railroad continued to move west.

Through a variety of contemporary writings, we are able to see that without the creation of this new form of transportation, America may never have advanced enough to unite its vast territories, or put itself on the path to modernization and industrialization. President Theodore Roosevelt announced to the entire nation the importance that the railroad played in aiding in the country’s development and growth, when he spoke to

³⁹ Ibid., p. 4-13.

⁴⁰ Adas, p. 402-403.

Congress in 1905: “The question of transportation lies at the root of all industrial success, and the revolution in transportation which has taken place during the last half century has been the most important factor in growth of the new industrial conditions.”⁴¹

The people of New York were among the first to experience the conveniences and changes that the railroad would bring. Railroad development was discussed in every newspaper in Utica, throughout New York by writers hoping to increase popular support for railroads, and by everyday people enamored with romantic ideas of what railroads could do for the country and the lives of individual people. Often discussed, was how the railroads would build essentially non-existent economies, whether or not new routes should be added, which cities they should bypass or go through, and what changes railroads would bring to the lives of individuals in the Mohawk Valley.

It is obvious that the railroads benefited America’s economy and helped to put the country on track financially. What may not be so obvious is the role railroads played in creating the “modern” America the world sees today. Before the development of our transportation system, the United States was outdated and behind the times. To make matters worse, the people living in this country knew it, as did the rest of the world. Railroads brought new, fast paced and exciting lifestyles to the whole country, and allowed people to explore the vastness of American resources like never before.

The feelings of “modernity” that came out of New York at the same time that the railroads were built, gave the people of the Mohawk Valley a sense of belonging: New Yorkers were “modern” and up-to-date, able to successfully compete with the rest of the world. As the railway lines branched out to the whole country, they took these feelings

⁴¹ Roosevelt, Theodore. “The President’s Message: Topics of Large Public Interest in Document Read to Congress Yesterday,” New York Daily Tribune (Wednesday Dec 6, 1905) p. 1

of “modernity” with them, which swiftly led to increased confidence and pride in the state and country as a whole. As a result, the individual cities and states, especially New York and the Mohawk Valley, developed personalities that when combined, created a new, strong, national character for America.

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