

RAILWAY HISTORY

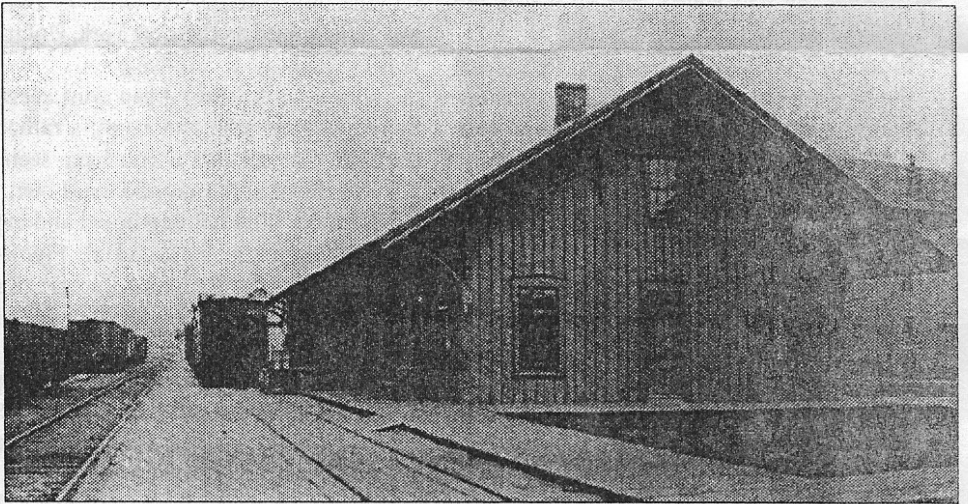
New Berlin's Depot: The Midland's Largest Stationhouse

BY JOHN TAIBI

The earliest railroad stationhouse built in central New York was put up in Deansboro (originally Deansville at the time) by the Utica, Clinton & Chenango Valley Railroad – a predecessor of the Utica, Clinton & Binghamton Railroad. It was completed late in 1867 during the same period of time that the UC&CVRR was completing its steam line from New Hartford to that Oriskany Valley community.

During this early period of railroad growth, a board and batten sheathed stationhouse was considered to be state-of-the-art architecture for buildings being built in villages that the railroad was going to serve. Their construction was simple: a skeletal beam frame covered on the outside by vertical boards and battens, while on the inside several rooms (one for passengers and one for the agent) were generally finished by wainscoted and plastered walls. The freight (baggage) room constituted the largest area inside the depot and was not finished to any great degree. Rather, it was open from floor to ceiling giving the room a cavernous appearance. Not only was a board and batten stationhouse perfect for the railroad's purposes, it was exactly what the community wanted: an attractive building to mirror the villages' prosperity. Painted an attractive shade of yellow, with white trim, the depot was a perfect – and welcome – addition to the neighborhood.

However appealing to the railroad's purposes and the community's eye, this earliest board and batten depot did have some drawbacks – some of which would be improved upon immediately by the Utica, Clinton & Binghamton and its new neighbor the New York & Oswego Midland Railroad, and some would have to wait until the purpose of a railroad stationhouse was defined. Examples of



The New Berlin depot as it originally appeared (above). It featured board and batten siding and ornamental eave support brackets (below).



the former drawback were the freight room doors were quite narrow (5 feet) and the eave supports were rudimentary. These shortcomings were immediately improved on all future UC&B and NY&OM depots by employing eight-foot freight doors and ornamentally attractive eave supports (i.e., curved with bottom mounted finials). An example of the latter drawback was that the passenger wait-

ing room was nearest the track and the agent's office was at the rear (non-track side) of the building. While this was certainly a convenient arrangement for the passengers, the agent's ability to supervise the operation of the depot was diminished. Eventually, the New York, Ontario & Western Railway (the Midland's successor) realized that this interior design needed to be changed so they converted some the earlier depots, and the future ones they built, to have side-by-side passenger and agent rooms with both of them fronting on the trackside. This change in the location of the agent's room brought about the design, and need, for a bay window, a feature that was not included in the earlier depots because the agent's room was not trackside.

While the Deansboro depot was not the epitome of a country depot—which was reserved for its bay-windowed cousins, it should be considered the prototype for all the future board-and-batten stationhouses. It was the

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improved models that began to dot the countryside as the New York & Oswego Midland Railroad was being built in 1869-70.

The Oswego Midland was a railroad that was envisioned to connect the Lake Ontario port of Oswego with the harbor of New York City. It was to be an "airline" railroad, one to operate as the crow flies, and was to be the hypotenuse of a triangle formed by its railroad line and that of the New York Central & Hudson River Railroad along the Hudson and Mohawk rivers. As everyone knows, the hypotenuse of a triangle is the shortest distance between the two points, and so it was the Midland's hope to be the shortest route between its NYC&HRR crossing in Oneida and the New York harbor. It didn't quite work out that way, due mainly to the circuitous route that was finally built; but along the way the Midland endowed a collection of board and batten depots to the villages on its mainline and branches.

These first generation stationhouses, of varying sizes - depending on how important a community was to the railroad - were all members of the same family. The characteristics of all, regardless of size, were a board and batten exterior, end and front entrance doors that opened into the passenger waiting room, an agent's room at the rear of the building, transoms over all doorways - including freight doors, upper story windows, gracefully curved and ornamentally attractive eave supports, and an uninterrupted gable roof. Taking these characteristics into account, it is safe to say of these early

stationhouses that their plainness was their charm. This mostly due to the lack of the bay window and any other ornamentation.

The depots came in a variety of sizes. From as small as 20'x40' to as large as 35'x125', with the most popular size being 30'x50'. The smaller depots denoting a village of minor importance to the railroad, the larger built to accommodate the business of a more financially important community. But again, regardless of size, all of these depots exhibited the traits of the Midland's characteristic standards. All of the stations, when built, were painted the yellow with white trim color scheme, but soon changed (after the Midland was reorganized as the New York, Ontario & Western Railway) to an olive green color overall, with a contrasting green trim accented by red window sash and eaves; a rather attractive color scheme if you have seen the restored depot at Munnsville that I own.

Examples of remaining board and batten stationhouses can be found at: Plymouth (20'x40'), Parkers (Guilford Center), Eaton (30'x50'), Cuyler, Truxton, Earlville (30'x90'), Munnsville and Mt. Upton (both built by the Ontario & Western), Deansboro (the oldest of the lot), Hamilton (resided and modernized), with New Berlin - at 35'x125' - the largest surviving stationhouse from the Midland era.

The surviving New Berlin station is a shining example of board and batten architecture not just because it is so elderly (approximately 133 years old) and categorizes the style of stationhouse called for in the 19th Century, but because it embodies all of the characteristics of an Oswego Midland standard design

depot. Its size signifies that the village of New Berlin was an important community along the line of the railroad; one whose businessmen and farmers contributed greatly to the financial well being of the railroad.

The fact that the earliest stationhouse - Deansboro, and the largest - New Berlin, are still in existence is a testament to the railroad's construction and care, not to mention that the owners of the structures after the railroad was abandoned took good care of them as well. These buildings have stood the test of time, and with a little more tender loving care will forever be a tribute to the days when the Oswego Midland Railroad opened up the interior of New York State for habitation and industry. The Brothertown Association, Inc. who received an \$18,000 grant from Oneida County for its purchase, is caring for the Deansboro depot. Currently, the Unadilla Valley Railway Historical Society is attempting to purchase the New Berlin station, with the asking price for the structure being \$50,000. That's a lot of money, but for the price you get a lot of history as well as a unique stationhouse the likes of which will never be seen again. Not to mention a building nearly four times as large as Deansboro.

Embracing the history of our communities is more popular than ever these days, and what's more historically important than the depot, since it may have been responsible for the community's prosperity in the first place. We tend to forget nowadays that it was the depot that was the most important building in its village at the time. Preserving its memory, and that of the railroad, should be uppermost in our minds.

Unadilla Valley Railway Society
PO Box 751
New Berlin, NY 13411

